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Exploring Parental Involvement Strategies Utilized By Middle School Interdisciplinary Teams

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EXPLORING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT STRATEGIES UTILIZED BY MIDDLE
SCHOOL INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAMS

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A DISSERTATION

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EXPLORING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT STRATEGIES UTILIZED BY MIDDLE
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EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

ABSTRACT

Adolescents present a unique collection of characteristics and challenges for which middle school interdisciplinary teams were designed to address. Current research focuses on teacher-specific strategies which can be utilized in order to increase parental involvement. However, there is little literature addressing how an interdisciplinary team approach to involving parents alters the face of parent-teacher communication. The central research question for this study was, "What are the strategies utilized by interdisciplinary middle school teams to effectively involve the parents of their students in the educational process?"

The researcher utilized a multiple-case study approach with three central Alabama middle school interdisciplinary teams: one from a suburban setting, one from a rural setting, and one from an urban setting. An interdisciplinary team at each middle school participated in multiple interviews, responded to journal questions, and was observed at parent nights and related events. Parents were also included as participants through focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and written questionnaires.

At each site, the researcher discovered the similarities and differences in the teachers' and parents' definitions of parental involvement, their attitudes toward parental involvement, strategies implemented by each team to involve parents, and strategies perceived as effective by team parents. The researcher identified several themes within each setting, as well as four cross-case themes. All of the interdisciplinary teams in this

research study utilized strategies grounded in a belief regarding the essential role parental involvement plays, maintained an open and approachable attitude toward parents, served as a resource to parents, and approached problem-solving opportunities as a team. The findings of this study serve as a bridge between what is known about adolescent development, best middle school interdisciplinary teaming models, and the essential nature of parental involvement in education.

DEDICATION

This work is

dedicated to

my wife, Erin Robbins, who God used throughout

this research to show me the true meaning of the word

"sacrifice."

Thank you,

my dear.

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Lord, this is Your work, and I pray that I honored You throughout this process. Use this work for what You will. Amen.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Middle school interdisciplinary teams of teachers have available to them a unique "table of opportunities" (Rottier, 2000, p. 214), with great potential to engage students and parents with multiple and varied methods of curricular design, instructional methods, and development and training strategies. However, many middle school interdisciplinary teams nation-wide are settling for "hors d'oeuvres" (Rottier, 2000, p.214) – only scratching the surface of what can be done to engage parents as partners in their child's education. One of the primary purposes of middle school interdisciplinary teams is to communicate and engage parents while developing and implementing curriculum based on an adolescent's developmental needs (Conley, Fauske & Pounder, 2004). Through the notoriously turbulent time of adolescence, the adolescent-parent relationship has become a regular source of stress in many families across the country, and many schools have recognized the need to re-engage parents as a resource for adolescent support (Richardson, 2004).

The Carnegie Corporation of New York issued Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century (1989), focusing middle level educators on the unique nature and developmental needs of adolescent students. In this publication, middle school interdisciplinary teams were identified as a necessary mechanism to

support the adolescent and involve the parent in the educational process (Carnegie Corporation, 1989). Tonso, Jung, and Colombo (2006), when speaking of middle school interdisciplinary teaming, cited communication with parents as an organizational practice most likely to result in achievement gains, and viewed the middle school interdisciplinary team as an effective tool to engage parents. Effective middle school interdisciplinary teams engage parents as partners in education, and strategies to accomplish this goal should be intentionally orchestrated and systematically implemented (Carnegie Corporation, 1989). Throughout middle school-specific literature, the importance of middle school teachers recognizing and practicing strategies to engage parents is evident, and the benefit of such positive communication is clear (Barge & Loges, 2003; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995).

Adolescent students present a stereotypically distinctive set of characteristics and challenges which middle school interdisciplinary teams were designed to address (Boyer & Bishop, 2004; Dickinson & Erb, 1997; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993). At the heart of the middle school movement is the recognition of the importance for a school environment to reflect the needs of the students which it serves (Lounsbury, 2009). Yet organizing teachers into groups, labeling them a team, and expecting them to engage parents in the schooling process will not automatically produce positive outcomes without implicitly and intentionally training teachers to utilize the full measure of their team structure (Boyer & Bishop, 2004; Rottier, 2000; Tonso, Jung, & Colombo, 2006).

Research clearly outlines the connection between involved parents and student achievement. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) composed a theoretical model of the parental involvement process to connect parental involvement with student

achievement. The theoretical model is composed of three major constructs of parental motivation: parental role construction (perceptions regarding how they are supposed to interact), parental self-efficacy (perceptions regarding their personal abilities to affect positive change), and opportunities and barriers for involvement (perceptions of invitations for involvement from students and teachers and perceived life context variables) (Gettinger & Guetschow, 1998; Green et al., 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995,1997). Specifically, the researchers aimed to uncover the answers to three primary questions: 1) Why do parents become involved in children's education? 2) What do they do when they get involved? 3) How does their involvement influence the student's outcomes? (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995,1997). The model addresses general parental motivations for becoming an involved parent, and clearly ties parental perceptions of involvement with outcomes.

However, there appears to be a gap in the current research. The available research tends to focus on general parent-teacher communication benefits and strategies, with a rare emphasis on middle school interdisciplinary team teacher parental involvement strategies (Erb, 1997; Gulino & Valentine, 1999; Hill & Tyson, 2009). Effective parent-teacher communication techniques and involvement strategies for teachers are clearly outlined in the literature; however, effective involvement strategies specific to middle school interdisciplinary teams of teachers have not been explored. After a thorough review of the literature, it appears that only a modest amount of literature specifically addresses how an interdisciplinary team approach to involving parents alters the face of parent-teacher communication and benefits adolescents.

Significance of this Study

Investigating this gap in the research may facilitate the creation of a description of effective middle school interdisciplinary team parent involvement. The results of this research study will aid middle school administrators in the process of creating professional development opportunities for middle school interdisciplinary team teachers to work together as a team to involve parents in the educational process. If middle school interdisciplinary teams implement these strategies, middle school students and their parents will benefit from the increased effectiveness of parental involvement strategies. The data resulting from this study may inform middle school teachers regarding effective parental involvement strategies, and may springboard interdisciplinary team teachers toward implementation of proven and effective parental involvement strategies.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study is to contribute research to the area of effective middle school interdisciplinary teaming parental involvement strategies.

Research Questions

This study will gather data regarding the interdisciplinary team teacher and parental perspectives regarding their involvement on middle school interdisciplinary teams. Middle school teachers and parents will be the participants. Using the following research questions as a general guide, this research study will explore the characteristics

of parent-teacher involvement utilized by effective middle school interdisciplinary teams of teachers.

Central Question

What are the strategies utilized by interdisciplinary middle school teams to effectively involve the parents of their students in the educational process?

Sub-questions

1. How do middle school interdisciplinary teams of teachers define parental involvement?

2. What are the attitudes of middle school team teachers toward parental involvement?

3. What are the strategies that middle school interdisciplinary teams of teachers utilize to involve parents?

4. What do middle school interdisciplinary teams of teachers view as the most effective strategies for involving parents?

5. How do parents of middle school students define parental involvement?

6. What are the attitudes of parents of middle school students toward parental involvement?

7. What are the strategies that parents describe as useful in being involved in the education of their student?

Definition of Terms

Important terms within the study include:

Adolescent – an individual from ages 10-18, depending on developmental stages attained.

Young adolescent – an individual from ages 10-14.

Interdisciplinary team – a team of teachers whereas each teacher teaches a different

content area

and share a common group of students.

Middle school – a school which houses grades 6, 7, and 8.

Middle school concept – the structure and philosophy of effective middle school practices

based upon the needs of adolescents.

8-4 – grade configuration in which grades K – 12 are divided into two schools, grades K-

8 and grades 9-12.

6-3-3 – grade configuration in which grades K – 12 are divided into three schools, grades

K-6, grades, 7-9, and 10-12.

5-3-4 – grade configuration in which grades K – 12 are divided into three schools, grades

K-5, grades 6-8, and 9-12.

Parental involvement – Parental contributions toward student success utilizing the skills, t

time, and energy of the parents (Barge & Loges, 2003; Epstein, 1995).

MMGW – Making Middle Grades Work; a middle school improvement initiative created

and promoted by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB).

Responsive practices – Practices most commonly implemented in middle schools that

directly support the developmental needs of adolescents (Gulino & Valentine,

1999; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991).

Organization of Study

Chapter one presents the introduction of this study, significance of the study, purpose statement, research questions, and definitions of terms. Chapter two presents a review of the current literature which focuses on characteristics of an adolescent, a description of and the rationale behind the middle school concept and interdisciplinary teaming, definitions of parental involvement, and parental involvement and communication strategies. The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model of Parental Involvement (1995, 1997, 2004) provides the parental involvement theoretical framework for this study, which includes parental roles and efficacy, perceptions of invitations for help, and parental life contexts. The Making Middle Grades Work Middle School Improvement Model is also detailed. Chapter three rationalizes and outlines the qualitative research methods utilized in completing this research study. Chapter four presents the data collected from the research process. Chapter five presents the implications for the study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Parental involvement with middle school interdisciplinary teams is a complex concept not easily implemented, maintained, or changed (Erb, 1997; Quinn & Restine, 1996; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991). Therefore, the literature relating to this topic must be explored through multiple areas of concentration. The literature review for this study is organized thematically by these topics: characteristics of adolescence, the middle school concept and philosophy, middle school interdisciplinary teaming, and parental involvement. The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model of Parental Involvement (1995, 1997, 2004) provides the parental involvement theoretical framework for this study, which includes parental roles and efficacy, perceptions of invitations for help, and parental life contexts. An explanation of the Making Middle Grades Work (MMGW) Middle School Improvement Model is included. A summary of all of the related literature closes this chapter.

Adolescence

G. Stanley Hall (1844-1924) was the first major researcher to establish adolescence as a separate stage of development with the publishing of his text *Adolescence,* originally published in 1905. Hall defined adolescence as beginning with the onset of certain physical changes through the maturation process (beginning with

puberty), and continue until adulthood has been physically attained (Hall, 1969).

Adolescence is characterized by the most dramatic period of physical growth and

maturation, other than infancy, than any other phase of a person's life (Pruitt, 2000). Hall

(1969) described adolescence as a rebirth; human beings have been born once, and

adolescence is the medium through which an individual experiences further development

toward the completion of the physical developmental process. Adolescence is a period of

relative storminess; emotions wax and wane oftentimes without clear rationality, and

adolescents often move from emotionally extreme highs to extreme lows (Hall, 1969).

Additionally, an adolescent is heavily influenced by the peer group; at no other point in a

person's life does peer group play such an influential and crucial role in decision making

processes (Hall, 1969; Masten, Juvonen, & Spatzier, 2009; Richardson, 2004). As a

researcher, Hall (1969) laid the groundwork for other researchers to further develop

descriptions and theories regarding adolescent development and behavior.

Thornburg (1983) identified adolescence, specifically early adolescence, as a

transitional period of development. While common practice dictates a progression

through adolescence based upon physical maturation, Thornburg relied heavily on the

changes in the social structures surrounding the adolescent as well as the cognitive

development that takes place during this time. Thornburg (1983) stepped back from

physical characteristics in determining the developmental stages of an adolescent.

Thornburg (1983) outlined that, while physical growth is an important aspect of

adolescence, social growth and cognitive development are equally reliable external

indicators that can be used as transitional markers in shaping adolescent developmental

research. Social and cognitive markers, further explained by Erikson (1950) and Marcia

(1966), are additional critical components to understanding the periods of development through adolescence.

A recurring theme throughout adolescent development literature is the nature of an adolescent seeking to discover who they are (Thornburg, 1983). Erik Erikson (1950) recognized this characteristic by supplementing the definition of adolescence to include identity formation. Adolescence, according to Erikson, is a period of time during which an individual begins the process of forming their own self-identity, who they were, who they are, and who they want to be (Erikson, 1950). During the adolescent period, an individual must begin searching for answers to difficult questions, such as: Who am I? Where did I come from? What will I become? (Muuss, 1975). By their very nature, however, adolescents look to feedback from their peer group for the answers to these questions, and may downplay or dismiss the influence of adequate role models or authority figures (Muuss, 1975). Adolescents are oftentimes consumed with how others may perceive them in relationship to how they actually are (Erikson, 1950). Parents are oftentimes startled by this shift in priorities, perceiving a lessened impact on the life of their child (Thornburg, 1983). Adolescents can successfully navigate through this period of identity formation when they have made a commitment to a system of values, such as religious beliefs, career goals, a philosophy of life, and an acceptance of their sexuality (Muuss, 1975).

Building upon Erikson's theory of identity crisis, James Marcia (1966) created four identity statuses, or stages, through which an adolescent progresses. Rather than discovering a resolution to an identity crisis, an adolescent experiences a new commitment to a set of values or beliefs (Marcia, 1966). Adolescents who have not yet

experienced an identity crisis are in the *identity diffused* status. When an adolescent has made commitments to a set of values (frequently from upbringing or from parents), but has not experienced a crisis of identity, the adolescent is in *foreclosure* status. Middle school students, often identified as early adolescents, fall within these first two stages. However, some adolescents are notorious for struggling through the next status, *moratorium*. During this status, adolescents are experiencing an identity crisis, and are aggressively probing for alternatives to their status quo. These adolescents have not yet made a firm commitment to any identity, and may falter between various values systems. Lastly, late adolescence, the *identity achieved* status, is characterized by identity crisis resolution, and as a result, the individual has made firm commitments to his or her chosen system of values (Marcia, 1966).

The importance of parental influence in the life of an adolescent is a basis of current research (Masten, Juvonen, & Spatzier, 2009). Through the notoriously turbulent time of adolescence, the adolescent-parent relationship has become a regular source of stress in many families across the country (Richardson, 2004). There exists the general belief among parents that they are not as influential in the lives of their students as are their students' peer groups (Masten, et al., 2009). Current research does suggest that peer groups play a large role in shaping social behavior and participation in negative acts, and are main contributors to establishing normative behaviors within a peer group (i.e. expectations of behavior) (Masten, et al., 2009). However, research findings have confirmed that parental influence can and does extend into an adolescent's social realm, can largely impact a wide range of behaviors, and can shape an adolescent's academic decision-making before the onset of adolescence and throughout the transitional stages

(Bouchey & Harter, 2005; Masten, et al., 2009; Richardson, 2004). When parents establish normative expectations for decision-making for an adolescent within the context of values, adolescents are able to determine the importance of the value separate from the social context in which it is presented, and make more productive decisions in the social realm (Johnson & Johnson, 2001; Richardson, 2004; Masten, et al., 2009).

Many organizations, whether educational or community-based, have recognized the need to re-engage adolescents in conversations with their parents (Richardson, 2004). Parents can play a critical role in the decision-making development of their adolescent child (Bouchey & Harter, 2005; Masten, et al., 2009; Richardson, 2004). However, the strife commonly present during periods of adolescent development oftentimes results in students turning inward while parents keep their distance. This presents schools and other organizations with opportunities to rekindle the meaningful dialogue once experienced by parents with their children (Richardson, 2004). Richardson (2004) conducted a study in which she uncovered questions that adolescents (middle school students, specifically) would like to ask their parents, given the opportunity to do so. The purpose of this study was to uncover the issues that adolescents want and need to discuss with their parents, with the goal of opening up channels of communication between parents and their adolescents. The largest percentage of students (43%) listed questions pertaining to their family, primarily attempting to make sense of their relationship with their parents and siblings (i.e. "What's it like to be a parent?" "Am I important to you?").

According to Richardson (2004), this indicates an attempt on behalf of the adolescent to make sense of the shifting in the parent-child relationship that may be occurring. Another common set of questions asked by adolescents dealt with the family

structure and desired support (i.e. "Are all of these rules really necessary?" "Can I go places with you?"). This data is indicative of an adolescent's need for boundaries, structure, and rationale for their boundaries. Interestingly, the stereotypically difficult questions regarding sexual practices, drug or alcohol use, or pregnancy made up a small percentage (14.9%) of the questions from the adolescents. This indicates a possibility that these subjects are already discussed with the adolescents or that the questions as a whole are lower priority to an adolescent's relationship with his/her parents. The necessity of positive parent-adolescent communication and interactions is evident through examination of the developmental characteristics of adolescents and the research-proven impact of parental influence on an adolescent's decision-making capabilities.

Adolescents have been described as "pressured kids….worriers….multi-taskers….with energy to spare," who are "five years away from teddy bears and five years away from college" (Scherer, 2006, p. 7). Schools and parents can facilitate the progression of an adolescent through developmental stages and identity crises by mutually supporting and connecting the school and home environments. Additionally, schools and parents have an obligation to recognize the stress under which their adolescents may be operating daily, and create a learning environment which facilitates the adolescents' progression through identity crises and encourage creativity and individuality (Muuss, 1975; Thornburg, 1983).

The Middle School Concept and Philosophy

With its roots in the early 1900s, adolescence has increasingly become an acceptable and respected stage of human development (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991). And

as a result, schools began to note the implications for the education of adolescents. Namely, educators began to connect the needs of the students they served with the manner in which they taught (Lounsbury, 2009). Beginning in the 1920s, middle grades pedagogy began to take shape, as school leaders implemented programs in schools that were increasingly responsive to the developmental needs of the adolescents (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991). However, the country maintained its "revolutionary vision for educating all American youth" (Lounsbury, 2009, p. 31), and schools generally maintained an 8-4 format. By the late 1940s, in growing response to the developing understanding of adolescent needs, junior high schools became the predominant pattern for schools, beginning to replace the 8-4 pattern with a 6-3-3 pattern (Lounsbury, 2009).

By the mid 1960s, it was a common view that junior high schools were failing in their task of sufficiently providing for the needs of their adolescent stakeholders (Lounsbury, 2009). Junior high schools were existing as, in fact, junior *high* schools, and "not successful at completely separating themselves from their parent, the high school" (Lounsbury, 2009, p. 32). In light of the growing perspective that junior high schools were too similar to high schools, the middle school movement began to truly take shape. The term "middle school" was first termed by William Alexander in a speech at Cornell University in 1963, which is commonly marked as the beginning of the middle school movement (Lounsbury, 2009). Since the mid 1960s, the prevalence of middle schools in the United States has only grown, and the predominant grade organization has become 5-3-4 nationwide. At the heart of the middle school movement is the recognition of the importance for a school environment to reflect the needs of the students which it serves (Lounsbury, 2009).

The middle school movement, which now has more than thirty years of force behind it, is dedicated to implementing responsive practices in the middle school based upon the needs of the adolescent. The middle school concept seeks "to establish a climate of caring," building the concerns and needs of adolescents into the life of the school (Lounsbury, 2000, p. 193). Middle schools are characterized by their responsive practices, the practices that are integrated into the life of a middle school student in order to best address the challenges that are unique to them (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991). Middle school pedagogy advocates for developmentally responsive practices, which current research describes as an integrated curriculum of learning across disciplines (i.e. interdisciplinary teaching units), interdisciplinary team teaching, discovery and inquiry learning, flexible scheduling, opportunities for remedial instruction, school transition programs, exploratory programs, and heterogeneous grouping and advisor-advisee programs (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991). According to Mac Iver and Epstein (1993), the goal of a middle school is, "to create responsive learning environments that make adolescents feel a part of a supportive and caring community" (p. 522).

Developmentally speaking, adolescents require a meaningful curricular context before rigorous learning can take place (Beane & Lipka, 2006). Effective middle school curriculum makes learning more meaningful for adolescents by requiring students to establish connections between the content areas through a challenging and integrative curriculum (Bailey, 2003; Beane & Lipka, 2006). Additionally, effective middle school curricular practices should compel adolescents to develop their own thinking and problem-solving skills; middle school educators should create learning environments in which students are able to take risks with their learning, and feel motivated to engage in

new learning opportunities (Bailey, 2003; Lounsbury, 2000). Beane (2005) states that effective middle school curriculum should "stimulate the intellectual imagination of the middle school student" (p. 51). Research has shown that schools that implement curriculum expectations as standard teaching practices positively affect student achievement and behavior (Anfara & Lipka, 2003; Bailey, 2003; Felner, Jackson, Kasak, Mulhall, Brand, & Flowers, 1997). A one-size-fits-all curriculum design at the middle school level may be a symptom of short-sighted expectations of what students are capable of and how adolescent learning can take place.

The middle school concept dictates the instructional methods most effectively utilized to teach adolescents. Middle school curriculum is most effectively delivered within the context of "interactive instructional approaches, including writing and editing, student team learning, and other cooperative methods" (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993, p. 525). Studies have suggested that middle schools should emphasize active learning techniques, such as self and peer editing in English, discovery learning in science, writing and debating in social studies, and problem-solving and thinking skills in math (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993). Comparatively, rote and drill-centered approaches are extensively correlated to low levels of engagement, low levels of homework completion, and a decreased sense of application of learning to real-life. Research has shown that middle school teachers most effectively reach adolescent learners when interactive and discovery instructional approaches are implemented, and students are pushed to show evidence of higher level thinking skills. Effective middle school instruction is unlike elementary or high school – it is geared directly toward the needs of the early adolescent (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993).

In addition to instruction, effective middle school advisor-advisee programs maintain healthy connections between students and their school. Advisement remains deeply embedded in the middle school concept; advisor-advisee programs and the middle school concept are "one in the same" (George, 1989, p. 16). Advisory programs have their roots in the shift that takes place often between fifth and sixth grade, where a student experiences transitions from a one-room-all-day teacher to multiple department or content area teachers (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991). When students shift to middle school, they rotate from one content teacher to another, and may feel "that there is no one teacher who really knows them, cares about them, or is available to help them with problems" (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991, p. 592). Therefore, many middle schools attempt to provide adolescents with an established homeroom or advisement time during which students connect meaningfully with an adult, oftentimes in a smaller group setting (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991).

An advisor-advisee relationship is similar to that of an adult mentor, who guides the child in academic advising, as well as social interactions. The middle school advisor is the adult in the building who provides "what students need to stay connected to the school" (Doda, 2009, p. 47). The existence of the advisor-advisee program within the life of a middle school student is a natural step toward attempting to maintain a connection between students and their learning environments. The advisory relationship should not be maintained only in the course of the advisory period, but should be brought into the daily school life of the student and the teacher (Gulino & Valentine, 1999).

Another responsive practice central to the middle school concept is the inclusion of heterogeneous ability grouping in academic core classes (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993).

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The purpose of heterogeneous ability grouping within the middle school concept is to allow all students, regardless of ability, to experience and learn from the high-achieving students in their classes. According to Doda (2009), keeping the experts in the learning environment benefits all of the students in the classroom. A well-trained middle school teacher utilizes and depends upon differentiated teaching strategies in order to reach all of the ability levels present within one single class period. The abilities of the classroom should reflect the team as a whole; the teacher's responsibility is to appropriately challenge all students within the classroom, both the high achieving students and the struggling students. Significant research exists to support the implementation of heterogeneously grouped core academic classes in middle schools (Oakes, 1992; Slavin, 1990).

However, many middle school programs are being squeezed away from implementing effective middle school responsive practices as a result of increased state and federal accountability standards (Doda, 2009; Lounsbury, 2000). Doda (2009) stated:

The [middle school] accountability movement compelled many leaders to reduce middle level programs and practices that emphasize the whole child, including robust exploratory programs, the fine and practical arts, advisory programs, recess, heterogeneous grouping, interdisciplinary team planning time, and the use of flexible block scheduling. (p. 45)

The charge of curriculum integration at the middle school level becomes more complex each year with the addition of greater state and federal testing accountability

measures (Doda, 2009). One benefit of the increased accountability toward middle school programs is that it has increased the levels of discussion and examination of the components of a rigorous and relevant curriculum (Doda, 2009). However, reductions in budgets and increased accountability toward state assessment measures has forced some middle schools into eliminating responsive programs in favor of other remedial programs intended to simply increase scores on standardized assessments. In some areas of the country, the values of the society are in direct conflict with the middle school concept, leaving some middle level programs without support (Lounsbury, 2000).

State and federal accountability for middle schools to close achievement gaps related to race, ethnicity, gender, and economics has threatened the heterogeneous ability grouping structures that have been in place for years (Doda, 2009; Lounsbury, 2000). Too often, these accountability measures have resulted in school leaders dismantling heterogeneously-grouped classes in favor of placing students into ability-similar classes, intending to raise the low-achieving students and challenge the high-achieving students (Doda, 2009). Research findings have shown that these measures to increase scores are often met with short-term gains, but fail to sustain these gains over a longer period of time (Doda, 2009). Middle schools contain learning climates where social relationships are paramount, and increasing the distance between smaller groups of students can backfire with increased discipline challenges, increased instances of bullying, and decreased teacher expectations of student performance. Research has indicated that students tracked according to ability (homogeneously-grouped classes) made no greater academic gains than students in non-tracked (heterogeneously-grouped) classes (Oakes, 1992; Slavin, 1990). Additionally, students placed in homogeneously-grouped classes

displayed negative effects of the grouping, such as decreased motivation for learning and decreased opportunities to learn (Oakes, 1992; Ekstrom & Villegas, 1991).

Student perceptions of effectiveness are critical in gauging the overall strengths and weaknesses of the responsive practices implemented within a middle school program (Gulino & Valentine, 1999). Gulino and Valentine (1999) conducted a study that measured the perceived effectiveness of the implementation of middle school-specific responsive practices through student satisfaction measures. Responsive practices, for the purpose of this study, include the practices most commonly cited in middle level literature: interdisciplinary teaming, advisor-advisee program, developmentally responsive curriculum, well-defined transition programs, and the presence of middle school certified teachers. As a basis for the student satisfaction study, the researchers cited the importance of student perceptions in contributing to student motivation – learning in the middle school is greater than the cumulative effect of the learning experiences a student encounters. "It's not the experience," they stated, "but the interpretation of the experience that has consequence" (Gulino & Valentine, 1999, p. 93). The powerful potential of these practices are in their implementation as a system, rather than in isolation.

Guilno and Valentine's study (1999) discovered a positive correlation between the implementation of responsive practices within a middle school program with the rates of student satisfaction with the middle school experience. The implications of this study are clear – while the isolated correlates varied tremendously, satisfaction in the overall middle school experience played a self-fulfilling prophetic role in the engagement of the student in the middle school program. Middle school students who perceived that their

developmental needs were being met were more likely to buy-in to the responsive practices in place. Gulino and Valentine (1999) stated that the interrelatedness of the responsive practices speaks to the importance of the implementation of an overall developmentally responsive middle school program.

Middle School Interdisciplinary Teaming

Interdisciplinary team teaching is a "signature practice of the middle school design" (Valentine, Clark, Irvin, Keefe, & Melton, 1993, p. 49). Wallace (2007) described middle school interdisciplinary teaming as "the root of most of the successful middle level programs today" (p.1). According to Boyer and Bishop (2004), its structure is a powerful force for change within the context of current middle school challenges. Interdisciplinary teaming has a foundation in the 1930s, with attempts to creatively integrate curriculum through the use of block scheduling and common teacher planning times (Arhar, 1992). During the middle school movement in the 1960s, the interdisciplinary team concept rose to greater prominence as the key component of middle school design (Clark & Clark, 1994). According to the experts, teaming at the middle school level has become the standard practice of teacher organization in the United States (Hackmann, Petzko, Valentine, Clark, Nori, & Lucas, 2002).

The overarching purpose of the middle school interdisciplinary team is to engage an adolescent learner in ways that an individual teacher is less capable of doing – creating smaller and supportive learning communities within the larger context of the middle school (Wallace, 2007). The structure of an interdisciplinary team of teachers may vary from two-teacher teams to five-teacher teams, depending upon financial resources, school

size, grade level structure, and state certification challenges (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993).

In general, however, four teachers (math, science, social studies, and language arts) compose an interdisciplinary team, and share between 90 and 120 students in the same grade level (Clark, 1997; Crow & Pounder, 2000; Hackmann, et al., 2002). Teachers from other content areas (electives, exploratory classes, physical education) may be integrated into these teams (Crow & Pounder, 2000). Additionally, the middle school support staff, such as counselors, special education teachers, and administrators, may participate with the core interdisciplinary teams in a consultative role to aid in addressing student issues. According to Hackmann, et al. (2002), a large majority of middle school teams are heterogeneously-grouped according to ability level, ethnicity, skills, and other factors. The middle school team should feature an even distribution of students on each team, and therefore represent a "microcosm of the overall school population" (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 130). One increasingly common variation from the typical middle school interdisciplinary team is the concept of multi-age teaming: grades 6-8, for instance, mixed on one team of 100 students. On multi-age teams, the students remain on the same interdisciplinary team during the middle school years, creating a tight social and academic bond with the teachers and the other students (Hopping, 2000; Rottier, 2000). Regardless of the organizational format, teams with a strong commitment to the teaming concept provided adolescents with a potent sense of belonging to a community larger than themselves yet smaller than the school (Alspaugh & Harting, 1997; Mills & Pollack, 2009).

The organization provided by middle school interdisciplinary teaming is essential in distinguishing a middle school from its predecessor, a junior high school (George,

1990; Russell, Jarmin, & Reiser, 1997). The concept of the middle school interdisciplinary team is far more complex than simply its structure or composition. Middle school teams of teachers are tasked with providing their adolescents with a sense of belonging to a group, a developmental need of an adolescent (Hansen, 2009). Experts agree that middle school leaders should act very intentionally to lay the groundwork for effective interdisciplinary teams, training teachers to take full advantage of this structure while maintaining a singular focus on adolescent needs (Russell, Jarmin, & Reiser, 1997). Effective middle school interdisciplinary teams oftentimes maintain their own team name, team mascot, team activities, team field trips, and strategies separate from yet supportive of strategies of the overall school, thus fostering a greater sense of team identity. Hansen (2009) outlined the important changes that can take place when a sense of team-identity is formed: "Early on in the teaming process, you'll start to hear exciting changes in teachers' dialogue about students as they refer to students as 'our kids' or 'the way we do things'" (p. 34). The teachers on effective interdisciplinary teams display an ownership for the students on their team, the decisions their students make, the achievements of their students, and the shortcomings of their students. Effective middle school leaders allow the team teachers the flexibility to address these issues and challenges within the context of their team identity (Hansen, 2009).

An interdisciplinary team maintains a daily schedule that allows for activities focused on maintaining team identity, middle school student support, and curricular enrichment. Interdisciplinary team teachers often utilize a common daily planning time to coordinate team activities, which is one of the most critical components to the middle school teaming model (Clark, 1997; Erb, 1997; Doda, 2009; Hackmann, et al., 2002;

Hansen, 2009; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1990). During this common planning time, team teachers integrate curricular units, discuss and work to resolve student issues, conduct team-parent conferences, or discuss the use of team celebration or team meeting blocks (Doda, 2009; Hackmann, et al., 2002). If a common planning time is not established, the team teachers must meet before school, after school, or during lunch in order to plan team activities or address student or team issues (Mac Iver & Espstein, 1990). In addition to common planning time, responsive team practices, such as advisor-advisee periods and remediation sessions, are built into the school day, which provide for mechanisms of student support during regular school hours (Clark, 1997; Hansen, 2009; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1990, 1993). The Carnegie Report (1989) outlined the overall benefits of a supportive interdisciplinary team:

> A better approach is to create teams of teachers and students who work together to achieve academic and personal goals for students. Teachers share responsibility for the same students and can solve problems together, often before they reach the crisis stage; teachers report that classroom discipline problems are dramatically reduced through teaming. This community of learning nurtures bonds between teacher and student that are the building blocks of the education of the young adolescent. (p. 46)

The school-within-a-school concept of interdisciplinary middle school teaming presents teachers with opportunities to create a team identity and team goals above and beyond those of the entire school (Quinn & Restine, 1996; Rottier, 2000; Russell, Jarmin, & Reiser, 1997).

The positive effects of interdisciplinary teaming on student outcomes are evident through research findings (Erb, 1997). Developmentally speaking, adolescents value school social relationships and bonding experiences at a much higher level than any other age group (Wallace, 2007). Positive experiences in social bonding during adolescence results in a student's ability to take risks in friendships, and is linked to a stronger self-identity for the middle school student (Hicks, 1997). Research has shown that middle school students participating on middle school interdisciplinary teams experienced changed levels of social bonding with their teachers and school than their non-teamed peers (Arhar, 1990; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Wallace, 2007). Additionally, Mac Iver and Epstein (1991) described the benefits to teachers and students of schools that have a strong commitment to interdisciplinary teaming: (a) they have a significantly stronger overall middle grades program; (b) teachers gain support and understanding from team members; (c) students' problems are identified and resolved more quickly; (d) instruction is more effective due to team coordination and integration; and (e) students develop greater team spirit and positive attitudes about school and learning. Based on this research, the benefits of implementing a teaming model within the middle school are clearly tied to positive student social outcomes.

During the transition years (i.e., years in which students are changing schools), an adolescent's academic achievement tends to decrease (Blyth, Simmons, & Carlton-Ford, 1983; Crocket, Peterson, Graber, Schulenberg, & Ebata, 1989). Although the decrease in achievement during a transition year has been attributed in part to increased expectations of teachers, middle school interdisciplinary teaming has remained a crucial component in combating this trend (Alsbaugh & Harting, 1997). Fenzel (1989) studied the effects of

middle school interdisciplinary teaming on transitions to the middle school and from the middle school. The researcher discovered a significantly lower strain on transitioning students who participated in middle school teams than transitioning students who did not participate in middle school teaming. Research has also shown that the middle school interdisciplinary team concept is one of the most effective tools in connecting the more self-contained settings of the elementary school with the departments in secondary schools (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Erb, 1997; Fenzel, 1989; McPartland, 1992). According to the experts, interdisciplinary teaming helps to reduce the negative effects of departmentalization on the student-teacher relationship (Erb, 1997; McPartland, 1992).

Research has also explored a clear connection between middle school interdisciplinary teaming responsive practices and student achievement (Clark, 1997; Erb, 1997; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991). Research conducted by Lee and Smith (1993) revealed a positive correlation between the implementation of interdisciplinary teaming practices and student achievement and at-risk behaviors (discipline issues). Students who attended schools which implemented interdisciplinary teaming practices showed an overall higher level of achievement and lower at-risk behaviors. Lee and Smith (1993) also reported that students engaged on an interdisciplinary team arrived tardy to class less often, completed their homework more often, and were more likely to bring the right materials to class. Additionally, Lee and Smith (1993) discovered that teamed middle schools distributed their higher achievement and student engagement results more evenly across social class lines than did departmentalized middle schools. Middle schools that practiced interdisciplinary teaming showed fewer problems with student discipline and dropouts (George & Lounsbury, 2000; Lee & Smith, 1993). Research clearly outlines the

benefits to students and teachers when a middle school commits itself to strong

interdisciplinary teaming practices (Rottier, 2000).

Interdisciplinary teaming has also been shown to possess tremendous benefits for

the teachers who comprise the teams (Quinn & Restine, 1996). Teachers who participate

on interdisciplinary teams report a greater sense of collegiality and support from their

teammates than from the former departmentalized format (Erb, 1997; Quinn & Restine,

1996). Challenges with students are an inevitable part of the teaching profession.

However, the support, encouragement, and sense of belonging that being a part of a team

provides to teachers helps to keep focused on solving the adolescent-related issues at

hand. Another benefit for teachers that has emerged in the literature is a lessened feeling

of isolation and increased awareness of what was going on within the other classrooms on

the team (Quinn & Restine, 1996). Teachers described this as increased opportunities for

interaction and collaboration with other teachers, allowing time for sharing successes

with other teachers and gleaning new ideas from the experience of others (Mills &

Pollack, 2009; Quinn & Restine, 1996).

Consistency is another benefit reported by teachers on interdisciplinary teams.

Interdisciplinary team teachers meet regularly together to create inter-curricular ties,

develop plans to address collective and individual student concerns, and conduct parent

conferences (Erb, 1997; Mills & Pollack, 2009; Quinn & Restine, 1996). The

expectations for parents and students are more consistent across the curricular areas when

the team teachers are working collaboratively. Commonly, parent conferences with

interdisciplinary teams result in a truer perception of the strengths and weaknesses of a

student as a result of feedback from multiple perspectives and settings. Lastly, teachers

report increased levels of student contact in interdisciplinary teaming situations –

teachers are able to more quickly diagnose student struggles and intervene with strategies

to help the student be more successful (Quinn & Restine, 1996). Teachers gain a greater

and earlier sense of the strengths and weaknesses of each student, and truly know what

each student is capable of achieving. Overall, middle school interdisciplinary teams are

tied to increased parental involvement, improved work climate, and increased job

satisfaction (Erb, 1997; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 1999).

Teacher efficacy is also impacted by middle school interdisciplinary team

organization and structure. Warren and Payne (1997) explored the relationship between

middle school teacher efficacy and interdisciplinary team practices. The researchers

uncovered a positive correlation between the existence of an interdisciplinary team with a

common planning time as a support mechanism and the teachers' sense of efficacy in

affecting positive student change (Warren & Payne, 1997). This research supported an

earlier study by Ashton and Webb (1986) which surmised that the existence of a common

planning time with interdisciplinary team members resulted in a positive outlook on a

teacher's personal competence. When team teachers who share a common group of

students have the opportunity to collaborate and support each other through a common

planning time, research has indicated increased teacher perceptions of self-efficacy

(Warren & Payne, 1997).

The interdisciplinary team is the organizational structure created to address the

developmental needs of the adolescent student within the context of the middle school

(Boyer & Bishop, 2004). Much of middle school literature regarding interdisciplinary

teaming focuses on teacher perceptions and benefits, impact on student achievement, and

organizational structure and benefits. However, Boyer and Bishop (2004) reported a critical perspective of middle school interdisciplinary teaming: the student's voices. In this study, the researchers utilized qualitative methods to explore how middle school students perceived effective middle school interdisciplinary teams. The findings suggested that students perceived a positive learning environment when students and teachers remained together for most of the day on teams (Boyer & Bishop, 2004). Additionally, students are positively impacted when student collaboration is present in individual and team goal setting, designing a curriculum unit, and governing the team business. Students reported an increased sense of belonging to their learning community, the community (team) of students upon which they have been placed. Students described their teachers as understanding, helpful, friendly, and easily accessible. Boyer and Bishop (2004) reported a democratic learning environment as a prominent theme of students' perceptions of teaming. According to Tonso, Jung, and Colombo (2006), middle school learning communities should be democratic in practice, with teachers providing examples for students to follow which highlight relevant virtues and civic responsibilities. Middle school students expressed appreciation for sharing responsibility for team decisions, such as creating learning units, planning team town hall meetings, establishing team expectations, and other activities or celebrations (Boyer & Bishop, 2004). Students valued a share of the governance necessary on an interdisciplinary team. Additionally, students perceived that interdisciplinary teaming promoted a learning environment of tolerance and appreciation for diversity, which increased their levels of tolerance for other students. Effective middle school teams are characterized by "important lessons about commitment to the general welfare" (Lounsbury, 2000, p. 193).

Boyer and Bishop (2004) reported that students feel empowered, more self-confident, and more independent as a result of their engagement on a middle school interdisciplinary team.

Existing research supports the creation of a general list of best practices of effective middle school interdisciplinary teams. To aid in their research study, Boyer and Bishop (2004) compiled a research-based list of effective middle school team attributes. These attributes highlight many of the key practices emphasized by middle school teaming literature. According to the experts, attributes of successful middle school teaming include: (a) a spirit of belongingness; (b) team logos, rituals, and traditions present; (c) students and teachers working together on discipline issues; (d) emphasis on team structure, vision, and mission; (e) teachers utilizing a common planning time; and (f) team control over flexible blocks of time. Boyer and Bishop (2004) effectively delineated the importance of team belongingness through logos and rituals, which is tied directly to an adolescent developmental need. Additionally, the researchers cited the importance of the team teachers working collaboratively to solve problems.

However, Boyer and Bishop (2004) failed to cite three of the most important functions of a middle school interdisciplinary team. First, middle school interdisciplinary teams are intentionally built by school leaders with consideration to certain structural characteristics deemed most effective, such as team size, room locations, student ability groupings, and team planning times. These characteristics provide the groundwork for effective teaming practices. Secondly, the researchers neglected the importance of middle school curricular practices, such as interdisciplinary units and remediation of student skill gaps. Lastly, the researchers failed to outline the importance of the

interdisciplinary team in involving the parents of their students. The team approach to schooling is a wide departure from the single-classroom system typically utilized in elementary settings. Therefore, middle school teams must be able to serve as a resource to parents with specific concerns, questions, or in need of guidance.

After careful consideration of multiple and varied studies, this study requires the creation of a common set of characteristics of effective middle school interdisciplinary teams (see appendix K for a complete list of characteristics and references). Effective middle school teams share many common structural, curricular, instructional, and responsive characteristics:

Structural characteristics:

- 80 to 100 students

- Team teachers located within close proximity to one another

- Team teachers share a common planning time

- Heterogeneously grouped core classes

Curricular characteristics:

- Team teachers engage in curriculum-related discussions

- Team teachers plan and integrate curricular ties between content areas

- Teachers engage in problem-solving sessions to aid in addressing students' skills gaps

Instructional practices:

- Active and hands-on teaching strategies are implemented

- Teachers encourage the use of higher order thinking skills

- Team teachers use a variety of assessment methods

- Team teachers integrate remediation opportunities within the school day

Responsive practices:

- Team teachers foster a team spirit with among their students

- Teachers maintain open lines of communication with parents

- Team teachers resolve parental concerns as a team

- Team teachers serve as a resource for parents

- Team teachers act in an advisory role for their students

These 16 research-based characteristics provide a thorough and solid foundation upon which a middle school team can be evaluated for effectiveness relating to middle school interdisciplinary teaming practices.

Current research in the area of middle school interdisciplinary teaming has largely focused on common characteristics, reporting positive student outcomes, overall teacher benefits, and effective organizational structures. However, only modest research exists to support interdisciplinary teams in methods of involving parents in the teaming process. Parents play a crucial role in the education of adolescent students, and interdisciplinary teams would be remiss if they failed to tap into the parents resources available to their team. This study is intended to uncover perceptions of effective parental involvement by interdisciplinary teams and parents, which will facilitate improved communication and collaboration between middle schools and homes.

Defining Parental Involvement

Parental involvement is a term that can be perceived or defined in a variety of ways by different subgroups of people, depending upon their role, personal experiences,

or goals and objectives. The definition of parental involvement has broadened from simply "bodies in the building" (Epstein, 1995, p. 703) to incorporate multiple varieties and methods congruent with parental strengths, weaknesses, skills, time, and energy (Barge & Loges, 2003; Epstein, 1995; Hoover-Dempsey, 1995, 1997). In the past, many parents subscribed to the parental involvement philosophy of, "I raise them, you teach them" (Barge & Loges, 2003, p. 142), while many teachers believe that "if the parents did a better job raising them, I could do a better job teaching them" (Barge & Loges, 2003, p. 142). However, many schools have recognized the critical interdependence of the school, family, and community in educating students (Epstein, 1995). This evolution in parental involvement in educational settings has redefined how schools gauge their effectiveness in engaging parents.

According to Barge and Loges (2003), "An implicit assumption in the existing research is that parents, students, and teachers hold similar conceptions of what counts as parental involvement" (p. 142). This, however, may become problematic; parents, students, and teachers may possess differing perspectives on what constitutes parental involvement, as well as the specific strategies (communication, roles, time investment) being involved at school may entail (Baker, 1997a, 1997b; Barge & Loges, 2003). Dissonance between expectations and performance results when schools are unclear about what they define as parental involvement; frustration results when parents want to become involved, but have no mechanism to do so, or do not perceive an invitation has been extended by their child or their child's school to become involved (Barge & Loges, 2003).

Based on Baker's research (1997a, 1997b), contemporary research has expanded notions of parent, teacher, and student involvement. Baker confirmed that both parents and teachers alike placed a high priority on parental involvement, and felt that home-school communication was critical to student success in school. However, Baker surmised that parents (1997a) and teachers (1997b) held varying interpretations of what constituted involvement; therefore, a chasm existed between how the teachers expected the parents to be involved and how the parents actually were involved (Barge & Loges, 2003). In their study, Barge and Loges (2003) explored whether parent, student, and teacher perceptions of parental involvement were similar, including the communication strategies they entailed. This study was conducted within the middle school setting, and consisted of parent, teacher, and student data collection methods.

Parents perceived four primary components of parental involvement: (a) monitoring student progress; (b) cultivating personal relationships with teachers; (c) utilizing extracurricular school programs; and (d) developing community support systems. The parents cited monitoring academic progress as the most common method of becoming involved at their child's school. However, parents commonly stated one reason for staying on top of their child's academic progress: to maintain a good relationship with the teachers. Extracurricular activities, viewed as methods of providing appropriate community resources for their child, were also mentioned as an important measure of parental involvement. Lastly, parents indicated that the community support system (seen as collaboration at the school site) was an essential component of parental involvement. The community reinforced student achievement by working together to achieve scholastic goals.

The students cited three important themes of parental involvement: (a) help with homework; (b) encouragement; and (c) interacting with schools. The most common characteristic of parental involvement was helping with homework, which the students divided into two categories: helpful (straightforward assistance, monitoring), and not helpful (completing assignments for the student, reminding). Also, students perceived encouraging conversations with parents as parental involvement. Encouragement varied in its descriptions, from creating competitions between siblings or withholding privileges until satisfactory progress on assignment had been made. Lastly, students defined parental involvement as the presence of their parent at the school during the day and for special events. Student data emphasized the importance of parental time spent monitoring, encouraging, and being present at the school.

Teachers cited four critical themes of parental involvement: (a) communication; (b) participation; (c) supervision; and (d) discipline. First and foremost, teachers perceived parental involvement as maintaining open and frequent lines of communication, and acting responsively when needs arise. Second, participation was perceived as parental involvement, which included having conversations with children, attending school-led meetings, or chaperoning field trips. The third emergent theme identified by teachers as parental involvement outlined the perceived importance of supervision and parenting, examples of which were ensuring good nutrition, spending time at home, or providing necessary school supplies and clothing. The last theme emerging from the teacher data related to discipline. Teachers perceived parental involvement as displaying support for the disciplinary measures enforced by the school. Barge and Loges (2003) emphasized the importance of clearly defining expectations for

parental involvement, both in helpful forms and unhelpful forms. According to the research, parents, teachers, and students benefit the most when there is consensus between groups as to what constitutes parental involvement.

The researchers discovered that teachers "tend to have a narrower view of parental involvement as primarily being home-school communication" (Barge & Loges, 2003, p. 142). The teachers viewed parental involvement as utilizing the mechanisms for communication between home and school, such as notes, emails or phone conversations, or reviewing homework or assignments with their children. The parental view of involvement broadened this definition to include: attendance at school programs, participation in school committees or curriculum planning teams, conducting staff evaluations, and seeking opportunities to advocate for the children in school-related debates (Barge & Loges, 2003).

Parents, teachers, and students agreed on two main components of "high-quality parental involvement" – building positive relationships with teachers and monitoring a child's academic progress (Barge & Loges, 2003, p. 156). First, the focus on student-parent-teacher relationships signified a perceived importance to involvement extending beyond participation on teams, committees, or programs. Each of the three groups (parents, teachers, and students) identified parental attendance at school functions as essential, but high-quality parental involvement extended to visits during the school day with teachers and students with problem-solving intentions, contacting teachers regularly changed monitor student progress, and corresponding with teachers to student issues regarding grades and report cards. A major finding of this research was that teachers perceived the impetus for initiating contact resided with the parent, not the school. The

importance of parents initiating contact with the school in order to be involved in the educational process was evident throughout this study. Reciprocally, the school's and teacher's perceived openness to and invitations for parental involvement played a significant role the in the decision for a parent to become involved.

Another important implication of this study was the importance of monitoring student progress as a key form of involvement (Barge & Loges, 2003). Bronstein, et al. (2005), stated "Children whose parents do not attend to their progress at school may come to feel that their educational progress is not important" (p. 562). Teachers, students, and parents alike viewed monitoring of student progress as a key component of effective parental involvement; specifically, they saw it as the parent's role to review report cards and progress reports, help with and monitor homework assignments and homework completion, and read to and with the child, as is age-appropriate. Additionally, students and teachers viewed effective parental involvement to include structuring time at home so that a student could complete assignments, providing a time and place and establishing a system of rewards and consequences for assignment completion (Barge & Loges, 2003).

Several key differences existed between the perceptions of parents, teachers, and students in defining high-quality parental involvement (Barge & Loges, 2003). The notion of student discipline in maintaining positive parental involvement was misunderstood between parents, teachers, and students. Parents and students tended to view discipline as a system of rewards and consequences provided by the parents to maintain acceptable and positive student decisions – they viewed discipline in the context of the parent-student relationship. However, teachers tended to view positive parental involvement regarding student discipline in terms of supporting the corrective

disciplinary measures the teachers have taken toward the student (Barge & Loges, 2003). This mismatch in expectations sometimes resulted in a teacher's perception of authority being undermined by a parent's inability to understand the purpose of validity of such disciplinary measures. Perceptions of effective parental involvement by parents, teachers, and students established the lens through which educational decisions were made. Recognizing these perspectives, establishing them as a baseline for decision-making, then moving forward to work within these perspectives will allow for teachers to view parental involvement in a more realistic and productive manner.

Multiple avenues exist through which parents may become involved in a child's schooling process, which also helps shape a working definition of parental involvement (Barge & Loges, 2003). Epstein's (1995) categories of parental involvement have become one of the most widely used sources to outline the variety of ways parents can become involved in the educational process (Barge & Loges 2003; Gettinger & Guetschow, 1998). Epstein (1995) outlined six different types of parental involvement:

- Type one: Parenting – Parents implement practices in the home environment that supports positive academic outcomes of their students;

- Type two: Communicating – Parents utilize mechanisms of school-home and home-school communication which are already in place;

- Type three: Volunteering – Parents attend school programs and volunteer when needed;

- Type four: Learning at home – Parents aid their students in completing homework and other curriculum-related activities;

- Type five: Decision-making – Parents become involved in the decision-making process at the school by participating on committees and advisory boards;

- Type six: Collaborating with community – Parents engage in the educational process by integrating community resources, creating a sense of shared responsibility for educational outcomes. (Adapted from Epstein, 1995, p. 704)

Epstein (1995) noted that as parental involvement shifts from type one to type six, the expectations for communication shift from primarily home-centered forms to largely community and whole school methods. Epstein's model for parental involvement methods primarily outlines types and levels of parental communication, as communication plays a small role in types one and two (parent-student, home-school), but a much larger role in type six (parent-community-school) (Barge & Loges, 2003).

Parental involvement necessitates contributions from the parent, in a wide variety of forms, toward the scholastic success of their child (Epstein, 1995). In order to contribute in this way, schools can encourage parents to tap into their own skills, time, and energy, in order to have a positive effect on the child's schooling. For the purposes of this study, parental involvement is defined as a parent's contributions toward student success utilizing the parents' skills, time, and energy (Barge & Loges, 2003; Epstein, 1995; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997).

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model of Parental Involvement (1995, 1997)

Academic achievement and motivation for learning has long been a popular topic in educational literature (Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). In focusing on the need to more fully understand how parental involvement

contributes to student outcomes, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) proposed a theoretical model of the parental involvement process for parents of elementary school and middle school students. The overall purpose of the model is to illuminate the process of parental involvement and its influence on student outcomes. The theoretical model is composed of three major constructs of parental motivation: (a) parental role construction (perceptions regarding how they are supposed to interact); (b) parental self-efficacy (perceptions regarding their personal abilities to affect positive change); and (c) opportunities and barriers for involvement (perceptions of invitations for involvement from students and teachers and perceived life context variables) (Gettinger & Guetschow, 1998; Green et al., 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995,1997). Specifically, the researchers aimed to uncover the answers to three primary questions: (a) Why do parents become involved in children's education? (b) What do they do when they get involved? (c) How does their involvement influence the student's outcomes? (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995,1997).

The model is constructed in five sequential levels (see Figure 1). Level one of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model of Parental Involvement identifies four psychological contributors to a parent's decision to become involved in their child's education. The first contributing factor toward the parental decision to get involved is a parent's belief about what they should do in the context of the role of a parent. The second contributing factor to a parent's decision to be involved is the parent's perception of how much they believe they can impact the child's performance. The third contributing factor is the parent's perception of invitations for involvement from the school. The fourth and final factor toward determining a parent's decision to become

involved in his/her child's education is the parent's perception of invitations for

involvement from their child. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler outlined these four

contributing factors that determine a parent's decision to become involved in their child's

education, as encompassed within the first level of the framework.

LEVEL 5			
Student outcomes, including:			
Skills and Knowledge		Self-efficacy for school success	
LEVEL 4			
Tempering/mediating variables			
Parents' use of developmentally appropriate strategies		Fit between parent's involvement actions and school expectations	
LEVEL 3			
Mechanisms of parental involvement's influence on child's school outcomes			
Modeling	Reinforcement		Instruction
LEVEL 2			
Parents' choice of involvement forms, influenced by:			
Parent's skills and knowledge	Other demands on parent's time and energy		Specific invitations from the child and the school
LEVEL 1			
Parents' basic involvement decision, influenced by:			
Parent's role construction	Parent's sense of efficacy for helping the child	General school invitations for involvement	General child invitations for involvement

Figure 1. Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler Model of Parental Involvement

Level two of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model of Parental Involvement

(1995, 1997) describes how, once the decision has been made to become involved, the

parent considers the form that the involvement may take, based upon time, energy, or

perceptions of openness from child and teacher. Level three of the parental involvement

model describes the means through which the parent is involved based on its influence on outcomes. Level four focuses on the *fit* between the means of involvement delivered by the parent and the developmental needs of the child and the school expectations for involvement. Lastly, level five describes the student outcomes influenced by the parental involvement strategies. An adaptation of the model is represented in Figure 1 (adapted with permission from Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997).

Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, and Hoover-Dempsey (2005) conducted a model revision on levels one and two of the original parental involvement model. There are three primary differences in levels one and two between the original model and the 2005 revisions (Walker, et al., 2005). First, the first two original levels have been combined into one overarching construct – parental role construction and self-efficacy now make up one category, parent's motivational beliefs. Similarly, Walker et al. (2005) organized perceptions of invitations for involvement from the child's teacher/school and perceptions of invitations for involvement from the child into one category at one level – perceptions of invitations for involvement from others. The second difference between the original and the revised model is that the revised model reflects "a more dynamic representation than does the original" (Walker, et al., 2005, p. 87). The newer model shows relationships between the levels and components (Walker, et al., 2005). For instance, the revised model suggests a possible connection between perceived time, energy, skills, and knowledge with perceived life context. The third and final primary difference between the original and revised models relates to the presence of dependent measures at each level of the framework. The dependent measures at level one (psychological factors) and level two (contextual life factors) were combined into a single

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level: a parents' home and school-based behaviors (Walker, et al., 2005). An adaptation

of the revised model (levels one and two) is represented in Figure 2 (adapted with

permission from Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2005).
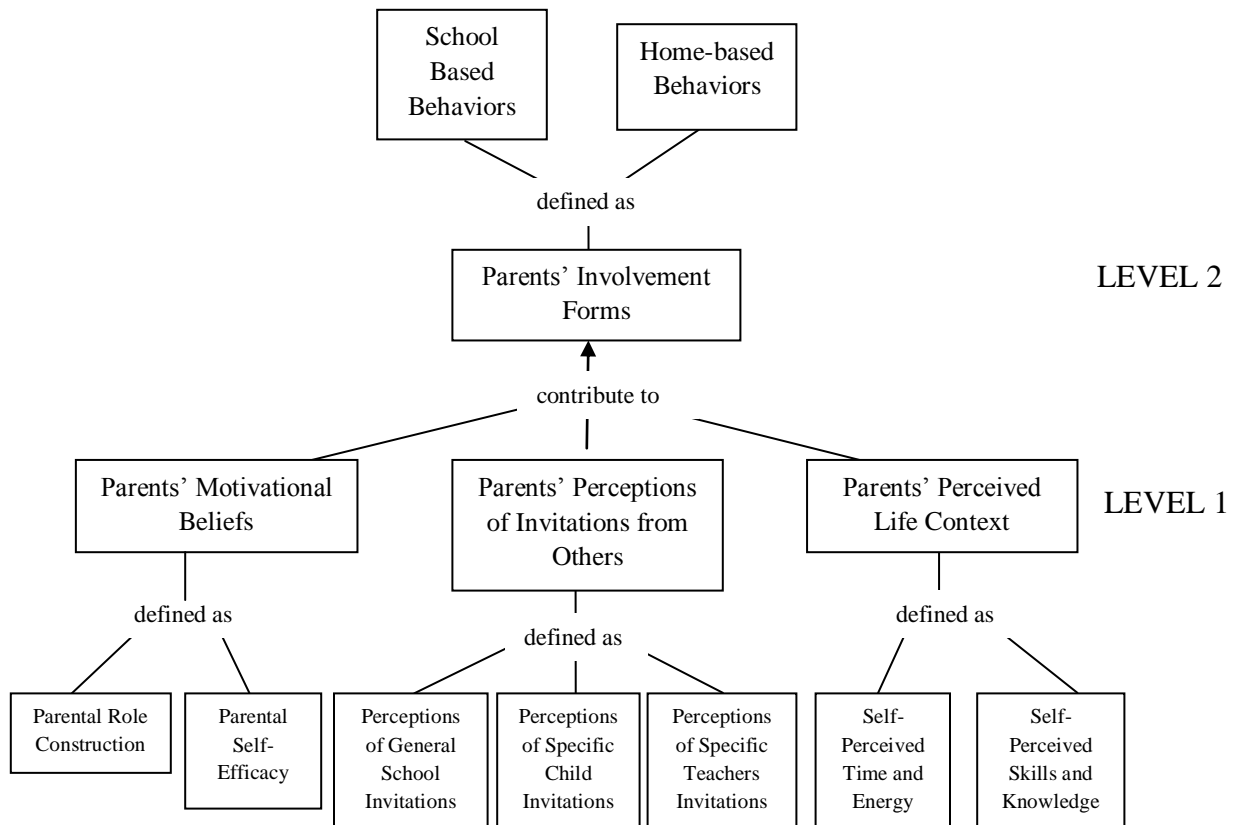
Figure 2. REVISED Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler Model of Parental Involvement

The Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler Model of Parental Involvement (1995, 1997,

revised 2005) focuses on the motivators behind parents' decisions to become involved in

their child's educational process (Hoover-Dempsey, et al. 2005). The literature regarding

parental role construction and parental efficacy has been addressed in the previous

section. In examining the model, however, perceptions of invitations from others

(school, student, and teacher) serves as an equally important piece of the parental

involvement puzzle. Hoover-Dempsey, et al. (2005) stated:

Although strong role construction and efficacy may precipitate involvement, invitations to involvement from members of the school community also serve as an important motivator for involvement because they suggest to the parent that participation in the child's learning is welcome, is valuable, and expected by the school and its members. (p. 110)

Hoover-Dempsey, et al. (2005), continued, "Invitations must be intentionally developed and offered before they can be perceived" (p. 110).

The Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler Model of Parental Involvement suggests that parental life context plays a role in motivating parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005; Walker, et al., 2005). According to this research, three factors contribute to parental life context: (a) family socioeconomic status; (b) parental knowledge, skills, time, and energy; and (c) family culture (Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005). Socio-economic status is correlated to parental involvement in schools; however, this correlation is more closely tied to familial resources and support systems than actual levels of household income. To this end, schools and community programs are able to intentionally target families with low levels of resources and supports in order to increase their levels of parental involvement in schools. A parent's perceptions of their personal skills and time shape their motivations to become involved in the educational process (Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005). Hoover-Dempsey, et al. (1995) reported that when aiding with lower-level tasks, elementary school parents were more likely to engage in the task of helping their child with their school work. However, if they felt their skills were not adequate to help their child, the parents sought other resources, such as another child or family member, asking the child to get more

information at school, or seeking help for themselves (Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005).

Family culture also factors into parental involvement decisions. The researchers stated

that schools, "must respect and respond to family culture and family circumstances in

order to access the full power of parental support for learning" (Hoover-Dempsey, et al.,

2005, p. 116). Many family cultures contain low support systems, such as first or second

generation immigrants, those with limited parental educational background, cultural or

situational poverty, or other culturally limiting factors (Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005).

In order to increase parental involvement in schools, leaders must examine the factors for

parental motivation, and develop plans and programs to address these issues adequately.

The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model of Parental Involvement (1995, 1997,

2005) serves as an applicable framework for this study because it provides clear

connections between school and teacher behaviors and parental involvement decisions.

The framework proffers three primary motivations for parental involvement: (a) parents'

motivational beliefs; (b) parents' perceptions of invitations from others; and (c) parents'

perceived life context. The first factor, parents' motivational beliefs, is defined as a

combination of parental role construction and parental efficacy (Hoover-Dempsey &

Sandler, 1995, 1997, 2005). Middle school interdisciplinary teams are capable of acting

as a positive support for parents in this area by clearly defining parental roles and aiding

parents to increased levels of efficacy. The second factor, parents' perceptions of

invitations from others, is another factor which middle school teams can affect positive

change in levels of parental involvement. When a parent experiences perceived increases

in invitations for involvement from the school, teachers, and students, their involvement

will increase. The last factor is parental perceived life context, which is composed of the

parental perceptions of time, energy, skills, and knowledge. Middle school teams have

the ability to increase the parents' perceptions of time, energy, skills, and knowledge.

The middle school interdisciplinary team is the ideal middle school fit for improved

implementation of the factors that contribute to parental involvement according to the

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model of Parental Involvement.

Parental Involvement

Research has clearly tied positive parental involvement in schools to increased

levels of academic achievement and overall student competence (Carr & Wilson, 1997;

Griffith, 1996; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005;Thorkildsen & Stein, 1998). Specific

parental involvement strategies have been clearly tied to increased student motivation for

academic success (Bronstein, Ginsburg, & Herrera, 2005). Not surprisingly, therefore,

schools have spent much time, energy, and financial resources attempting to find

effective methods of engaging parents in the educational process. Multiple recent studies

have been completed which attempt to uncover the underlying catalysts and motivations

for parental involvement in schools (Barge & Loges, 2003; Bronstein, Ginsburg, &

Herrera, 2005; Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005; Gettinger & Guetschow, 1998; Green,

Hoover-Dempsey, Sandler, & Walker, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie,

1992). Additionally, current research focuses on teacher and school-specific strategies

which can be implemented or utilized in order to increase parental participation within a

school setting (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jayanthi, Nelson, Sawyer, Bursick, & Epstein, 1995;

Schweiker-Marra, 2000; Seitsinger, Felner, Brand, & Burns, 2008). State and federal

governments have even attempted to mandate parental involvement in our schools with

the passage of Goals 2000: Educate America Act and Title I of Improving America's

School Act of 1994 (Barge & Loges, 2003). This legislation recognizes the importance

of home-school partnerships, and suggests models for school governance that places a

priority on collaborative efforts with parents and the community (Barge & Loges, 2003).

School leaders recognize the central role the parents play in the overall educational

picture; therefore, research attempts to uncover the underlying motivations for parental

involvement while discovering useful strategies for increasing parental involvement

(Barge & Loges, 2003).

In previous research, parental efficacy has been defined as a parent's ability to

implement attitudes, skills, and behaviors that are essential for maintaining control over

their role as a parent; in the context of students, parental efficacy is the belief that a

parent has the ability to affect positive changes and support systems for their child's

ability to learn and grow academically (Bandura, 1986,1997; Hoover-Dempsey, et al.,

2005; Swick & Broadway, 1997). Research has shown that parental efficacy is

significantly related to the level of parental involvement in a child's educational setting

(Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987, 1992). Parental efficacy is a significant

contributing factor toward decision-making relating to parental involvement in education,

which indicates that "parents develop behavioral goals for their involvement based upon

their appraisal of their capabilities in the situation" (Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005).

Parental efficacy is composed of positive parental role construction and self-image,

realistic views of locus of control over educational outcomes, and high levels of

interpersonal systems of support (Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005; Swick & Broadway,

1997). Accordingly, parents who exhibit high levels of parental efficacy through these

components display greater levels of parental involvement within the home and school setting (Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005; Swick & Broadway, 1997). These three components of parental efficacy will be explored in subsequent sections, and will be highlighted in the context of current research.

Parental role construction remains an important contributing factor toward parental efficacy throughout parental involvement literature (Gettinger & Guetschow, 1998). Parental role construction is defined by current research as "parents' belief about what they are supposed to do in relation to their children's education and the patterns of parental behavior that follow those beliefs" (Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005, p. 107). Positive parental role construction is characterized by a parent's own beliefs about how a child should develop, perceptions of effective child rearing, and what parents should do at home to support their child's education (Gettinger & Guetschow, 1998; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005). Parents who feel confident in their role as parents (i.e., parents who have a positive role construction) tend to spend more time with their children, and take higher levels of interest in the activities (both school and community-based) of their children (Gettinger & Guetschow, 1998). Parental role construction is highly influenced by social factors, such as expectations from outside groups, personal prior experiences with schooling, and ongoing experiences during school-related interactions (Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005). Since parental roles are influenced by external social factors, parental expectations for effective involvement are dynamic and can be altered when the influential factors are changed (Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005). Parental perceptions of effective involvement in schools vary according to the level to which parental role

construction has taken place (Barge & Loges, 2003; Gettinger & Guetschow, 1998; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005).

Positive parental involvement is highly affected by the level of control parents feel they have over their child's educational and developmental outcomes (Swick & Broadway, 1997). Low perceptions of control by parents over educational outcomes often results in a parent leaving child developmental guidance and decision-making to outside agencies or to fate. High perceptions of control result in a parent's tendency to collaborate with teachers and other parents with educational progress at the center of the process, thus increasing levels of parental involvement in schools. Similarly, parents who perceive a high level of intrapersonal support systems in place are more likely to engage in parental involvement in schools, and will spend more time engaged in activities that promote their child's education. Support systems such as resourceful neighbors, supportive religious programs, collaborative schools, helpful teachers, and other supportive factors increase the likelihood that a parent will engage in meaningful participation in their child's education (Gettinger & Guetschow, 1998; Swick & Broadway, 1997). Research has shown that when schools provide an abundance of resources, opportunities for dialogue and feedback, and clear connections to neighborhoods and community, parental efficacy increases (Barge & Loges, 2003; Swick & Broadway, 1997).

There exists an underlying assumption that parents possess their own motivations for engaging with their child in the schooling process (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2005). Research does indicate that parents who are involved in their child's education perceive themselves to be more successful parents (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brown,

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1995). However, research has emphasized the important role the school has in involving parents intentionally in the educational process - parents are most responsive to invitations for involvement from their own students and from school (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997, 2005; Green et al., 2007). Parental involvement extends beyond formal invitations; perceived openness from the school environment and teacher interaction plays a significant role in a parent's choice to engage with the school (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997, 2005; Green et al., 2007).

Parental involvement in schools tends to decrease during the middle level years (Hoover-Dempsey, et al. 2005). In order to increase productive parental involvement in middle schools, school leaders need to address the research-based factors that contribute to a parent's decision to become involved in the educational process. Multiple school improvement processes exist and can serve as frameworks for change. Making Middle Grades Work is one example of a school-improvement process that addresses engaging parents utilizing middle school philosophy and concepts.

The Making Middle Grades Work (MMGW) School Improvement Model

The Making Middle Grades Work (MMGW) School Improvement Model, initiated by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), was the first national middle school improvement model (Southern Regional Education Board, 2008). The purpose of MMGW is to engage federal, state, and local school leaders in the middle school improvement process through the implementation of MMGW key practices and key conditions – philosophical and organizational strategies implemented within the

middle school which reflect positive support systems to promote middle school achievement (Sara Wright, personal communication, March 18, 2010; Southern Regional Education Board, 2008). The presence of MMGW middle schools in the nation has grown to 350 schools in 19 states (Southern Regional Education Board, 2008). MMGW's presence in Alabama, the context for this study, began in 2000 with two pilot schools, Opelika Middle School and Muscle Shoals Middle School (Sara Wright, personal communication, March 18, 2010). Currently, there are 131 MMGW middle schools in the state of Alabama, and the number is continuing to rise each year (Sara Wright, personal communication, March 18, 2010). With the integration of middle school-specific supports within MMGW schools, students will experience accelerated and challenging learning in an adolescent-centered environment, which increases a middle school student's level of preparation for challenging high school studies.

MMGW has established 10 research-based key practices for implementation within MMGW schools (adapted from Southern Regional Education Board, 2008, pp. 2-4). An MMGW school:

- Engages students in a rigorous academic core curriculum.

- Holds a belief that all students matter.

- Establishes high expectations and a system of extra help and time.

- Implements classroom practices that engage all students.

- Encourages collaboration and working together on teacher teams.

- Experiences support from parents.

- Utilizes qualified teachers.

- Uses data to drive decision-making.

- Utilizes technology to improve student knowledge and teacher practices.

- Exhibits strong school leadership.

Research indicates that the implementation of the 10 key practices of MMGW middle schools is likely to result in increases in student achievement (Southern Regional Education Board, 2008). The SREB has contracted with Research Triangle Institute (RTI) on an ongoing basis (most recently using 2004 data) to determine the level of correlation between the implementation of MMGW key practices and middle school achievement. In the process of their data analysis, RTI uncovered several findings. First, middle schools that fully implement the MMGW framework: (a) have a higher percentage of students who perform at or above proficiency in all areas of achievement; (b) have teachers who are more likely to provide students with more challenging assignments and lessons; (c) have teachers who encourage students to take advanced courses in high school; (d) have teachers who are available for extra help during the school day; and (e) have students who were engage with multiple and varied strategies for learning (Southern Regional Education Board, 2008). Research data indicate that students attending highly-implemented MMGW schools outperformed students attending low-implementation or non-MMGW schools (Southern Regional Education Board, 2008).

MMGW cites five key environmental conditions which need to exist in order to maximize the implementation of the MMGW middle school improvement framework (Southern Regional Education Board, 2008). First, the local board and school need to make a commitment to implement fully the MMGW key practices. Second, a culture of continuous analysis and improvement must be established within the faculty. Third, local

leaders must dedicate themselves to analyzing all state, national, and international curriculum standards, and ensure that all local curriculum standards reflect the highest of expectations. Fourth, district and school leaders must provide professional development opportunities directly related to the MMGW key practices. Fifth, the local school board must be dedicated to matching teaching assignments with the teacher's area of certification (Southern Regional Education Board, 2008). The presence of these conditions ensures genuine levels of the implementation of MMGW key practices, and provides the environment necessary for middle school improvement to take place.

The impetus for becoming an MMGW middle school lies with the middle school leaders at the school (administration and leadership team). Once the school leadership team has made the decision to apply for MMGW status, the school must undergo a multiple-step, multiple-year process (Sara Wright, personal communication, March 18, 2010; Southern Regional Education Board, 2008). Foremost, the school must have the consent and support of the local school board and superintendent. In general, however, there are seven steps for a middle school to achieve MMGW status. First, the school administration contacts the state MMGW office to express interest and to complete a short online application. Second, the state MMGW coordinator schedules and attends an MMGW planning meeting with the administrator and the school's leadership team. During this initial planning meeting, the MMGW key practices and conditions are iterated, and the school is tasked with forming committees related to each key practice and condition. The committees are tasked with developing a current status report, as well as recommendations to further implement the effective middle school practice. Third, the school participates in a Technical Assistance Visit (TAV) from a team of local MMGW

educators, within one year of their initiation into the program. The purpose of the TAV is to evaluate the extent to which the key practices and conditions have been implemented and exist in the school's operations and culture, and the TAV team will create a list of recommendations or changes that need to be made to better serve the needs of the students.   Fourth, the school agrees to provide ongoing school improvement data to MMGW through a variety of sources: the standardized Middle Grades Assessment, biannual TAVs, teacher and student surveys, and general promotion and integration of MMGW key practices and conditions (Sara Wright, personal communication, March 18, 2010; Southern Regional Education Board, 2008).

MMGW research cites six primary stakeholders as beneficiaries to the MMGW middle school improvement model, which include (a) students; (b) teachers; (c) principals; (d) schools; (e) community; and (f) nation (Southern Regional Education Board, 2008). Students' knowledge and skills increase, and the academic and social connections from middle school to high school are made clear. Teachers gain tremendous professional skill and overall teaching confidence. Principals experience a strengthened understanding of the curriculum, and become more skilled at leading and implementing fully a school improvement initiative. Schools receive specific data about their students' strengths and weaknesses in a variety of academic areas, and are able to use this data to take actions to improve the rigor and relevance of the curriculum. Educational reform as a whole benefits from the MMGW school improvement process with increased levels of educational efficacy. Efforts can produce positive change. Lastly, the community and nation receive an ongoing supply of students who are engaged

learners, high achievers, and overall productive contributors to society (Southern

Regional Education Board, 2008).

The Making Middle Grades Work Middle School Improvement Model values the

contribution of the middle school interdisciplinary team as one key mechanism through

which middle school improvement goals are attained (Sara Wright, personal

communication, March 18, 2010). Collaboration, teaming, and curricular integration are

key components of the MMGW program (Southern Regional Education Board, 2008).

Additionally, support from parents is noted as a key practice for all MMGW schools

(Sara Wright, personal communication, March 18, 2010). A middle school that has

invested in the MMGW process for several years will exhibit characteristics which place

a high value on the contributions made from interdisciplinary teams and parental

involvement (Sara Wright, personal communication, March 18, 2010).

Summary of the Literature

Literature relating to characteristics of adolescence, the middle school concept

and philosophy, middle school interdisciplinary teaming, and parental involvement has

been outlined in this chapter. The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model of Parental

Involvement (1995, 1997) provided the parental involvement theoretical framework for

this study, which includes parental roles and efficacy, perceptions of invitations for help,

and parental life contexts. Additionally, a thorough explanation of the Making Middle

Grades Work (MMGW) School Improvement Model was included. Middle school

interdisciplinary teams of teachers are a central component to the challenge of educating

adolescents by addressing the social, emotional, and cognitive needs of their students.

Clarity throughout adolescent and middle school-specific literature supports the importance of the interdisciplinary team as the primary mechanism for involving the parents of middle school students. However, little research exists to categorically define the effective strategies middle school interdisciplinary teams utilize to involve parents in the educational process. The findings of this study serve as a bridge between what is known about adolescent development, best middle school interdisciplinary teaming models, and the essential nature of parental involvement in education.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative multiple case study approach was utilized to answer the research

questions related to this study. Case study research is best described as "a qualitative

approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple

bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving

multiple sources of information, and reports a case description and a case-based themes"

(Creswell, 2007, p. 73). Case study research may select a single-case from which to draw

data, or may select multiple sites from which to draw data (Stake, 2006). Single case

research, also called instrumental, provides insight into an issue or theme related to one

bounded case. In multiple case study research, also called collective, the researcher

studies several cases to provide insight into an issue or theme related to the case selected

(Creswell, 2007).

The desired end result of any qualitative case study research is greater insight into

the central phenomenon related to the research questions (Creswell, 2007; Creswell,

2008; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). Stake (2006) referred to the central phenomenon in

multiple case analysis as the quintain, the "target of collection" (p. 6). The researcher

seeks to understand the quintain better by studying single cases, and continuing by

delineating their specific similarities and differences with each other. Underneath this

"umbrella" (Stake, 2006, p. 6) lies all understanding of the central phenomenon. While

single case analysis seeks to understand the case, multiple case analysis seeks to bring understanding to the quintain. The quintain explored in this study is the parental involvement strategies utilized by effective middle school interdisciplinary teams of teachers.

Qualitative research design has an extended history, and can be traced back to social scientists in the disciplines of law, medicine, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and political science (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research is "exploratory" in nature and process, collecting data within the natural settings of the participants, and utilizing inductive reasoning in order to draw themes and patterns through data analysis (Creswell, 2007, p. 73). Today's qualitative research, "involves closer attention to the interpretive nature of inquiry and situating the study within the political, social, and cultural context of the researchers, the participants, and the readers of the study" (Creswell, 2007, p. 37). Qualitative research is naturalistic and interpretive in nature; meaning and sense are brought to a phenomenon only through the study of the participants in their natural setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The "key concern" (Merriam, 1998, p. 6) in qualitative research is to obtain the perspectives of the participants, the insiders' perspective, on the central phenomenon.

Merriam (1998) emphasized the critical importance of the use of qualitative methods in research in the field of education. The author stated, "….I believe that research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspective of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practices of education" (Merriam, 1998, p. 1). Approaching a phenomenon from an interpretive standpoint allows researchers to pry deeper toward

social understanding. Qualitative case study methodology is most appropriate when the research questions seek to explain current circumstances, such as how or why a social phenomenon occurs (Yin, 2009). For research that requires deep analysis, case study research becomes an increasingly "relevant" methodology (Yin, 2009, p. 4). Unlike quantitative research, which dissects a phenomenon to reveal its parts (the variables in the study), qualitative research seeks to explore how the parts work together to form the whole (Merriam, 1998).

Case Selection and Sampling

A case is a "noun, a thing" (Stake, 2006, p. 1), not a function. Stake (2006) focused on the importance of separating the case from the actions or activities of the case. In order to gain accurate depictions of the case, a researcher must be able to first accurately understand the case itself. According to Stake (2006), "Each case is a specific entity" (p. 2), which must be studied in depth in order to accurately contribute to the overall understanding of the quintain. In this study, the case is the middle school interdisciplinary team; the researcher seeks to gain greater insight as to how each case in the study functions to involve parents in the education of their students. To achieve the purpose of this study, the researcher chose to utilize a qualitative multiple-case study research design. In order to maximize the insight gleaned from the participants, three middle school interdisciplinary teams were purposefully selected as cases to participate in this study from three different MMGW certified middle schools in Alabama, one urban middle school, one suburban middle school, and one rural middle school. The case selection process was as follows:

- The researcher began with a complete list of all 131 MMGW certified schools in the state of Alabama;

- Utilizing this complete list, the researcher narrowed down the sites based upon geographical proximity to central Alabama and their classification as urban, suburban, and rural schools;

- The researcher discussed these sites with the director of MMGW Alabama in order to solicit her selections for central Alabama MMGW middle schools which have established highly successful teaming models;

- The researcher gained all necessary district and school level written permissions to conduct research (see Appendices A, B and C);

- The researcher conducted a selection meeting with the principal at the research site. At this meeting, the principal:

    - Reviewed a list of research-based characteristics of effective middle school interdisciplinary teams (see Appendix K).

    - Selected one interdisciplinary team of teachers which, based upon the principal's experiences and observations of the team, most resembled these research-based characteristics.

- The researcher met with each of the selected middle school interdisciplinary teams to introduce the purpose of the research and review the research process.

- Upon acceptance of research protocols and obtaining informed consent, data collection procedures began at each data collection site.

By allowing site-selection to take place by an outside expert in the middle school field, the researcher attempted to obtain local school sites which most effectively employed

MMGW research-based standard middle school practices. Additionally, case-selection at each school site was based upon the site principal's own observations and experiences with each middle school team, based upon the list of current middle school teaming effective practices (see Appendix K). The purpose of these case selection procedures was to obtain a participant sample of teams which exhibited high levels of knowledge and implementation of effective middle school interdisciplinary teaming strategies, and had already demonstrated their strategies and abilities to work as a middle school team to involve parents to a high degree.

Data Collection

Qualitative case study research typically gathers data from multiple sources in order to gain the most complete and thorough exploratory picture of the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009). Consistent with a qualitative approach to data collection, the data collection and analysis is constant and ongoing (Stake, 2006). The researcher in this study continuously collected data from multiple and varied sources including: (a) multiple team interviews; (b) multiple team meeting observations; (c) ongoing team document review; (d) multiple teacher email prompts; (e) a parent questionnaire; and (f) multiple parent focus groups. From these data, emerging themes were outlined, analyzed, and explored further.

Team Interviews

The researcher conducted multiple interdisciplinary team interviews throughout the course of the research project. Team interviews occurred during the team's regularly

scheduled weekly team meeting period. All interdisciplinary team members were present in the interview, and previously created interview protocols were followed. The interview questions (see Appendix J) were derived from the seven components of parental motivations for involvement from the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model of Parental Involvement (1995, 1997, 2005). The interviews were semi-structured; the researcher took notes as the questions were asked and responses were offered. With the permission of the participants, the team interviews were audio-recorded, and later transcribed. Student names were not identified in the study. For the sake of anonymity, participants are identified by pseudonyms throughout this study.   All of the conversations took place at the research site, and remained confidential. The research was only discussed by the parties directly involved in the study.

Team Document/Regular Correspondence Review

The researcher gathered school and interdisciplinary team related documents or other documents described as regular school-home correspondence. These items included: (a) school letters and bulletins; (b) class syllabi; (c) team introductory letters; (d) parent night PowerPoint presentations; (e) field trip forms; (f) parent update emails; and (g) individual notes to parents of team business.

Teacher Email Prompts

The researcher requested that each of the team teachers respond to weekly parental involvement email prompts. The email prompts were derived from questions (see Appendix J) relating to the seven components of parental motivations for

involvement from Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model of Parental Involvement (1995, 1997, 2005). The researcher emailed the teachers with an email prompt, and the teachers responded on an individual basis with their thoughts, impressions, interactions, successes, failures, strategies, and frustrations relating to parental involvement. The responses were provided to the researcher throughout the data collection period, and were transcribed by the researcher verbatim, replacing student and parent names with pseudonyms. All responses remained confidential.

Parent Questionnaire

The researcher issued one anonymous researcher-generated parent questionnaire to the parents of all of the students on the middle school interdisciplinary team. Epstein's (1995) six types of parental involvement and the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model of Parental Involvement (1995, 1997, 2005) served as the basis for the questions contained on the questionnaire (see Appendix G). This questionnaire was issued at the midterm (four-and-a-half weeks into the school year). Data collected through the questionnaire were utilized to further identify themes related to effective parental involvement strategies and perceptions of effective parental involvement.

Parent Focus Groups

The researcher conducted two parent focus groups at each site during the data collection period, a total of six parent focus groups. All of the parents from the team were invited to attend; however, team teachers were not be invited to attend. The focus groups were informal; the researcher did not take notes as the questions were offered.

Epstein's (1995) six types of parental involvement and the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model of Parental Involvement (1995, 1997, 2005) served as the foundation for the focus group questions (see Appendix E). With the permission of the participants, the team interviews were audio-recorded, and later transcribed. The purpose of the audio recording was clearly stated, and with any objection, the researcher opted to take inconspicuous notes instead of utilizing the audio recording. For the sake of anonymity, all parents, students, and teachers were identified by a pseudonym throughout the transcription. The focus of the data collection within the parental focus groups was to gauge parental perceptions of effective involvement, as well as to explore the level of parental satisfaction with current parental involvement practices. All of the conversations took place at the research site with parents only, and the results remained confidential.

Validation Methods

In data collection and analysis, validity of results remains of utmost importance. Validity refers to the credibility or accuracy of the findings, which may or may not be recognizable at first or second glance by the researcher (Creswell, 2007, 2008). As a result, validation strategies must be employed by the researcher to help ensure an accurate analysis.

For this study, multiple strategies were utilized in order to help ensure validity of research findings:

- *Multiple teacher interviews* – According to Weiss (1994), conducting multiple teacher interviews helps to build a relationship between the researcher and the interview participants, which allows the participants to more accurately reflect

their thoughts, feelings, and experiences, therefore increasing validity. Attempts were made to make the participants feel comfortable throughout the interview process. However, conflicting statements in concurrent interviews did not necessarily indicate inaccurate data. The information gathered was context specific, therefore conflicting statements may not be mutually exclusive (Weiss, 1994). As stated by the author, conflicting data may be accurate for their specific contexts.

- *Content validity of interview protocols* – The researcher reviewed the interview protocols prior to focus groups with a panel of practicing administrators (three independent middle school administrators) to ensure appropriateness, breadth, and depth of questioning. This strategy for increasing validity ensured that the questions presented were representative of all of the possible questions that were available (Creswell, 2008).

- *Triangulation of descriptions and themes* – Triangulation is a process in which "researchers make use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence" to support findings (Creswell, 2007, p. 208). The analysis of the various data sources within one case produced emergent themes. These themes were triangulated for validity among the various sources of data, including interview data, teacher journaling data, document review data, and observational data.

- *Interviewing integrity* - Weiss (1994) stated that:

    ….for the most part, we must rely on the quality of our interviewing for the validity of our material. Ultimately, our best guarantee of the validity

of interview material is careful, concrete level, interviewing within the context of a good interviewing partnership. (p. 150)

Relationships with research participants were cultivated over time, and built upon trust and confidence. The researcher routinely evaluated the integrity of interview procedures and protocols, and strived to maintain accurate interview records and data. Information gained during interviews, observations, focus groups, and document review was carefully considered in light of contextual specifics.

Whittemore, Chase, and Mandle (2001) endorsed an interpretive view of validation which separates criteria into two parts: primary and secondary. The four primary criteria to establish validation are (as cited in Creswell, 2007):

- credibility (Are the results an accurate interpretation of the participants' meanings?)

- authenticity (Are different voice heard?)

- criticality (Is there a critical appraisal of all aspects of research?)

- integrity (Are the investigators self-critical?)

The researchers also offered secondary criteria, which are related to explicitness, vividness, creativity, thoroughness, congruence, and sensitivity (Creswell, 2007). These criteria were applied to this research data and emergent themes to help ensure accuracy of findings and reporting processes.

Data Analysis

Consistent with qualitative multiple-case study protocols, data analysis occurred throughout the course of the research study (Stake, 2006). Immediately following the team interviews, team meeting observations, and the parent focus groups, the researcher prepared the data for analysis by transcribing the recordings into textual formats. The researcher read through the data to obtain a general sense of the material. Next, the researcher analyzed and reviewed the transcribed text a second time for accuracy. In order to begin identifying emerging themes, the researcher reviewed the interview data within a case to begin the coding process, categorically aggregating the data by locating textual segments and assigning code labels. The team documents, teacher journals, and parent questionnaire data were coded similarly for categorical analysis. The data were coded twice, once for descriptive purposes to be included in the research report, and once for textual themes to be included in the research report. This analysis process was cyclical in nature, and occurred simultaneously with other instances of data collection.

Emergent themes were categorized by case, keeping separate the emergent themes from rural, urban, and suburban cases. At the completion of the data collection, coding, and thematic analysis portions of the research study, the case themes were analyzed for similarities and differences. Cross-case analysis produced rich and descriptive comparative results between the different cases.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher sought permission from the University of Alabama at Birmingham Institutional Review Board for Human Use to conduct this research study. An expedited

review was necessary. The superintendent (or his/her designee) for each school district represented on the participant list provided his/her written permission for the research project to take place within his/her school district. Furthermore, the researcher obtained ~~the~~ written permission of each school's principal to conduct research within his/her school site. The informed consent letter was distributed to each of the team teacher participants, which described the purpose, risks, benefits, alternatives, confidentiality issues, withdrawal procedures, costs, legal rights, and questions related to this study. All team teacher interviews were conducted during a regular team meeting time during school hours, but not at a time when the teachers were responsible for students. At no time were student data collected.

All recordings and transcriptions of team interviews, team meetings, and parent focus groups were maintained on the researcher's computer, and were locked in a password-protected audio file. At times, a printed version was utilized, and was filed and stored in a locked file cabinet. The researcher had no direct involvement or relationships with the participants.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher is an administrator in a suburban central Alabama middle school. The researcher graduated from a local university, and immediately began teaching middle school science at a local middle school on an interdisciplinary team of teachers. The researcher taught middle school science for seven years, during which time the team of teachers changed formats, teachers, and structures in multiple instances. After seven years of teaching at the central Alabama suburban middle school, the researcher began a

career as a middle school administrator at another middle school in the same school district. The researcher is completing his sixth year as a middle school administrator.

The researcher has conducted multiple professional development sessions for veteran teachers, newly hired teachers, and pre-service university teachers on topics such as middle school teaming effectiveness, parent communication techniques, dealing with difficult situations with parents, and adolescent-reflective teaching strategies. Additionally, the researcher has created and led multiple presentations for parents on topics such as adolescence and home-based intervention strategies. Portions of the data collection phase were challenging for the researcher to maintain a nonparticipant role, and the researcher constantly needed to maintain an observational mindset. However, the knowledge base the researcher has in the related areas served as an asset to the interviewing and data analysis processes.

Summary

Chapter 3 outlined the methodology that was implemented to answer the research questions. Qualitative multiple-case study design was cited as the methodological approach utilized in this study. Case selection and data analysis processes were described, along with ethical considerations and a statement as to the role of the researcher.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The central research question that directed this study was, "What are the strategies utilized by interdisciplinary middle school teams to effectively involve the parents of their students in the educational process?" In order to best address this central question, the researcher focused data collection efforts to answer seven sub-questions:

- How do middle school interdisciplinary teams of teachers define parental involvement?

- What are the attitudes of middle school team teachers toward parental involvement?

- What are the strategies that middle school interdisciplinary teams of teachers utilize to involve parents?

- What do middle school interdisciplinary teams of teachers view as the most effective strategies for involving parents?

- How do parents of middle school students define parental involvement?

- What are the attitudes of parents of middle school students toward parental involvement?

- What are the strategies that parents describe as useful in being involved in the education of their student?

As previously described in Chapter 3, the researcher utilized a multiple-case study approach with three central Alabama middle school interdisciplinary teams: one from a suburban setting, one from a rural setting, and one from an urban setting. All three

middle schools are active members of Making Middle Grades Work (MMGW), a regional middle school improvement initiative. MMGW schools exhibit dedication to authentic middle school practices and tenets, such as a strong academic core, engaging classroom practices, dedication to interdisciplinary teaming, high expectations for all students, quality professional development, and strong middle school leadership. In order to select the three middle schools, the researcher requested input from the director of MMGW Alabama. The researcher asked this individual to select three central Alabama middle school sites, one of each type, which best represented an authentic implementation of MMGW tenets and practices. Once the MMGW middle school sites were selected by the director, the researcher provided the principal at each school with a research-based list of effective middle school team characteristics, and asked the principal at that school site to choose the middle school team within his/her building that best displayed or represented these effective middle school team characteristics.

Each interdisciplinary team at each middle school participated in multiple team interviews, responded to journal questions, and was subject to observations at parent nights and related events. As a subgroup of each case, parents of students on the interdisciplinary team were also included as participants through the use of focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and written questionnaires. The data were first coded for case context and descriptions. Then, the general team and parent data were coded for each case, which was used to generate within-case themes. The researcher identified seven themes within the suburban setting, seven themes in the rural setting, and five themes within the rural setting (see Table 1). The researcher also conducted a cross-case thematic analysis in order to generate similarities and differences between settings.

Through this process, the researcher identified four cross-case themes (see Table 1). In the chapter and sections that follow, the researcher describes each case in depth, including a description of the research site (see Table 2), the team participants, and the correlating emergent themes from each site. A summary of each site's data and within-case themes closes each case. Lastly, cross-case themes are presented and analyzed.

Table 1. *Research Themes – (cross-case themes are boxed together, within-case are*

separated)

This effective middle school team:

Alpha Middle School	Beta Middle School	Gamma Middle School
Believes that parental involvement is essential to student success.	Believes that parental involvement is essential to student success.	Believes that parental involvement is essential to student success.
Is open and approachable to parents.	Is open and approachable to parents.	Is open and approachable to parents.
Serves as a resource to the parents of adolescents.	Serves as a resource to the parents of adolescents.	Serves as a resource to the parents of adolescents.
Approaches problem-solving opportunities with parents as a team instead of individuals.	Approaches problem-solving opportunities with parents as a team instead of individuals.	Approaches problem-solving opportunities with parents as a team instead of individuals.
Establishes immediate positive relationships with students and parents through the use of a team motto, team support systems, and team spirit	Makes face-to-face contact whenever possible.	Displays compassion for difficult circumstances in their students' lives.
Attempts to use a daily communication tool for struggling students.	Attempts to use a daily communication tool for struggling students.	
Utilizes technology to communicate with parents.	Displays a compassion for the difficult circumstances in their students' lives.	
7 emergent themes	*7 emergent themes*	*5 emergent themes*

Table 2. *Research Site Characteristics Comparison*

Category	Alpha Middle School	Beta Middle School	Gamma Middle School
Location	*Suburban*	Rural	Urban
Average ADM	1,085	338	690
Number of teams (schoolwide)	12	3	4
Number of teachers per team	4	4	5
Approx. number of students per team	100	103	160
Total number of faculty and staff	115	56	65
Free/Reduced Lunch Rate (%)	16.4	55.6	82.3
Annual Local Tax Contributions (% of total income)	50.5	32.9	22.6
Annual $ spent per student (district)	12,058	9,312	8,793

Research Data Methods and Parental Response Rates

The researcher spent 15 weeks gathering data concurrently at Alpha Middle School (suburban), Beta Middle School (rural), and Gamma Middle School (urban), all in Central Alabama. Through multiple team teacher interviews, multiple team teacher observations, multiple email teacher journal entries, and team document analysis, the researcher explored interdisciplinary strategies for involving parents. Additionally, the researcher gathered data from the parents on each team at each of the school sites through multiple small focus groups, one-on-one, face-to-face interviews, phone interviews, and written questionnaires. Through this time and energy intensive process, the researcher developed a greater depth of understanding of the central phenomenon – parental involvement through middle school interdisciplinary teaming.

The response rates for the parental participants are noted in Table 3. A large discrepancy exists between the suburban, rural, and urban parental response rates. The difficulty of gathering data from the parent population is evident throughout this research project. Opportunities to gather data from willing team parents were exhausted at each school site. This experience was an obstacle for the researcher, but was also, in-and-of-itself, valuable observational data which contributed to the production of the overall research themes.

Table 3. *Research Site Parental Response Rate Comparisons*

Category	Alpha Middle School	Beta Middle School	Gamma Middle School
Location	Suburban	Rural	Urban
Average ADM	1,085	338	690
Number of parents interviewed (total = 21)	8	10	3
Number of parental questionnaires distributed (total = 367)	104	103	160
Number of parental questionnaires returned (total = 107)	62 / 59.6%	16 / 15.5%	29 / 18.1%
Total parental response rate (questionnaires + interviews / total = %) (107 + 20 = 127 total parents)	70 / 67%	26 / 24%	32 / 19%

Alpha Middle School

Description of the Community

Alpha Middle School is located in a well-established and affluent central Alabama suburban city. The city was incorporated in 1967 with only 410 citizens. Presently, the city has grown to a population of over 65,000 people. Boasting the best restaurants, shopping, and entertainment, the city draws visitors from all over the state, and continues to increase in the number of residents. Concurrently, the school system has experienced extreme growth, which is now comprised of nine elementary schools (grades K-5), three middle schools (grades 6-8), one alternative school (grades 6-12), and two high schools (grades 9-12). Over the last 15 years, the reliable and solid reputation of the school system has become a draw for many families to permanently plant their lives in this suburban area. The school system generally draws from students who live in above-average sized and priced homes, from multi-million dollar homes located in an exclusive golf and country club community to the standard four and five bedroom homes in pleasant neighborhoods. However, several lower income apartment complex areas are also served by the school system, of which the prevalence has grown in the last 15 years.

Alpha Middle School is the largest of the middle schools in this city, with an average daily membership of 1,085 students, a slight increase over the last three years. The school's large size requires four interdisciplinary teams of four teachers at each grade level, with a school-wide total of 12 teams with approximately 100 students each. Alpha Middle School enjoys significant municipal financial support, as more than half of their total yearly revenue is funded from local tax dollars and other sources. Their

school's free and reduced lunch rate holds steady at approximately 16.4%. The school district spends $12,058 per student. By any local or national measure, Alpha Middle School experiences widespread support from the community. The school building itself can be described like any new modern high school: built in 2005, three separate floors (one for each grade), two gymnasiums, multiple computer labs, a large lunchroom, office suites on each floor, a full menu of technological devices in each classroom, a full track, and tennis courts. The overwhelmingly optimistic and high achieving attitude of the teachers and students is palatable by any visitor walking the halls. The teachers' classrooms are decorated down to every last detail, providing a warm and supportive physical learning environment.

Description of Interdisciplinary Team A

The researcher was introduced to interdisciplinary team A, a sixth grade team, at the end of the summer of 2010. Team A is comprised of four content area teachers, all veterans in their own right. They have been teaching together on this interdisciplinary team for two years. By the time the researcher met with them for an initial summer meeting, they had already conducted one team planning meeting on their own "to make essential team decisions," such as team motto, policies and procedures. Their team motto, "Reaching For The Stars," is a new one for this year. The team decided "Reaching For The Stars" is more easily applicable to their students in terms of goal setting and making transitions than their previous motto, "The Extreme Team." Plus, they state, "It's easier to decorate with, and we have ENOUGH extremes in middle school without encouraging it!"

Mrs. Michael is the math teacher on the team, and has been teaching for a total of 18 years. Her certification area is in elementary school, but she has taught all subjects. She taught 6th grade for 17 years, with one year teaching fourth grade in a different school. Mrs. Michael has been teaching at Alpha Middle School for 10 years, and has been a member of an interdisciplinary team since arriving at Alpha. She is a fervent advocate of middle school teaming:

> We are there for each other…..at every turn, there is somebody helping you. And we get so used to it, but when I first moved here, the difference was amazing. It really kinda blew me away. I would literally just walk around, it was a kinda surreal experience. I would just say, 'Oh my gosh. This is so…..I didn't know it could be this way.' It was just really nice. It was comforting too – there was always someone to help and support and plan and everything.

Mrs. Michael is thrilled with her current teaching assignment, and states that she has no desires or plans to change in the future. Mrs. Michael has emerged as the unspoken leader for her team members, a role that she has embraced and enjoys.

Mrs. Marcus, the team's social studies teacher, has been teaching for 15 years, all of which have been on a sixth grade interdisciplinary team at Alpha Middle School. She is elementary certified, but has taught both math and social studies at Alpha. Mrs. Marcus is on the "perfect" team, she says. She describes her current teammates as very close. "We really do like each other….we have a great sense of humor," she says. Mrs. Marcus even got her team members to commit to do a Christian book study together during their lunchtime. "It was called *So Long Insecurity*, but unfortunately, we have not ridded ourselves of all of our insecurities [laughing]." Mrs. Marcus's ability to find

humor in every situation is an obvious strength when it comes to teaching on a middle school interdisciplinary team.

Mrs. Robinson, the team's language arts teacher, started her career six years ago teaching seventh grade in another system, then moved to the high school setting to teach ninth and eleventh graders. Then, she moved to the middle school setting to teach at a different middle school in this system for two years, and now is in her second year at Alpha Middle School. The camaraderie of the interdisciplinary team is something that Mrs. Robinson enjoys about her team. Mrs. Robinson says about her teammates, "They're the best." She says that her favorite times are when they are in the hallways during class changes, and they get to just chat and have fun with their students. Mrs. Robinson's soft-spoken wisdom and new perspective gets the attention of her teammates, who state openly how much they value her input.

Mr. Hall, the team's science teacher, is certified to teach elementary and middle school. He has taught for nine years, with his entire career being spent teaching either sixth or seventh grade at Alpha Middle School. Mr. Hall feels like he would sink if he did not have his teammates with him each day. "I find it immensely invaluable to have these teachers" Mr. Hall states about his team, "I don't know what it would be like otherwise." He has grown to truly love working with this age group:

> They are just starting to get abstract concepts. And, that's interesting in science because there are a lot of things that just go right over their heads. But, it's neat to see the challenge of them just starting to grasp some of these ideas….But, I think they are great, and just as cute as they can be.

Mr. Hall has an obvious passion for teaching young people to love science as much as he does.

Team A's Definition of Parental Involvement

Interdisciplinary team A defines parental involvement as supporting and supplementing the efforts of the teachers with their own efforts for accountability at home. Mr. Hall states that parents should:

> Talk with their kids about what's going on in school….and check their agendas regularly. I think that an effective parent would be one that is not undermining [what's going on at school], that they might be talking with the child….and prompting them to communicate with the teacher.

The student's assignment book, team A believes, should be checked by parents every day for accuracy and assignment completion. Additionally, team A believes that effective parental involvement supports the behavioral expectations of the teacher. According to Mrs. Robinson:

> Parents need to touch base with us to get the real story. I had a couple of parents last year that would do that. Not that they were doubting us or questioning our policy, but because they were doubting their child's version of it.

Repeatedly, members of team A express their desires for parents to believe the teachers over the students when dealing with a student discipline issue, or an issue where there is a difference between the teacher's version and the student's story. "If a student knows that they have a parent at home that will back the teacher up and require them to

act/perform a certain way in school, they will do better" Mrs. Robinson writes in her email journal.

Team A's Attitudes Toward Parental Involvement

Team A exhibits an extremely open attitude toward parents. They welcome inquiries from parents about grades or classroom activities, or for more information about any topic. During the open house parent night, Mrs. Michael addresses this issue directly by stating to the parents, "Please call us or email us for a conference. We really would love to meet with you for any reason." In a team interview, Mrs. Marcus expresses their team's philosophy: "We feel like the more information we give them and the more information we have [from them], the better we are going to be and the better the kids are going to be." By the first day of school, their team had already conducted two parent conferences. Mrs. Marcus believes that the benefits of one of their team conferences with the parent of a student with an anxiety disorder has already been seen because, "it helped on the first day of school because she had already gotten to talk to us and meet us and knew we weren't scary, and that kind of thing." Team A admits, however, that some parents in their school do have the tendency to get too involved in their child's academic work. Mrs. Robinson states, "I think some are having difficulty letting them be their own advocate." Mr. Hall agrees, "Sometimes they have a hard time getting what's supposed to happen out of the child. So, I think that's important, it's important to let the child have as much responsibility as they can handle." The team was consistently concerned with parents who circumvent the student in an attempt to resolve a problem or concern. The team found great value in parents who empowered their students to take steps to resolve

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concerns on their own rather than contacting the teacher directly themselves. At the foundation of team A's philosophy of parental involvement is maintaining the appropriate balance between student independence, teacher responsibility, and parental accountability.

Team A's Strategies to Involve Parents

Interdisciplinary team A primarily utilizes technology as a method of involving parents. They send out weekly e-newsletters celebrating their team's successes and helpful team-related items, such as upcoming important dates, test information, study tips, and school events. The team teachers also maintain an online gradebook program through which parents may view an up-to-the-minute profile of their child's assignments and grades in all of his/her classes. Teacher webpages are maintained in order to keep an ongoing post of student work, specific assignments, links to helpful webpages, and other class specific information. Additionally, the teachers routinely utilize email as their primary form of communication to and from the parents of their students. Email is utilized as both a proactive and a reactive tool to involve parents, and is used to notify parents of issues, schedule conferences, praise students, or update a parent on a student's academic status.

Another strategy team A utilizes to involve parents is conducting a team conference. When needed, the team teachers quickly transitioned parents from communication via email to a face-to-face conference with the team teachers. All parent conferences take place as a team of teachers, never as an individual. "If just one of us is having a problem with a kid, we are fine with going ahead and having a conference with

all four of us meeting and seeing what we can come up with," Mrs. Marcus says. The interdisciplinary team organization allows varying perspectives from differing classroom environments on one child, which is beneficial when attempting to define or describe an academic or behavioral problem. "It just [gives] another side to the child," Mrs. Robinson states. Mr. Hall continues, "Kids act a lot different in a particular classroom."

When daily communication between home and school is necessary for student accountability, the team teachers instituted a form of required regular written communication, such as notes and signatures in the student's assignment book or a formal daily contract. These strategies were implemented for only the most severe academic needs, and commonly as an intervention strategy decided upon by the team teachers and the parent as the action plan at the end of a parent conference. Team A utilizes this strategy for only a few students on team A, around five at any one time. The strategy requires more time, accountability, and energy on the parts of the parent and the teacher.

Team A's Most Effective Strategies to Involve Parents

The data for team A parental involvement strategies did not point to any one set of most effective parental involvement strategies. However, team A's practice and implementation of parental involvement strategies indicates their strong reliance on methods centered on technology, including weekly e-newsletters, daily email as needed, webpage maintenance, and online gradebooks. Perhaps in a response to the high levels of technology available in their community, the team uses technology to inform parents, approach parents with student-related issues, advertise their team's spirit and purpose,

and celebrate their students' successes. The most effective means of involving parents on team A is the use of technology.

Team A Parents' Definition of Parental Involvement

Parents of the students on team A define parental involvement within the context of helping at home to maintain appropriate student behavior and academic progress. The parents interviewed at Alpha Middle School indicated that they expect to be notified quickly of any issues relating to their children, whether the challenge relates to poor grades, discipline problems, or missing assignments. "It's my job to make him behave, not yours," one parent stated, when asked about what her role was in helping her child. When discussing what parents should do to help their children at home, the parents were more than prepared. "Structure – they need structure" one parent responded. "They have got to be organized." "Study habits. We started way back in elementary school where you come home, you talk for a little while, you snack, you do homework" a mother advised. The parents emphasized the importance of maintaining a daily schedule that builds in appropriate school-time, though recognizing that student personality impacts the level of their involvement. "My child is self-driven and does this on her own," one mom notes. More than half of the parents interviewed from team A described similar situations with their students. The parents of students on team A also maintained a constant and regular connection to their child's grades through a district web service, although they find great frustration in grades that are not posted by the teachers in a timely fashion or are posted incorrectly. "If it's not right or up-to-date, then what's the point?" a father sounded off. Through creating an environment conducive for learning at home and keeping track of

student progress using technology, team A parents maintain a high level of involvement with their children's academic progress.

Team A Parents' Attitudes Toward Parental Involvement

The parents of the students on team A desire to be involved in their children's academic life, but express some frustrations about exactly what that should look like at middle school level given the often tumultuous emotions of an adolescent. Parents interviewed describe their children as "depressing," "over reactive," "hard," "emotional," and "oversensitive." Given these traits, parent struggle with what level and form of parental accountability is appropriate or necessary for adolescents. "It's my duty [as a parent]," one participant states about being involved. She continues, "My daughter is a high-achiever…..but I'm planning on in the future to talk to [the teachers] about her growth and what are the areas that she needs any improvement in." The parents depend greatly on the information to be pushed toward them from the team teachers in the form of emails, online grades, and newsletters. Generally though, as long as their children were making good grades, the parents did not see the need to maintain daily supervision over their child's education.

In further discussing parental involvement, a common struggle for the parents interviewed surrounds the issue of teaching independence as a student transitions to the middle school. The opportunities to volunteer in the library or the office areas are not met with the same enthusiasm as they once were when the child was in elementary school. "We try not to come up here," one father said. He continued:

There are some parents who volunteer up here all the time, at the front desk.

They are the same helicopter parents at the elementary school. And, they are the

same ones up here walking the halls and answering the phones.

 Another parent expresses similar sentiments, "You can't be there when they

graduate from college….I know they aren't in college but my philosophy is they need to

start growing up."   The source of this desire to back away from the volunteerism is as

much the child's embarrassment as it is the parents' desires to see their children learn

independence. "Our kids would be so embarrassed if they knew we were up here right

now!" "Oh, you're embarrassing me!" another parent mimics. The parents receive the

message loud and clear from their children that their presence is not invited, and therefore

the parents do not seek out opportunities to volunteer. Parental involvement is redefined

in the middle school to embody an increasing number of at-home strategies.

Parental Involvement Strategies Cited as Effective by Team A Parents

Overwhelmingly, team A parents place technology as the most effective means of

maintaining parental involvement on this team. The parents repeatedly describe the

weekly e-newsletter as the most effective strategy the team utilizes. The e-newsletter,

they describe, aids them in knowing what is going on in the classroom on a daily and

weekly basis, which allows them to hold their children accountable for their child's

performance at school. The e-newsletter helps to maintain a climate of openness and

approachability between team teachers and parents.   Additionally, routine emails to and

from parents are treated with importance, and replies from the teachers are prompt and

sufficient to address the issues. Technology is the primary medium through which

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parental involvement is maintained on team A. And, the parents agree, it is indeed the most effective.

The following section outlines the emerging themes from the teacher data from Alpha Middle School. Teacher and parental perceptions of strategy effectiveness are included for each theme.

Emergent Themes for Alpha Middle School

The team believes that parental involvement is essential to student success.

At the core of team A's motivation to involve parents in the academic lives of their students is the core belief that parents are essential to student success. Mrs. Michael states in her email journal that students need, "the guidance and support" of their parents. "They aren't ready for too much independence," she states. The team continues to be impressed with the level and forms of parental support at their school. "Ninety-five percent of our parents are just great, real supportive, and bring us gifts and treat us real nice," says Mr. Hall, and the team whole-heartedly agrees. The team invites parental involvement because they see that it makes a difference in student outcomes. Recalling two parent phone calls she recently made, Mrs. Robinson states, "They had no illusions about their child being perfect. They were very understanding and supportive…..I was dreading making [the phone calls] because I don't like making those types of phone calls……[it] was great, and not so negative after all."   The team describes their parents as very involved, which provides added pressure to the team's job of managing the level of involvement. Mrs. Michael says, "Many of them are so involved that they would check and question every little homework grade." Referring to the prevalence and usage

of the online grading program that parents can view from any computer, the team

teachers often get emailed questions about grades. "We have the ones that check it every

day," Mrs. Robinson explains. "As soon as they have a quiz, they will check the

[website] and they email you because they want to know and want to be involved."

Despite continued frustrations with regards to instances of over-involvement, parent

involvement remains valued on this team. As Mrs. Robinson describes about a recent

email she received, "I appreciated [the email] because when I thought about it, I never

would have known if the mom hadn't told me." The team is able to look through the

frustrations of parental involvement to see it as a necessary component of student

success.

The team is open and approachable to parents.

Team A's openness and approachability to parents is clearly stated by parents.

The parent night open house was an excellent display of team openness and

approachability. "We would love to meet with you for any reason," they declare to their

parent group. The team members' welcoming and friendly demeanor toward all parents

is evident in their interactions with the parents. Their personalized comments to parents

one-on-one also speaks to their openness. "He's doing great so far!" one teacher states to

a parent afterwards. Many parents stayed after the program to speak with each of the

teachers, and the teachers showed no signs of frustration to being held late. Additionally,

the parent graffiti wall (where parents attending parent night write encouraging notes to

their students to be displayed on the team hallway) was cited multiple times as a *neat* way

to involve parents in the general school day. "They have an open door policy," was

stated by multiple parents on the questionnaire. Also, "Every time I visit the school for any reason, everyone is open and willing to assist you." Mr. Hall describes the challenges of team openness, "I think that some people take advantage of how welcoming we are, but I think a lot of people don't even take advantage of how welcoming we are, and that we might need to reach out to some." All of the parents interviewed felt that they would feel comfortable contacting the teachers whenever they felt they needed to do so.

"They welcomed me when I came without an appointment," states one parent. Although the team generally does not conference with drop-in parents immediately, Mrs. Michael talks honestly about the drop-in parent conference she recently experienced. Typically, the front office staff at Alpha Middle School (secretaries, counselors, and administrators) protects teachers from interruptions during class instructional time. When she got called out of class by the office to attend the drop-in conference, her first thought was, "Oh, this is ridiculous." But after the conference was concluded, she learned more about the anxiety issues the child was having, and how school "really freaked [the student] out." The team's general response about meeting with hard-to-reach parents: "Sometimes, it's someone we have called, like, 19 times, and they just show up one day. And, we are like, 'Okay everybody, scramble to make this happen.'" Team A attempts to take advantage of a hard-to-reach parent's impromptu availability even if it means scrambling on their end to fit it into their busy daily schedules.

The team serves as a resource to the parents of adolescents.

The unique challenges of adolescents are reflected in the descriptions teachers and parents used to describe their children and students, including "depressing," "over reactive," "hard," "emotional," "oversensitive," "impulsive," "worriers," and "independent but very dependent." One parent states the perceived level of support from the team: "I feel confident that if I asked for help, they would provide it." Keeping these characteristics of adolescents in mind, team A has clearly accepted the task of teaching parents to create a supporting learning environment at home. First and foremost, team A has discovered the need to "train" parents to look at their student's assignment book (agenda). "I would say every student, if they are having problems succeeding academically, you could probably trace it back to that," Mrs. Robinson says. Their weekly parent e-newsletter consistently reinforces the need for parents to know student assignments, upcoming projects, and important dates. Team A also routinely suggests student organizational tips to parents – mechanisms through which the parent can keep track of the student's organizational habits. They tell the parents, "If you see your child's binders with folders and papers hanging out, that could be a clue that they are not as on top of it at school."

Team A addresses these needs to all of the parents in a general way, such as at parent night and through team e-newsletters. They routinely ask their team parents to check their child's agenda, backpack, binders, and locker. More specifically though, the team makes these suggestions to parents during team parent conferences. The team also utilizes a team contract (a daily academic and behavioral progress report between home and school) for student who are severely struggling, and recognizes the importance of

teaching the parent the value of their own accountability. Team A knows what adolescents need at home – they state, "accountability," "structure," and "organizational skills." They actively attempt to carry these developmental needs of adolescents into the home environment by involving parents.

The parents interviewed were quite knowledgeable regarding effective home-based strategies to help their child be successful in school. "Structure," they immediately state as a need. The parents describe their efforts to structure the afternoons and evenings after school in order to make sure the homework gets done. "You talk for a little while, you snack, you do homework," one mother says. Parents add that intervening as a parent on this issue is an ever-evolving process of matching their home's environment with what they need. "When the time afterschool becomes more demanding, you have to get even more structured. Now, you have to have a snack then go straight to it, whereas before, maybe we would let them [play] for a little bit," one mother describes. "When they were young, it wasn't as time-consuming….it's a huge transition for them when they start to have to study more and take more time" one mother states. She continues, "We used to use the kitchen table, but then 'Your papers are on my papers and your stuff is on my side' [mimics fighting with her hands]…..'Okay everybody, we're getting desks and we're going up to our rooms!'" she laughs. The parents also describe the need their students have for organizational skills. "They have got to be organized…..they have to have a study spot," parents state. The parents continue by describing their own attempts to look after their kids' grades, such as routinely checking online for grade reports, creating family calendars with due dates, and checking their homework. Not surprisingly, these parents describe that they learned to create these home interventions

for academic success through raising older children, not by being taught or directed to do so by anyone else, the school or the team of teachers.

The team approaches problem-solving opportunities with parents as a team rather than individuals.

Team A at Alpha Middle School is team-oriented in all they do – literally, everything they do has a clear tie to each other. Parent conferences always take place with the entire team present. This structure provides for a global view of the child, his/her challenges, and the teachers' classrooms. Team meetings, which occur daily, also provide team teachers with opportunities to collaborate. During a team meeting before a parent conference, the team typically "formulates a plan" to present to the parent. The team teachers:

> ….bounce some ideas off each other, you know. 'This is what I am seeing in this child. What are you seeing?'….being able to have your team teachers reflect on a child who deals with the same student during the same period with the same parent – that's very important.

Team A utilizes their team structure as a problem-solving team, one that makes observations regarding students individually, but collectively brings their concerns to the team table in order to gain the most accurate representation of the student. Then, a plan is formulated in an attempt to intervene.

Parental perspectives of the purpose of the middle school team approach are notably shallow, focusing on management of size and number of students. The parents describe that the purpose of the middle school teaming model is to "take a really large

school and break it into smaller pieces, like their elementary school…." and to "divide the school into parts." All of the parents interviewed at Alpha Middle School focus on the organizational benefits, i.e. smaller sizes, rather than the teaming and teacher benefits. Parents are, almost wholly but not surprisingly, unfamiliar with the purpose of teaming from the teachers' perspectives. The team A teachers, however, recognize this unfamiliarity and worry about its' affect on parents, specifically intimidation. "I'll confess. I don't know if we have ever surprised a parent with a team approach," Mrs. Robinson describes. "I do worry sometimes when they first walk in that they feel like they are ambushed, because I can see if I were in their shoes, how I would feel," she continues. "I can see a parent who just wanted to come to meet with you and wanted to talk about this little one thing. And, here's four teachers….that can be hard," Mr. Hall expresses. This obvious unfamiliarity of parents with the teaming model affects the teachers' approach to conferencing. The team specifically tries to minimize the potential for intimidation by speaking warmly, arranging the seats in a circle instead of square tables, making friendly small talk, and expressing their desire to help. "I don't want them to think that we are here to tell them what's wrong with their kid," Mrs. Robinson states. The team is able to empathize with the parents' perspective, and makes adjustments to their parent conferences in order to minimize any possible intimidation.

The team establishes team motto, team support systems, and sense of team spirit.

Team A works very diligently to establish and promote a sense of team spirit and support among the 100 students on their team. " 'Reaching for the Stars' – that's our

team theme for this year," Mrs. Robinson states proudly. Showing the researcher the hard copy first edition of the team newsletter to go home to all parents, she says "Note that our stationary matches our theme!" Each of the weekly parent e-newsletters will be created with this theme represented throughout. Their hallway is decorated in stars, moons, and an overall space theme. Each of the weekly team e-newsletters sent by Mrs. Michael to parents is concluded with, "And remember, keep reaching for the stars!" The team teachers regularly give out "Star Student" awards in ceremonies on their team, which celebrates their students' achievements. In addition to the team theme, team A very clearly presents team procedures and team expectations to parents for homework, tests, quizzes, discipline, and communication. The team teachers speak in terms of "we" and "us" many times in front of the parents at parent night.

This team also presents team-based opportunities for remediation for struggling students on this team, such as a lunch time study hall, team study sessions, and morning help. The team introduced these opportunities as a group during their parent night, but they also keep these offerings at hand to pull out during parent conferences throughout the year. All of these efforts result in a positive team identity, which impacts the middle school student's motivation to learn, the team feels. One parent answers on the questionnaire, "My child is learning and is happy as a result of enthusiastic, caring teachers. This attitude of 'learning is fun' carries over to home."

The team attempts to use a daily communication tool for struggling students.

As previously stated, team A utilizes student contracts to aid in student accountability, parental involvement, and school-home communication for struggling

students. The contract is a daily team report sent home of the student's day, including both academic and behavior. The parent views the contract each evening, and is expected to respond as appropriate. Typically, the team only has five to six students on a daily contract at any one time. "If we ever have the parent on board, it works fabulously," says Mrs. Robinson. She further describes:

> When we had the parent on board with that, within weeks, we could take the child off of the contract. It's just getting that element into it…..we decided last year that if we couldn't get the parent on board [with the contract] or if they weren't following up on it, then it didn't matter how many contracts we had the kid on, it wasn't going to work.

Student agendas are also used by the team teachers to communicate student progress with parents. Although the team does not feel that all students should have their agendas checked every night, the team does arrange with specific parents to use this as their primary tool of communication to and from school. "Some children need to do this every night," states Mr. Hall. He continues to include some students who might be doing *okay* academically, but for whom concerns may still exist. "Then there are some children who are going just fine, and still would communicate with then to make sure they are being challenged." Using a daily communication tool such as the agenda is a common team intervention utilized by team A at Alpha Middle School.

Team A utilizes the daily contract and agenda for struggling students not only for student accountability, but also as a tool to help clarify the parental role in the student's improvement. Mr. Hall says they convey to parents the importance of follow-up when

getting their commitment face-to-face. "I tell them, 'This is very important that you follow-up. It's important that you are a part of this too.'" The team has found that very specific instructions to parents work best. He further states:

> We will tell them, 'This works best when you check it each night and have some sort of immediate consequence or reward each day….' We usually show them a contract and where they will sign it….so they will know what to do……I think it can be overwhelming [for them].

The team recognizes the importance of facilitating an essential piece of the student improvement puzzle - the daily involvement of the parent.

The team utilizes technology to communicate with parents.

"Email has totally changed the game of parent communication. It's easier, it's quicker, and you can include everyone that needs to be included," Mrs. Michael states. This team of teachers utilizes technology as their primary form of communicating with parents. "As previously stated, this team emails an e-newsletter full of team and class information to their team parents each week. The newsletter contains their team motto, celebrations of success, upcoming important team-related dates, pictures of students engaged in classroom activities, important study information, and current units of study for each subject. Additionally, team A teachers maintain their own personal webpages with more specific information pertinent to their content classes. Technology is also utilized by the teachers to regularly communicate specific information, such as grades, about students to their parents. Teachers are able to place all of their student grades into a district webpage whereas the parents can log in and view their child's specific

assignments and grades. Not surprisingly, over 85% of the parent questionnaire

respondents indicated technology as the most effective tool for increasing and

maintaining parental involvement. "Technology has made it much better," one parent

addresses. Another parent writes, "Technology is a beneficial aide this team uses to keep

parents informed in non-traditional ways. This allows lines of communication to remain

open always."   The team relies heavily on technology to keep parents informed of their

child's progress, important team events, and to stir up positive public relations with the

parents. "I'd much rather email than get on the phone," Mr. Hall states. One parent

states, "If I have a problem, they quickly answer my emails with a solution." The team

efficiently manages the use of technology in order to maintain open lines of

communication with parents.

The increasingly popular role of technology in teacher communication is not

without its challenges, however. Mrs. Michael observes:

> When I first started teaching, students were expected to know things and take
>
> things home and communicate them with their parents. Now, between emails, and
>
> newsletters, and [webpages], and [online grades], I'm thinking, 'Do they ever talk
>
> about school?' I know the parent would rather email me to find out the answer to
>
> a question about homework or a grade than sit there and ask the child.

Mr. Hall agrees and states:

> It's an important developmental skill for the child to advocate for themselves….to
>
> know what they need to do to make things up, and if that goes between the parent
>
> and the teacher and leaves out the child, then you've lost something there.

The team is clearly concerned about the potential for the use technology in parent communication to diminish the student's responsibility in his/her academics.

Mrs. Michael has one additional concern about the impersonal nature of email, and that "people will….say things in a way in an email that they would never do if it was a personal communication or by phone." Mr. Hall carefully composes emails to parents, and reads his emails multiple times before sending (and even gets his team members to read them!). He is most concerned about tone over email, and how an email can be perceived versus intended. "Sometimes something you think sounds funny or you think sounds okay comes across as rude. Sometimes, it's just better to call," he adds. "Email can be our best friend or our worst enemy," Mrs. Michael adds.

Summary of Alpha Middle School Data

Alpha Middle School is located in a large, affluent, suburban city in central Alabama. The parents in this community are largely very knowledgeable and involved parents, and maintain very high expectations for their students and for their school. The interdisciplinary team of teachers is a highly functional middle school team which values the essential contributions of the parents, and therefore, maintains an extremely open and approachable attitude toward parental involvement. The team defines parental involvement as parents supporting and supplementing the efforts of the teachers with their own efforts for accountability at home. They strive to involves parents by possessing a belief that parental involvement is essential to student success, maintaining and open and approachable attitude toward parents, serving as a resource to parents in need, approaching problem-solving opportunities as a team, establishing a team motto

and a sense of team spirit, attempting to use a daily communication tool for struggling

students, and utilizing technology to communicate with parents.

Beta Middle School

Description of Community

Beta Middle School is located within a small rural city in central Alabama. The city was incorporated in 1887, largely due to the discovery of large deposits of a natural resource, which continues to be exported around the country and the world. The city continues to grow today with a population of about 5,000 citizens, and promotes their city as "the kind of place most Americans would like to have as their hometown." Perhaps the city's most notable attraction is a small public university, which is located in the heart of the city square. The city regularly hosts cultural and athletic events related to the local university. Driving from the highly populated suburban areas to the rural small town, the city is flanked by rolling farmlands, older-style houses with large front porches, and ranches with large numbers of cattle. The downtown area is a traditional small city square, with locally-owned shops, wide sidewalks, and plenty of parking on the street.

Beta Middle School is a small part of a very large county school system, which has three local schools: one elementary school (grades K-5), one middle school (grades 6-8), and one high school (grades 9-12). Beta Middle School has an average daily membership of 338 students, which has remained somewhat steady in recent years despite local growth. The school's small size requires only one interdisciplinary team of teachers at each grade level, with approximately 110 students on each team. Beta Middle School is supported adequately by state and local tax dollars. Nearly 33% of their total yearly revenue is derived from local sources. Their school's free and reduced lunch rate is approximately 55.6%. The school district spends $9,312 per student. Although the city remains attractive and well-kept, Beta Middle School is located outside of the city

square, adjacent to the local housing project and directly in the middle of many older and unkempt houses. Although school leaders work hard to maintain the building in a positive way, the age of the building is evident to any visitor. The school is built in a one floor circular pattern, such that one can turn right out of the main office, continue straight, pass classrooms on the left and right, and wind up back at the main office three minutes later. Each of the teachers' classrooms is a unique shape and style, and their general attempts to create a student centered environment are observable.

Description of Interdisciplinary Team B

The researcher was introduced to interdisciplinary team B, a sixth grade team, during their sixth grade summer student transition camp. Team B is comprised of four content area teachers who have been teaching together on this interdisciplinary team for five years. The team was helping to lead their annual camp for the rising sixth grade students, which aids their students in becoming familiar with sixth grade procedures and expectations. The team teachers are friendly with each other, emphasizing their close relationships compared to other teams of teachers. "We are the closest team in the school….we do things together outside of school as a team. The teachers, however, have some frustrations about the new teaming schedule for this year. "Last year we had an actual teaming time, instead of just a personal planning time, where we could plan as a team," Mrs. Luke states, "We could do everything together." The team planning period was taken away this year in order to accommodate the addition of a school-wide middle-of-the-day student remediation period, staffed by the team teachers. Team B at Beta Middle School remains creative about finding times to collaborate as a team. Sometimes

they use their personal planning as their team time. Alternatively, they meet before school or after school, if they do not have a parent conference scheduled. "Last year was better than this year is," Mrs. Luke states.

Mrs. Walker, the social studies teacher, is a 21 year veteran teacher, with her entire career spent at Beta Middle School. She taught language arts for 20 years before switching content areas to teach social studies last year. Mrs. Walker has no desire to work with any other grade level or at any other school. She laughs about the peculiar characteristics of her middle school students, "I like middle school – you do see some bizarre things, but I guess that goes along with the age. There's a good reason they put middle schools off by themselves. They are not allowed to be the general population." Mrs. Walker has the official title as the "team leader" of the interdisciplinary team – a designation placed there by the school's administration. Her leadership style, however, is a quiet one. She leads by example – her responses are always thoughtful and deliberate.

Mrs. Lee, the team's language arts teacher, has been teaching for 25 years, nine of which have been at the middle school level on an interdisciplinary team. Having taught for 15 years at the elementary level, she made the jump to middle school when she left teaching elementary school in the inner city. "I thought I had made a huge mistake," she said, "That first group was a rough group!" The support from an interdisciplinary team was essential to helping her successfully navigate the transition to middle school teaching, "Starting and coming to middle school, I really needed that team," she states. The middle school concept is something that has grown on Mrs. Lee, and she believes that her team is a tight-knit group. She continues, "I like the middle school now, I like the setting, and I like the team. We're very close, we talk all the time, do parent

conferences together. As a team, we are very strong." She is dedicated to her team members and to the students that they serve. Her practical and down-to-earth attitude helps keep her team focused and grounded.

Mrs. Luke has taught for 10 years, and has been teaching middle school math for five years. She is certified to teach kindergarten through sixth grade, and did teach kindergarten, third, fourth grade over the course of five years. "I love middle school, but kindergarten is only for those who are born to do it." Mrs. Luke believes that the team approach to teaching middle school provides embedded support for the teachers, not just the students. She states, "I tell you, if I hadn't had teaming my first year, I would have been LOST." Mrs. Luke's high energy approach to everything is obvious, and this translates to provide her middle school interdisciplinary team with the motivation and encouragement to continuously problem-solve. "We do everything as a team," she says.

Mrs. Nancy has been teaching science for 13 years at Beta Middle School. "I just like middle schoolers," she states. As the elected spokesperson for the team, she is primarily the teacher to address the parents on behalf of the team on parent night. "She's not intimidated to stand in front of our parents and tell them what they need to be doing," her teammates say of her. Mrs. Nancy is a strict disciplinarian with a no-excuses approach to parents and kids. She wastes little time at school, even grading papers throughout many of our team interview times. However, she has a compassionate heart for kids who have outside struggles, meeting with them before school daily in her "Prepare For The Day" class.

Team B's Definition of Parental Involvement

Interdisciplinary team B defines parental involvement as parents proactively working at home to ensure the success of their children at school. Effective parental involvement, according to team B, can be described as the specific interventions the parent is doing at home to ensure the child's success, such as finding out what they did at school, checking their student assignment book for homework, upcoming projects, tests, and quizzes, providing the students with a specific study location and time, but also providing them with some free time as well. Effective parental involvement also means attending parent nights, general parent meetings, and scheduling parent conferences when needed. Additionally, team B believes that effective parental involvement also extends to discovering and taking advantage of opportunities for teaching personal student responsibility. In terms of issues of discipline and behavior, team B desires for their descriptions of the problems to be believed by parents. "Not believing everything your child says. Not becoming angry and taking everything they say. Believe it or not, middle schoolers will lie. Most parents don't realize that," Mrs. Walker states. Team B at Beta Middle school believes in early intervention – within the first six weeks of school, the team had already held ten parent conferences.

Team B's Attitudes Toward Parental Involvement

Team B at Beta Middle School has varying attitudes toward parental involvement. On one hand, the team recognizes the importance of parental involvement in the academic lives of adolescents, and believe that, "most of our parents are really capable of making a difference." Mrs. Walker states in her journal that:

the value of parental involvement is a ten out of ten. These are some of the most

critical and important years in the development of productive young adults. If

parents are involved, they have an opportunity to be a positive influence on their

children and to help them make good decisions that will affect their futures.

Additionally, they wholeheartedly believe that, "….parents need to know what's

going on

in their child's life at all times." On the other hand, they describe the parents on their

team as, "….uninvolved – a majority of them are not involved," states Mrs. Nancy. The

team feels that they are sometimes treated like a "babysitting service," as described by

Mrs. Luke. The following comments (see Table 4) describe experiences with parental

involvement at Beta Middle School.

Table 4. *Team B (Beta Middle School) Parental Involvement Descriptors*

Participant	Quote
Mrs. Lee	"I think they just send them here. They want us to take care of them while they are here, and we send them home, and then that's it for school."
	"I think it's exhausting and parents give up."
Mrs. Luke	"It's like they send them to school and they are out of their hair for eight hours."
	"It takes a whole lot more effort and work to stay on top of everything, and a lot of them just aren't willing to do that. It's too time-consuming."
	"They don't have a clue."
Mrs. Walker	"I don't think they hold their children responsible for anything."
Mrs. Nancy	"We are like a babysitter. And then they come back home."

Clearly, team B is frustrated with low levels of effective parental involvement and follow through they have experienced at Beta Middle School. This team, however, is persistent in teaching parents what they need to be doing at home in order to make a positive impact on their child's academic future. "You have to educate them when you call them, tell them exactly what they need to do," Mrs. Walker advises. The team believes that parents need to have a hand in teaching the child to be organized. Mrs. Walker continues, the parent should:

....help their child get organized......putting some of the responsibility on them, helping them get started....expect them to come home with that planner every day to show what they did in class....the parent should say, 'Oh, let me see what you did in class.' Just giving them that support at home....they need to support us in that way, for their children, academically.

The team often finds themselves providing the students with supplies that the parents either refuse to get or cannot afford. Mrs. Nancy describes one of her pet peeves: students unprepared for class. She states:

Half of them are coming with nothing. They just walk into the classroom. And they need a pencil, they need paper, they need this, they need you to hold their hand, and we just don't have the time for that.

For these team teachers, they generally experience no changes in student behavior from team attempts to intervene with parents. "There is rarely any follow through," Mrs. Lee sadly states. When asked if there is ever a point when they stop trying to involve a parent, Mrs. Nancy simply responds, "We have to keep on." Persistence embodies team B's attitude toward parental involvement.

Team B's Strategies to Involve Parents

The primary strategy utilized by team B for parental involvement is parent conferencing as a team. Within the first few weeks of school, the team had already conducted multiple parent conferences, as well as pursued parent contact through phone calls and emails to parents. Team B's practice of regularly conducting team parent conferences is reflected in the variety of way in which they do so. The team will conference with parents traditionally (face-to-face), over the phone as a team and individuals, during scheduled times before and after school, or unscheduled times throughout the day, if necessary. If possible, the conference takes place with all team members present, rather than one-on-one with the parent. Their team approach to parent contact reflects their desire to present challenges to parents from a team problem-solving standpoint, rather than an individual classroom performance standpoint.

Team B's Most Effective Strategies to Involve Parents

The data for team B parental involvement strategies did not point to any one set of most effective parental involvement strategies. Team B's strategies to involve parents did, however, focus on providing parents with specific information about their child's progress in a multitude of ways, such as phone calls, conferences, emails, and online gradebook programs. Team B aims to get parents involved one by one as they meet and discuss with each, providing that parent with ideas and strategies for them to implement at home.

Team B Parents' Definition of Parental Involvement

The parents on team B define parental involvement as parents maintaining knowledge of a student's activities at school and monitoring student actions. "[Parents] just got to be involved, there's just no way around it," one parent exclaims. She continues, "You have to be involved, and try to find out what's going on." Effective parental involvement was simply defined as "being there," as one parent describes. The parental participants from team B recognize the importance of parental involvement in creating a successful student, and are willing to step into the role as monitor and accountability for their children.

Team B teachers' would like for the parents to take the lead on monitoring, teaching, and reinforcing learning skills such as organizational habits, homework completion, study skills, and planning habits (student planner monitoring). However, when pressed for specific effective at-home strategies for student support, the parents were largely unable to describe any they utilize at home. The parents on team B more often verbalized their role as the monitor and disciplinarian rather than teacher and *reinforcer* of skills. No parents interviewed discussed at-home strategies utilized in order to help their child achieve, but focused on enforcement. "You need parental enforcement at home with the school enforcement to know, hey, you got in trouble in Mrs. So and so's class, you better not act up today or else mom and dad are going to get you," one parent describes. The chasm between the teachers' desired role for their parents for involvement and the parents' embraced role for involvement differed greatly.

Team B Parents' Attitudes Toward Parental Involvement

Parents describe the challenges of attempting to stay involved in the lives of their adolescents, whom they describe as "inconsistent," "full of attitude," "exhausting," "stressful," "confused," "silly," "lazy," "know-it-alls," and "defiant." "I know they need a lot of attention - a lot of guidance," a parent states. Clearly, the parents recognize the challenging nature of the adolescent, which only adds frustration to the already difficult parental involvement question. However, lack of information from school and about school was the most common topic of discussion and source of strife for some of the parents. "He never tells me anything," one parent voices. "He never brings home projects, he never tells me when there is something going on at school," she continues. "They kinda keep things. You don't know what's really going on. You have to dig and dig and dig. And I tell you, I am looking through books and drawers trying to find out anything I can," another parent says. One parent describes the closed-off and last minute nature of her adolescent, "So, if there is no information coming home, and kids don't want to tell you, they might tell me something the morning of leaving out the door to the bus….I am finding out last minute." Parents on team B focused on the importance of the parental role as the monitor of information coming home from school, and some voiced frustration with a perceived lack of timely and sufficient information coming home from Beta Middle School in general. However, many of the parents expressed that their experiences so far with school-home communication from this team has been satisfactory to this point. "It's been pretty good," a parent states.

Parental Involvement Strategies Cited as Effective by Team B Parents

The most useful parental involvement strategy that team B parents describe is the use of the online grading system. Teachers maintain their grades using a web-based gradebook, and the parents are able to view their child's recent grades using a website provided by the school district. The use of this website enables the parents to keep track of their child's progress, as well as contact the team if there are any questions or concerns. Additional tools parents describe as useful are emails and phone calls from the team teachers. However, multiple parents cite that they are only contacted if there is a problem and not soon enough. One parent states that she gets called "when it's too late to do anything." This sentiment was the exception rather than the rule, and parents expressed much appreciation to the team teachers when they were contacted with concerns or questions.

The following section outlines the emerging themes from the teacher data from Beta Middle School. Teacher and parental perceptions of strategy effectiveness are included for each theme.

Emergent Themes for Beta Middle School

The team believes that parental involvement is essential to student success.

"Parents are one of my biggest concerns," states Mrs. Lee proudly, when asked about her view on the role of the parent in creating middle school success. Team B believes that parents can hold students accountable for their own responsibilities in ways that teachers cannot. Parents are able to hold the student accountable for essential skills like maintaining organization and turning in homework. Team B recognizes that teachers

can penalize and reward students based on performance, but that with such a limited amount of time available during the day, the real success comes from accountability from home. This team continuously strives to engage parents, particularly at points during the school year when they are most likely to come in for a conference, such as progress report times. "We have a LOT of conferences after those first progress reports go home," reveals Mrs. Walker. Even a simple, short phone call to a parent is an important step, "I have a whole book of parents I've called so far this year," declares Mrs. Lee. When asked what the one thing parents could do to help their kids, Mrs. Walker simply and somewhat poetically replies, "Just support us."

The team is open and approachable to parents.

Mrs. Walker proudly proclaims, "We have an open door policy. I want my parents to see firsthand what their child is doing in class." During the parent night, the teachers on team B invited parents to contact them on multiple occasions and in various formats, requesting that parents email, call, or come in for a conference. One parent describes the teachers as, "full of smiles." One parent proudly says, "Some teachers have even gone as far as to call me and say, 'Hey, your child is doing so well at whatever.' " The approachability of the team of teachers was not questioned by the parents, as all of the parents interviewed felt comfortable contacting the teachers if they had a question or a concern, and many had already had an experience doing so. "They emailed me back the same day," one parent said. "The teachers here….have been very communicative, and really good about returning emails and phone calls," one parent describes. One parent voices disagreement regarding team communication. "If I call, or send an email,

everybody is busy….it's defense. When I do get to talk to somebody, they are always so defensive." Despite some dissenting views, the overall parental perception of this team openness was positive.

The teachers on team B describe the multiple and varied attempts they make to contact parents and provide information to them. "Parents are invited to come and visit the school, eat with their child, find out information about what programs our school has to offer to them and their child," Mrs. Walker describes. The team also uses the student planner daily to communicate with parents, indicating assignments, important upcoming dates, and writing specific notes to parents. They regularly meet with parents for conferences, whether face-to-face or by phone, and send home progress reports. At the basis of their openness and approachability is their own desire to see parents involved in the academic lives of their students. Mrs. Lee describes its importance:

> It is so important that parents stay as involved with their middle school student as they did with their elementary student. Parents tend to get less involved as their children get older, thus giving students the impression that school is not that important. They figure if their parents aren't as interested as before, then they don't need to be either. If parents would take an interest in their child, keep up with what they are doing in school every day, and make an effort to come by the school at least once a month, then students would take more of an interest in success. I feel that parent involvement is the key to student success in middle and high school.

One mechanism through which parents of middle school student can become involved is through the middle school team. "We try to connect students with their parents by attempting to get the parents involved on a daily basis," Mrs. Luke states.

The team serves as a resource to the parents of adolescents.

When asked if the teachers thought that the parents knew what they needed to do at home to support their child's learning, Mrs. Walker responds, "They do after we talk to them! We tell them." Team B makes it a common practice to tell parents specifically what they need to do in order to help their child be more successful at school. The team has attempted to engage parents with topical workshops, parent nights, and other events on topics relating to parenting, study skills, and adolescent issues, but the results have been dismal. "They need workshops and stuff like that. And we have tried to, but they won't come. It's hard, it really is," Mrs. Walker explains. Mrs. Lee also expresses frustration about lack of parental response to team parent night opportunities – "the parents just don't come to these things," she states.

Mrs. Walker is quite vocal about the vital role the parent needs to play in their child's academic success:

> Parents are used to them having one teacher all day that can devote that time and put all of that energy into that child, and can focus on getting their stuff together and getting everything ready to take home. But we can't do that – we have over 100 students a day, and we are changing classes every period. So, I think we are trying to get the parents used to the middle school environment, it's something we try to do as well. Some of the eighth grade teachers mention that we have the

most difficult task because we have to prepare the children and we have to
prepare the parents as well, for middle school.

On the school's official parent night, team B stepped up to the microphone to address
their parents, a sparse crowd of 25 adults. They had spent time beforehand planning what
they would say and how they would say it. They attempted to bridge the gap between
teacher and parent by introducing the parents to their team policies, procedures,
classroom expectations, and goals. Teachers passed out written information describing
these policies and procedures, both for the team and for the individual classrooms.
"Please call us or email us if you have any questions," they stated several times
throughout the seventeen minute presentation. Mrs. Nancy and Mrs. Walker stepped up
as the informal team spokespeople. Mrs. Walker reviewed the importance of the parents
reviewing the student planners, showed them a copy of the planner, and asked parents to
make sure that the students are utilizing them. "Be sure to look at them every night," she
advised the parents. "It might be a good idea if you go see your child's locker as soon as
we finish here," she states. At the conclusion of the parent night, the parents exit quietly
with little attempts to talk to the teachers afterwards. Parental perceptions of the parent
night were mixed. While some parents felt that the introduction to the school and team
was valuable, a few felt it was overkill. "Kind of too much going on in that one session,"
the parent describes. She continues, "I felt like they were throwing information at me.
Just, 'Here's the book with everything you need to know.' I read it all, though." The
team remained largely unaware of the effectiveness of the parent night, one measurement
of openness and approachability.

The team approaches problem-solving opportunities with parents as a team rather than individuals.

Team B is focused on problem-solving efforts as a team, and recognizes the importance of collaborating together to involve parents. The teaming model is strong, even though the team experienced the loss of their daily team planning period. Even still, team B made team meetings a priority. Mrs. Lee describes the positive results of team meetings:

> When we have trouble with a certain student, it's nice to know that everyone else has the same concern. And, we can brainstorm ways to help….We can call parents in, and as a team, talk to the parent. And, that's very important. Just talking to each other everyday about what's going on in our rooms, what does work with this kid, what doesn't work – that helps….we always work as a team, especially when it comes to parents.

A large majority of parent conferences take place as a team of teachers rather than individuals – sometimes parents will request to meet with only one teacher, and the team complies with this request. But standard practice is for the entire team to be present. "We all teach the same students, so we really all need to be in the conference," Mrs. Walker states. Even if the parent cannot come in for a face to face conference, the team still attempts to get the information home in the form of a collective team concern. "When we talk about a student as a team, one of us will get everyone's comments together and make a call on behalf of the team" Mrs. Lee describes.

The teachers describe a recent conference they had with a parent where they outlined a system of rewards at home for the parent to implement. The team truly felt the

father was trying to help the child, but he just did not know what to do or how to help. "We asked the parent to sit down every night with their child, go over the planner and any notes we had written, and go over the homework assigned each night," Mrs. Lee describes. The team followed up with the student and the parent, and then shared any success with each other. This team approach to problem-solving challenges with students places a priority on team decision-making in terms of procedures and policies. "We sometimes don't follow what the school does. We sometimes do our own thing, with what we know works best with sixth grade," Mrs. Lee states.

Beta Middle School has a small enough student population that only one team is required at each grade level, which does impact the overall parental perception of the purpose of a middle school team. Many parents did not even realize that their students were on a "team" of any kind, and it remains unclear how widespread and common the use of the term "team" is to describe their teachers. "I don't know who my child's team is," one parent honestly blurted out during an interview. Another parent chimed in to describe the organization of a middle school team. Some of the parents perceived that the purpose of the team is to create a group of teachers that all teach the same kids and be able to problem-solve as needed.

Makes face-to-face contact whenever possible.

Team B has learned to take parental contact in any non-traditional form or timeframe that they can, such as office areas, ball fields, or parking lots. "We do talk to parents as much as possible. We chase them down in carpool lines!" Mrs. Walker exclaimed proudly. Mrs. Luke describes a time earlier in the school year when she was

having a particularly hard time getting assignments turned in from one of her students.

Her phone calls were being ignored, and the team was not having any success with their

interventions. She heard the intercom call for the student to come to the main office for a

check out. Although Mrs. Luke was currently teaching a class, Mrs. Luke contacted the

main office:

> I said, 'Can you send his mom down here for a minute?'…..I stepped out of the
>
> class while they were working and I told her that we were concerned and asked
>
> her what we needed to do. I said, 'This is what we are doing at school, this is
>
> what we are doing in class, it doesn't seem to be working. What else can I try that
>
> might be working for you at home?'"

Mrs. Walker has made contact with several parents in the carpool lines. She describes:

> I tell some of the parents, 'Look, if that agenda is not signed by us when they get
>
> in the car, you need to park and come inside and make them go around to each of
>
> us.' That has actually worked well.

> Also, when kids are released from weekly detention, Mrs. Walker waits with the

students until their transportation arrives so that she can make contact with an adult.

Team B regularly meets with parents early before school. "I think a lot of them

appreciate that," states Mrs. Walker. The team believes that it's just a standard practice

for their team of teachers – make parent contact whenever and wherever you can.

The team attempts to use a daily communication tool for struggling students.

Team B implements daily accountability measures for students who are struggling

to be successful in their academics. The student planner is the most common method of

providing daily accountability and communication between home and school. "One thing we do is write notes in their planners, if we need to tell them what's going on. We do have students who are required to get their planners signed – it's a good way to communicate," states Mrs. Luke. After a team parent conference, the team teachers and the parent will decide together that a system of daily accountability is necessary. The team teachers agree to do their part to check and sign the agenda, and the parent agrees to hold the student accountable at home with a system of rewards and consequences. Mrs. Walker even gets the parents to check their child's student planner in the carpool line before they leave school to send their child back into the school to find their teacher if they are missing a signature or any homework they need to complete. Two of the teachers on the team provide students with a daily grade in their class simply for the completion of the assignment portion of the agenda.

The team displays a compassion for the difficult circumstances in their students' lives.

Mrs. Nancy describes one type of challenge many of their students face, "A lot of [our] kids, their parents work at night, and they are left with siblings, and they might be the ones in charge." Interdisciplinary team B correlates their many of their distinct challenges with students to the lifestyle challenges of their parents. "Many of them had bad experiences [with school].….many of our parents didn't finish high school," Mrs. Nancy continues. Many of the parents are simply more concerned with and completely consumed by trying to make it through their daily lives, attempting to make ends meet by working any job they can find, such as a fast food restaurant or the evening or night shift

at a factory. Sitting down with their child to review homework is not even a possibility. Mrs. Walker describes the hard working nature of the parents of many of their students:

> I think that they are not working with their child, but they are working hard at their own thing. A lot of them have children when they are very young, and we see a lot of grandparents raising children, or students that we had not too long ago and their kids are now coming through.

The adults supervising the students afterschool are often older adults who do not have either the time or the capability to help or even provide guidance for the student.

Lower socioeconomic status contributes to the lack of parental support. Although the school has wide capability to involve parents using technology such as email, webpages, and blogs, the economic challenges of the area make this impossible for many. "A lot of them don't have the internet to check [grades], check [webpages], or whatever," says Mrs. Walker. Tight economic situations even inhibit the child's ability to take advantage of afterschool activities such as free tutoring or help sessions. Many children must ride home on the bus at the conclusion of the school day. Mrs. Nancy states, "Some of the parents work at night, and some rely on other people to pick them up. You know, a grandmother or someone, they might forget. There are different reasons [to not participate]."

Lack of supervision afterschool remains a community issue. "A lot of times they leave here and hit the streets and you'll see them out at night at 10:00….hanging in the street, the park, or McDonald's. Many of them don't have ANY supervision when they get home." states Mrs. Walker. Mrs. Nancy summarizes the issue well, acknowledging even her own inability to understand and work with adolescents:

I don't think they have a clue. I will say, when I was a teacher and I had a child

who was a middle school student, I didn't know how to deal with him either.

And, I have a little more education than some of them. So, no, they wouldn't

know how.

Summary of Beta Middle School Data

Beta Middle School is located in a small, rural, lower-class city in central

Alabama. The parents in the community desire for their children to be successful

students, but are uninvolved with their school as a whole. The interdisciplinary team

teachers at Beta Middle School is a highly experienced and knowledgeable group of

teachers. They remain quite frustrated at the overall lack of parental support from

particular parents, and therefore, work consistently and diligently to communicate with

parents. Team B defines parental involvement as proactively working at home to ensure

the success of their child at school. They strive to involve parents by possessing a belief

that parental involvement is essential to student success, maintaining and open and

approachable attitude toward parents, serving as a resource to parents in need,

approaching problem-solving opportunities as a team, making face-to-face contact

whenever possible, attempting to use a daily communication tool for struggling students,

and displaying a compassion for the difficult circumstances in their students' lives.

Gamma Middle School

Description of Community

Gamma Middle School is located within an urban setting slightly outside of a large central Alabama city. In the early 1880s, this area was becoming a prominent marker in the already booming iron ore and steel industry in the state. Therefore, the city was growing in size and population, and became incorporated in 1887. Today, the city continues to be largely composed of blue-collar laborers, and industry provides much of the economic opportunities for its citizens. Railroads crisscross throughout the city's streets. A wide and busy main thoroughfare is the primary artery from one end of the city to the other, which is flanked by small automobile dealerships, closed-down shops, and 40 to 50-year old housing. Many of the homes loudly speak to their original beauty, but current dilapidation. In the mornings, the streets are full of cars and buses and the sidewalks full of students walking to school. The city seems to always be bustling, day or night.

Gamma Middle school is a part of the city school system, of which there are eight total schools: five elementary schools (grades K-6), one middle school (grades 7-8), one alternative school (grades 6-12), one school for technology (grades 9-12), and one high school (grades 9-12). Gamma Middle School is located directly in the heart of the city off the main arterial city street. The school building is more than 50 years old; however, the efforts of the school staff to create a welcoming and high achieving school climate are obvious. A few maintenance items remain unattended to, such as a hole in a classroom door, a broken hand rail, or a cracked window pane. However, the classrooms are largely

attractive and well-kept by the teachers, hallways are well-lit, clean and orderly, and the teachers and students are smiling and friendly.

Gamma Middle School has an average daily membership of 690 students, which has grown consistently over the last three years. The school's size requires four interdisciplinary teams of teachers: one sixth grade team, one seventh grade team, and two eighth grade teams, with approximately 160 students on each team. The interdisciplinary teams at Gamma Middle School are composed of five teachers instead of the typical four (Gamma includes a Reading teacher on each team). Approximately 23% of the total yearly revenue at Gamma Middle School is derived from local sources, which is above the state average. The school district spends $8,793 per student. Their school's free and reduced lunch rate is approximately 82.3% (the state average is 52.7%). Gamma Middle School is a clear example of caring teachers working together in sometimes difficult circumstances to create the best they can for the benefit of their children.

Description of Interdisciplinary Team C

The researcher first met interdisciplinary team C at Gamma Middle School, an eighth grade team, during their planning period after the first week of school. Each of them provided a welcoming attitude and a willingness to help in whatever way was needed. Team C is made up of five content area teachers, who are teaching together for the first time as a team this year. Four of the teachers have been teaching together for two years, but one is joining the Gamma Middle School teaching staff this year for the first time. Team C is comprised of veteran teachers; they have 109 years of combined

experience. With three teachers with over 20 years of experience and two with less than 15, team C is a mixture of young enthusiasm and seasoned experience.

Mrs. Bradley, the reading teacher, has been teaching at Gamma Middle School for nine years, but is entering her 33rd year of teaching. She has taught elementary school in the past, but prefers middle school. "I won't EVER go back to elementary school," she laughs, "Just the lesson plans; you can really manage much better teaching one subject." Mrs. Bradley believes that the team concept at the middle school level is the best method of supporting the students and engaging parents. She enthusiastically states, "It works better. We used to work without [teams]. Then, we came together as a team and things just started to flow more smooth, especially for parents, you know?" Mrs. Bradley also cites the team concept as a vital support network for teachers in working with parents. She states:

> If we get those individual parents in a team meeting, and we talk to those parents, usually we get their support….we go around the table and we are all saying the same thing, it works for us. We say, 'Trust us, we know what we are doing. We are the professionals and we are the certified teachers and we need you to support us.'

Mrs. Bradley advocates team instilling personal responsibility into their students and their parents. She describes herself as someone who "tells is like it is."

Mrs. Talman, the social studies teacher, is the youngest teacher on team C. She has been teaching for 11 years, all of which has been at Gamma Middle School. She describes her love for the Gamma community:

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I am actually a product of this school. I went to this school. Went to the high

school. Went to [college]. I knew I wanted to come here, so I didn't put in any

applications anywhere else. So, I knew I wanted to come here. I've been here

eleven years. I have grown a lot.

Her love for impacting the lives of her middle school students is obvious

motivation for her career. "I love teaching middle school because it's the hardest to

teach," she describes. In her opinion:

It's the hardest to teach because of what they are going through physically,

puberty, and the emotions. I like it because if you can see those kids that are

going down the wrong way, you know, you can still kind of catch them and help

them understand the importance of education…..Here, we have a chance to kind

of pull them back where they need to be.

Mrs. Talman chairs the positive behavioral support school-wide committee, which

is responsible for the creation and maintenance of the school-wide reward program for

students exhibiting good behavior choices. She is a young building-wide school leader,

and her leadership is counted on both on her team and among the entire faculty.

Mrs. Hartwell is the most experienced teacher on the team – 46 years spent

teaching every grade from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Five years ago, she

decided to come out of retirement to go back to teaching. Her honest and experienced

voice fosters credibility with students, coworkers, and parents when she speaks. She says

about teaching middle school students, "They are not grown up yet, and they are leaving

that baby stage. So you can nurture them without all the whining. That's what I like about

middle school." Mrs. Hartwell has become a believer in the benefits of teaming at the middle school level. She states:

> If the child is having problems in one class, he's having problems in ALL classes. So, we get together to find out what we should do to help this child….We take care of them. We try to figure out, 'Okay, what does this child need? What's going on in his mind? What can we do to help?'

Mrs. Hartwell is not intimidated by any student, teacher, or parent, and firmly draws a hard line in the sand when the subject of personal responsibility surfaces. Sadly, during latter part of the research study, Mrs. Hartwell's husband of many years passed away unexpectedly, which prevented her from participating in the last few weeks of this study.

Mrs. Nelly is beginning her first year as a science teacher at Gamma Middle School. She has 14 years of teaching experience high school, seventh, and eighth grades in another system. Mrs. Nelly indicates that she has found a permanent home in the middle school. She states, "The high schoolers have more of adult issues. Middle schoolers have growing issues, and I like that better and I've always liked them better and I am GLAD to be back at the middle school." About her team, she cannot speak enough about the support they have provided to her since she came to Gamma. She states:

> I can't ask for a better team up here. Because, me being new, [the students] try me. They do, they try me! I would probably be like a first year teacher if I didn't have them. So, thank God for that.

Mrs. Nelly can be characterized as a sweet, caring, compassionate teacher who desires greatly to be a mentor for her students.

Mrs. Richardson, the team's language arts teacher, is beginning her second year at Gamma Middle School, and has taught a total of seven years. Her previous experience working with inner city students serves her well as a teacher at Gamma Middle School. "I think that [this city] is a hard city, but I have dealt with a lot of inner city kids. These things are nothing. They just need attention. When you give them the attention, the reward is great," she states. Mrs. Richardson is very forthright about her desire to make a positive and lasting impact on the lives of her students. Describing her approach to teaching middle school students, she says:

> ….You have to show them that you care about them and that you want them to succeed, and after you do that, it's wonderful. I enjoy what I do. I tell them that they are my kids away from home. And, that I won't tell them anything that I don't tell my own children.

Mrs. Richardson is confident in her ability to make a positive impact on inner city kids. "There's nothing I can't handle," she proudly says about herself.

Team C's Definition of Parental Involvement

Interdisciplinary team C defines parental involvement as helping to maintain your child's positive attitude about school while seeking out the resources needed in order to make sure your child's academic needs are fulfilled, which enables the child to be successful in their adult lives. Practically speaking, parents are responsible for monitoring their child's learning and academic habits, seeking help when needed. "They should come in and say, 'I just want to know, what can I do to help my child?'" Mrs. Bradley states. Parents should focus on creating a clear study time at home, maintaining

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good organizational habits, and monitoring the completion of homework assignments. Mrs. Hartwell's advice echoes her no-excuses approach to parental involvement, "I would tell them help your child as much as you possibly can. If you can't assist, find someone who can. Call us if you need us. We have an open door policy." Parental involvement according to team C begins with the child and the parent spending time together, and the parent getting to know what the child's strengths and weaknesses are. Mrs. Richardson simply states:

Just assist them. We have had parent workshops before where we have taught the parents how we have taught their children to write. That works, when you include the parent, and that parent is on the same page with you. We love parental support. Parents need to get serious about making conferences, keeping them, asking them for the type of help they need. Staying after school, you know. These teachers stay after school anyway for clubs, and different things, assisting the students with tutoring, you know. Parents can get in on that.

Team C's Attitudes Toward Parental Involvement

Team C consistently reinforced during the research project their desire to increase the levels of parental involvement on their team, but was very careful to also reiterate the fact that they do have many parents who are really involved, and take involvement in their child's academic life very seriously. "We have a lot of great parents who are really involved," Mrs. Hartwell clarifies. Mrs. Talman highlights:

But, we do have parents that take our suggestions, we do meet them at a certain point. They even come to us with, 'He's better when he's working by himself' or

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'Can he get a peer tutor?' You know, where they bring information about the student from home and they bring suggestions about them…..and so, that worked better.

The team also feels that their adolescents would be very well served if their parents spent time at home several times a week to review what their child is learning, their grades, and get a feeling for their strengths and weaknesses. Mrs. Richardson advises:

[Parental involvement] should be used as reinforcement. We are only with them fifty minutes a day. So, whatever we teach, we need that support from them. We need them to go home and do some homework and some skills because we can't do it for them at home. We need parents to be involved in every aspect of the teaching and learning process.

Team C says, however, they do not experience the support and involvement they would like to see. Mrs. Richardson describes the reasons some parents will come up to school:

Unfortunately, we don't get [parental involvement]….they don't come up and discuss the academics as quickly as they will come up and discuss something negative, a complaint. I just wish I had more parent involvement as it relates to the academics.

Many of the parents, the team believes, feel ill-equipped or unknowledgeable in the content areas to help their kids, and so they keep their distance. Many of the parents did not complete school themselves, and therefore, are not knowledgeable about the type

of support and interventions their students need at home in order to be more successful. Mrs. Talman expresses this point well:

> We don't want to paint the picture that we just have bad parents but what we find is….you know, we are in a low socioeconomic area, and what gauges your socioeconomics is your education. We have students that are coming from homes where their parents don't have higher level education, so they don't see the value of it. So, unless they impress that upon them like my mom did for me, my mom didn't have a college education but she pressed that into me that that was what I was supposed to do. The parent has to have the initiative, you know, 'Don't do like me.' If the child has that at home, that's good, but a lot of times, that's not [there]. And so we are having, and teachers across the state, what used to be put on the parent, now teachers having to that as well, instead of what we are paid to do - teach.

Also, the parents are uninvolved because they are intimidated by the content the students are learning in the eighth grade and are intimidated by the education levels of many of the teachers. Even the parents who have masters degrees show signs of being intimated, the teachers describe. Intimidation is one possible explanation for the lack of parental involvement in the lives of the students.

Team C's Strategies to Involve Parents

The strategies utilized by team C to involve parents primarily includes personal contact through phone conversations or face-to-face contact. The team teachers are quick to attempt to notify parents via phone when there is information they need to get to them.

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The teachers call parents immediately, oftentimes using their personal cellphones within their classrooms, particularly in cases of misbehavior. "I call them right then," Mrs. Bradley states. The availability of the parent to answer the phone call and the manner in which the information is received, however, varies from parent to parent. Team C attempts to lead the parents with very specific tips for how they can help at home. "We try to teach them," Mrs. Talman says about her team's interactions with parents. The open-door policy enables the team of teachers to interact with more parents than they normally would, but it does lead to conflicts, at times. "Parents can come in anytime….but because of that, we often get the mad ones," Mrs. Harwell states.

Team C's Most Effective Strategies to Involve Parents

The data for team C parental involvement strategies did not point to any one set of most effective parental involvement strategies. Team C's strategies focus on making contact with any parent, at any time, in any way necessary. The team believes that their team parents desire the best for their children, but need to be educated about the importance of their role, as well as specifically what they need to be doing at home. Team C takes advantage of every opportunity they have to make contact with parents by attempting to educate the parent on how they can help the child by providing support at home.

Team C Parents' Definition of Parental Involvement

Parents for the students on team C define effective parental involvement primarily as monitoring and controlling student behaviors, both social and academic. The parents

have a deep desire to know very quickly if their child is not performing well academically or making poor decisions. The parents see it as within their role to control their child's behavior. One parent describes her availability and desire to intervene when her child misbehaves, "I gave each and every one of them my cell number. Like I told them, I don't work. You call me….I can be there in ten minutes." Another parent agrees, "If you have a problem with my child, you can call me. I will come and correct her….I will come up here and sit and look at her while she's sittin' doin' what she need to do." The parents interviewed on team C are keenly aware of the tendency of adolescents to test boundaries and believe that parental involvement is taking the lead on helping to keep the behaviors in check.

Team C Parents' Attitudes Toward Parental Involvement

Parental attitude toward parental involvement focuses on monitoring their child's performance at school through teacher feedback. Mrs. Nelly observed about parent night, "They were asking more about behavior than grades. That's what shocked me. Some of them asked about grades, but lots of them asked how the students are, if they were being respectful." Parents exhibited very little mechanisms through which they obtain information. Generally, parents wait for information to be pushed toward them from the team and the school in the form of phone calls, notes home, and directly from their children. Parental involvement on team C is generally reactive to teacher initiation, instead of proactive through efforts of the parent. Many of the parental participants felt that the teachers only contact them, "when the kids are in trouble," and do not contact them early enough when students are falling behind academically. "I think they wait too

long to involve the parent. By the time they do the child already have no chance," one parent voices. "There is no encouragement," one parent writes, "only notification when there is a problem." However, an equal number of parents indicate a viewpoint on the far other end of the spectrum. "Parents are continuously encouraged to be involved through the internet, written communications, phone calls, and personal contact," a parent writes. Obviously, a massive disconnect exists between the perceptions of parental involvement from the parents and actual practice from the team teachers. However, an overarching desire to build successful students is clear from the parental feedback.

Parental Involvement Strategies Cited as Effective by Team C Parents

Team C parents cite personal phone calls from teachers as the most effective strategy the team teachers use to keep them involved. "If they get in trouble or will not do their work, they will call and let us know that there is a problem so we can fix it," a parent writes. Of the 29 questionnaire participants, one-third of them cited phone calls as the best way the team keeps them involved. The parent interviews reflected a similar belief. "Call me, and I can come correct her," one parent states. Another strategy cited multiple times as effective is the open door policy with face-to-face appointments. Parents consistently state that they visit the school when a concern or question arises. "I can set the time and the date that works for me and my schedule," one parents comments. The parents describe the least effective methods as progress reports and notes home, since their students cannot be "trusted" to get the information home to them.

The following section outlines the emerging themes from the teacher data from Gamma Middle School. Parental perceptions of strategy effectiveness are also included in each theme.

Emergent Themes for Gamma Middle School

The team believes that parental involvement is essential to student success.

Team C was persistent in involving parents in the lives of their students. They begin the year with a survey to take home, a questionnaire for parents. The purpose of the questionnaire is to engage the parent, and to give the parent the opportunity to provide feedback to the teachers about their child. Questions include, "What about your child do I need to know?" and "Tell me about your child's study habits." The teachers then use this information in planning, problem-solving, and parent contact strategies throughout the year. A parent questionnaire is a simple yet effective way of finding out more about their 160 students, while also making a positive first impression with parents. Because of their belief in the essential role parental involvement plays in successfully educating their students, the team also creates academic projects throughout the year that requires an adult's participation, such as the history mask project. "One of the purposes of a project is that you can get some parental involvement – somebody at home can help you with it," Mrs. Hartwell states. In order to try to keep parents updated on student progress, the team sends their students home bi-weekly grade sheets to be signed by adults, and regularly requires tests and quizzes to be signed. With the general absence of technology as a communication tool with parents, the teachers find other ways to keep parents informed and up-to-date on their child's progress.

Additionally, the team C teachers look for other opportunities to involve to parents face-to-face. Mrs. Hartwell described a point when she became so frustrated at the lack of parental response, she decided to take drastic action:

> We had an [science and math] night here for parents one night, and we didn't have a whole lot of people to come in. But, they were here to watch their boys practice football. So I did, I went out and got some of them. I told them 'You need to be here to understand what your child is doing'.

Team C teachers regularly call parents during the school day, and even during class if necessary. Mrs. Bradley uses her own cell phone during class to call the parents of misbehaving or underperforming students. "I will call parents in the middle of class. I will," she says. The team jokes about a recent incident where they were very upfront and animated in dealing with an underperforming student, whereas the student indicated that she was going to get her mom to come up to the school. "With the response I did this morning, I might get a parent visit," Mrs. Talman confesses. "Well, that's a good thing! At least you got them up here!" Mrs. Bradley responds with the team, laughing behind her. A core belief in the importance of parental support drives team C to persist in making parental contact whenever and wherever they can.

The team is open and approachable to parents.

Gamma Middle School has one very unique feature with regards to parent visitors: a literal open-door policy as a school-wide practice. Typically in schools, parents are forced to secure appointments with teams and teachers in order to conference

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with teachers. Mrs. Richardson describes her own similar experiences as a parent at her

daughter's school:

It takes to be an act of congress to get to see one of my children's teachers. You

can't walk in and do all this. Ever. Never. It's just like seeing the president.

They make you utilize the computer. The website, [online grades], all that. You

can't just walk in and say that you want to see a teacher during instruction.

However at Gamma Middle School, the administration has established the

expectation that parents can visit the school and their child's teachers at any time during

the school day, and teachers are expected to welcome the parents and make arrangements

to meet with them during that time. Mrs. Bradley explains the management challenge of

such a practice:

Well, it doesn't work well for us. It works well for the parents, though. But, if

they work and can't get here during our conference period, we just have to keep

the children busy, step outside, or bring them in – it's better to bring them inside

with you – and just sit and talk. But, you are going to have a lot of interruptions

because the children are not going to stop talking. We won't get to meet with

them as long as we might need to, but we'll stop and talk to them….and they're

satisfied.

Mrs. Hartwell has a more direct approach, "I tell them to come on in and sit down." The

team does have an established common team planning time, every day at 9:00 a.m.,

which they advertise as their team parent conference period. Before the creation of the

common team time school-wide, parents were dropping-in at very unpredictable times.

Now, "We tell them to PLEASE come during our team conference period," they exclaim.

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The parents also value the face-to-face time. "The personal appointments are the most effective way [to help] because I have adequate time to ask questions and receive feedback without being rushed," one parent describes. Although the team saw the value of the parental involvement, their frustrations with interruptions during instructional time were obvious. With the high percentage of parents with periodic and changing work and transportation issues, the team and school had decided to create an open an approachable school climate in which parents have the flexibility of visiting when they are able.

Parent night at Gamma Middle School was a surprising success in terms of parent turn-out. The team teachers spread themselves out in four corners of the library (Mrs. Bradley was not present due to a family emergency). There was no fancy team parent presentation or a PowerPoint show. "Please try to make it to every one," Mrs. Richardson stated to the crowds. Lines began to form behind each teacher's designated conference table. Each teacher stood and greeted the parent by name with an extended hand and a smile. Each teacher sat down with each parent with their grade books and recent tests in hand, and had a one-on-one conference with the parent. At any one time in the library, there were eight to 10 parents in each line. The parent night took over two hours, and over 50 parents were engaged in conferences. During the one-on-one conferences, the teachers honestly but respectfully conveyed the child's progress up to that point (see Table 5 for comments observed during parent night).

Table 5. *Team C (Gamma Middle School) Parental Night Statements To Parents*

Teacher	Quote
Mrs. Talman	"He's doing fine so far"
	"Now, we really need to kick it into gear."
	"Homework is not getting done. Please check on that for me"
Mrs. Richardson	"It's been a slow start."
	"She's not putting forth her best effort."
	"You've GOT to follow upon that."
Mrs. Hartwell	"Let's do this – let's start checking her homework right when she gets home."
	"She's already missing eight assignments in math."
	"He's got to stay on task."
Mrs. Nelly	"I know he can do better than that. He's a smart kid."
	"That's something you can help me with."

Even through the intercom announcement from the principal indicating that parent night was officially over and that, "We need to get the teachers home to their families," team C conferencing continues another 30 minutes. Every parent who desired to meet with a teacher on team C received a one-on-one conference. "They cut the lights off on us!" Mrs. Nelly laughs. The team recognized the surprising turnout at parent night as an opportunity to inform parents and to solicit their support, even though doing so translated to a very late night at school. "You know, I didn't want to tell them, you know, none of that. So, I stayed. And, they were appreciative, but they were thankful just to talk to us," Mrs. Richardson recalls.

Team C is required to keep their websites and online grades updated. However, less than half of their students have access to the internet at home, which translates to very low usage of parental usage of webpages, email, and checking grades online. One barrier to openness and approachability is the lack of email support within the district. "Our email is always down," Mrs. Bradley laments, "If we had reliable email, it would change the way we work with parents. That would be perfect," she continues. Parents also express frustration about lack of email responses. One parent sent an email three times, only to eventually just show up at the school because of lack of response. "I thought they were ignoring me, so we had to have a conversation," she remembers. "There's no email, EVER," another parent states. Clearly, some parents desire to communicate with teacher over email, and are restricted from doing so due to the unpredictability of the email network, which impacts the parental perceptions of openness and approachability. On a personal note, the lack of email reliability was a major hindrance to the collection of team data for the completion of this research project.

Many of the parental participants of this study felt that the team of teachers is open and approachable. "The teachers are available and accessible, as needed. Also, positive notes and letters are sent home at the beginning of the year," one parent responded on the research questionnaire. Another states, "The teachers show interest and concern for my child." The open-door policy has its obvious drawbacks, but it does impact the perception of openness in a positive way. One parent indicates, "They welcome you with open arms and you are never turned away even without an appointment." Many of the parents state that they do feel like they are a member of the interdisciplinary team, "because we are all helping our children achieve their goals."

Parents who have a need and a desire to visit with this team of teachers are provided with the opportunity to do so by limiting the number of barriers for involvement.

The team serves as a resource to the parents of adolescents.

The parental participants describe their adolescents as "a head ache." "emotional," and "chaotic." The teachers also cite the challenging nature of working with adolescents, describing them as "confused", "independent," and "needy." The team teachers recognize the apparent contradiction in maturity levels so common to the middle school age group. "You have those that are dealing with more grown-up issues, but then you have those who still go home and watch cartoons, all within the same classroom….balancing those is a feat within itself," Mrs. Talman describes. The challenging social and cognitive developmental period of adolescence presents a plethora of challenges to their parents. "It's a head ache," one parent describes. "She always has to have the last word. And mom and dad don't know nothin'," she says. Another parent comments on the emotional nature of adolescents: "Mine is emotional. She cries at the drop of a hat. Seem like she stay mad at me constantly about somethin'…..she's always on the edge….she says, 'Get off my case' a lot."

Team C makes intentional attempts to help guide parents through parental role development. Too many parents "babe-ify" their adolescents – a term they created to describe a parent who coddles and caters to their adolescent's excuses for not completing work or misbehavior. With every opportunity, team C clearly suggests and establishes their expectations for what the parent can do to help with struggling students. The team finds themselves in the role of training parents. Mrs. Bradley states, "Sometime the parents are like the children, you know, sometimes you need to be a little bit firm." Mrs.

Hartwell, the team states, can be more direct and upfront with what the parent needs to do to "step up" than the other teachers can because of her age and experience. "Mrs. Hartwell is able to be more….um…forthright," Mrs. Talman laughs. Mrs. Hartwell clarifies:

> I'm older than them. I could be their mommas….I tell them that I have a role, they have a role, and the child has a role. I tell them what my role is. I tell them what the child's role is. And I tell them what their role is. And, I tell them that unless all three of us are doing what they are supposed to do, we are going to have some problems.

She continues:

> I tell them, '[You] are responsible for the discipline. You are responsible for making sure that this child has what they need when he comes to my class. You are responsible for making sure that he knows that he is not in charge and that he follows the rules.

> Interdisciplinary team C has found that they need to be quite direct with the parents of their students, particularly the many young parents they have represented on their team. Mrs. Bradley describes what the team perceives to be the root of the problem, "They get away with things at home…..they don't discipline them at home. They don't have study times….they are not spending quality time with them after school." Mrs. Hartwell reiterates, "They think they need to be buddies with them, be friends." Team C makes it a standard practice to suggest to parents strategies to utilize at home to help the child be more successful.

The team approaches problem-solving opportunities with parents as a team rather than individuals.

Teaming is only in its fourth year at Gamma Middle School. Before that point, the school was organized largely by departments, similar to a high school, and it was very difficult to collect all of a student's teachers into one conference due to a department-based model. Presently, however, the interdisciplinary team is the primary mechanism through which student issues are tackled. Mrs. Talman states:

It's good for parent conferences and if there is a problem, we will talk about it at the team meeting and we decide there is a problem. We say, 'Okay, we need to bring them in.' And, we just know that our parent conference time is 9:00. You know we are all off that time.

Team C teachers are believers in the team approach to problem-solving. Mrs. Talman agrees, "That's what I really love about teaming…..all of us together to address one problem as a team." Mrs. Bradley feels that the team model is not only a support mechanism for the teachers, but also for the students. They feel that the value of teamwork is a skill that their urban students lack, and they see their interdisciplinary team model as an opportunity to show them what it means to work together and support one another. "In order for these kids to achieve, we all need to stick together" she states. Mrs. Talman continues, "When they see us, they see that we are going to stand together, and that is going to teach them a lesson as well. A life lesson." Their students, they observe, need to see that they are uniform and consistent, because their own homes may itself show a lack of any structure what-so-ever. This team is a vibrant group who clearly love the company of one another, and they believe strongly in the teaming model to

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impact adolescents. "All of us are team-minded. We want to work as a team. We encourage working as a team," Mrs. Nelly describes.

The teaming model is essential to involving parents, team C feels. The carry-over of adolescent academic and social behaviors from one class to the next is obvious. "Usually, if the child is having a problem in one class, he's having a problem in ALL classes. So we get together to find out what we should do to help with this child," Mrs. Hartwell describes. At times, parents need convincing as to the reasons that their child is underperforming, and team finds that the careful use of reiterated and supportive observations about student behaviors to parents is critical to getting them on board with interventions. "It helps with the parents to know that we all have the same concerns," Mrs. Richardson states. The team describes the process of convincing the parent that there is a problem, and that the conference is not the result of any ill personal feelings about the child – actually, the conference is a result of the exact opposite, care and concern. "All of us sit down, and [the parent] realizes that the child is doing something wrong in every class, she realizes that something is wrong. That's a plus of us meeting together," Mrs. Hartwell describes.

One significant barrier to a team approach to problem-solving at Gamma Middle School is the sheer volume of students on the team – 160. Generally, a team of five teachers will have no more than 120 students, meaning approximately twenty-four students per classroom teacher. With 160 students on their team, the number of students per classroom teacher leaps to 32 students. The team and each team teacher now attempting to create meaningful relationships with 40 additional students and parents creates an impossible scenario of adequate and impactful team problem-solving. The

teachers are forced into a situation where they can only address the most severe and time-consuming challenges. Additionally, the parent group with which they are working is notoriously difficult to engage in school, which compounds an already challenging parental situation. The team persists, however, making contacts whenever and wherever they are able.

The team displays a compassion for the difficult circumstances in their students' lives.

Perhaps the most notable of all of the characteristics of interdisciplinary team C is their deep and heartfelt compassion for the difficult life circumstances of many of their students. "Most of the problems they are having are brought from home. It's just that they haven't had the support that they need at home," Mrs. Hartwell states. Team C feels that a lack of knowledge of many of their parents is a primary cause of the overwhelming lack of accountability for students at home. Mrs. Richardson states, "Knowledgeable? They are not….when [the students] get home, the children don't have enough assistance." Mrs. Hartwell agrees, "You also have to recognize the [parents] that can't do anything. And the children are doing the best they can….when you talk to the parents, you realize what's wrong." The team is quick to remind the researcher that they have many parents who are doing everything they can to raise a responsible, intelligent, and hard-working young person. "We have a lot of folks that are doing it right," Mrs. Talman clarifies. Many parents, they say, recognize their own inability to provide sufficient aid, and therefore seek out the resources they need in order to help their children be successful. One parent interviewed provided an excellent example of this. She herself suffers from

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terrible and debilitating arthritis, and spends much of her time at the doctor, on medication, or immobile in bed. She is currently on disability, and cannot even afford her daughter's ADHD medication. However, when her child was struggling, she persisted by being a staunch advocate for her child. "I didn't get a response [from the school] so I just came up to see the principal." She has been able to meet with her daughter's teachers and the counselor, and has worked with them to formulate a plan of improvement.

The team's response to this is to insert themselves as the adult figure in the lives of many of their students. Adolescents need adults to look up to and hold them accountable for the actions, decisions, and learning. Mrs. Richardson recognizes her responsibility in this area. She states:

> They are looking for some type of positive role model or adult figure that they can identify with – something positive when they come to school, because they may not see at home anything positive. So, they look to us for that guidance.

Even something as common as walking into a room of teachers meeting without requesting permission becomes a teachable moment for a student on their team. "Excuse me!" one teacher exclaimed to the entering student. The student returns to the doorway, and knocks quietly. The teacher nicely responded, "That's better. Now, how can we help you?" The team C teachers gladly embrace this role, as the circumstances of many of their students' lives leave noticeable gaps in teachings more common to stable and higher socioeconomic families.

Summary of Gamma Middle School Data

Gamma Middle School is located in an urban area with high poverty in central Alabama. The interdisciplinary team teachers at Gamma Middle School is a highly experienced team of teachers, all of whom have a huge heart for the oftentimes trying circumstances of teaching inner city children. Team C defines parental involvement as helping to maintain the child's positive attitude about school while seeking out the resources needed in order to make sure the child's academic needs are fulfilled, which enables the child to be successful in their adult lives. Team C places the importance of parental involvement in the lives of adolescents very high, yet reports extremely low levels of parental support. They strive to involve parents by possessing a belief that parental involvement is essential to student success, maintaining and open and approachable attitude toward parents, serving as a resource to parents in need, approaching problem-solving opportunities as a team, and displaying a compassion for the difficult circumstances in their students' lives.

Cross-case Analysis

The previous within-case analysis describes each of the three very different schools and communities, interdisciplinary teams of middle school teachers, and correlating parent groups. The emerging themes detailed from these three cases represent the methods through which the interdisciplinary team of teachers attempt to maximize and manage parental involvement on their team, in their schools, in their communities, for their students. Due to specific differences in their schools, the communities, the students, and the parents, the three interdisciplinary teams have vast differences in their approaches toward parental involvement. However, four common themes exist. In the following section, four cross-case emerging themes are presented, and tie together the common strategies utilized by these three interdisciplinary teams in order to involve parents. For a summary of the cross-case emerging themes, see Table 6.

Table 6. *Research Cross-case Themes*

Theme	The Three Effective Middle School Interdisciplinary Teams:
Theme 1	Believe that parental involvement is essential to student success.
Theme 2	Are open and approachable to parents.
Theme 3	Serve as a resource to the parents of adolescents.
Theme 4	Approach problem-solving opportunities with parents as a team instead of individuals.

Although an analysis of each case resulted in these four themes, the strategies or behaviors exhibited by each team behind each theme was not necessarily congruent.

Essentially, the effective middle school teams use the same strategies, but in very different ways. Below are descriptions of each of the cross-case themes with the correlating supporting strategies or philosophies.

Theme 1 – Effective middle school teams believe that parental involvement is essential to student success

All three effective middle school interdisciplinary teams in this study believe that parental involvement is essential to student success (see Table 7). The three middle school teams were all persistent in making parental contact because they believe it is important to do so. Whether in the form of many emails a day, phone calls to work places, notes home, e-newsletters, webpages, waiting for parents in the carpool lanes, or cornering a hard-to-reach parent in the office, the teams are dedicated to getting as much information to parents as possible, and attempting to engage the parent in the educational process.

Not surprisingly, the three middle school teams conduct parent conferences as often as possible. The teams creatively and effectively schedule their day and weeks in order to maximize opportunities to meet with parents. The teams have a built in parent conference period during the day, and they also are willing to step outside of that conference time in order to gain access to a parent. Two of the middle school teams require students and parents to utilize a variety of forms of communication, including frequent emails to and from the parents, student planner signing, or a student performance contract. The urban team, due to extremely low levels of parental involvement, actually steps into the role of the parent by providing many students with

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parent-like advice, guidance, accountability, and mentorship. Without bypassing or

ignoring the valuable contributions of the parents, they reflect their belief that the role of

the parent in student success is an essential piece.

Table 7. – *Description of Theme 1*

Theme	Alpha Middle School	Beta Middle School	Gamma Middle School
Effective middle school teams believe that parental involvement is essential to student success.	*Therefore, they:* *Are persistent in making parental contact primarily through technology (email, webpages, e-newsletters).* *Conduct parent conferences often during their conference period or whenever the parent is available to meet.* *Require students to utilize various forms of communication with parents, such as student planners and student contracts.*	*Therefore, they:* *Are persistent in making parental contact through face-to-face conferences and phone calls.* *Conduct parent conferences often during their conference period or whenever the parent is available to meet.* *Require students to utilize various forms of communication with parents, such as student planners.*	*Therefore, they:* *Are persistent in making parental contact through face-to-face conferences and phone calls.* *Conduct parent conferences whenever parents arrive at school or over the phone.* Attempt to make up for very low parental support in the community by supporting students with parental guidance.

Theme 2 – Effective middle school teams are open and approachable to parents

All three effective middle school interdisciplinary teams in this study are open and approachable to parents (see Table 8). The teams establish and advertise very clear open door policies to parents, inviting them regularly and through many different methods to contact them with questions, concerns, and issues relating to their child. The teams are also intentionally friendly and welcoming in their interactions with parents. During parent nights, throughout conferences, while writing emails, or talking over the phone, the teams are keenly aware of the verbal and non-verbal necessities to making themselves and their team perceived as open and approachable. One additional method of establishing the perception of openness and approachability is through team A's team motto, team spirit, and team theme promoted weekly in the e-newsletter. Parents perceive that their child is in a welcoming and student-centered environment when the team provides students with a guiding theme for the year.

Table 8. – *Description of Theme 2*

Theme	Alpha Middle School	Beta Middle School	Gamma Middle School
Effective middle school teams are open and approachable.	*Therefore, they:* *Establish a clear "open door policy" through technology, team availability, and a team spirit.* *Are friendly and welcoming with their words and actions.*	*Therefore, they:* *Establish a clear "open door policy" through emails, phone calls, and parent nights.* *Are friendly and welcoming with their words and actions.*	*Therefore, they:* *Establish a clear "open door policy" through a school-wide consistent policy.* *Are friendly and welcoming with their words and actions.*

Theme 3 – Effective middle school teams serve as a resource to the parents of adolescents

All three effective middle school interdisciplinary teams in this study serve as a resource to the parents of adolescents (see Table 9). First and foremost, the interdisciplinary teams possess extended knowledge of the unique nature of an adolescent's social, emotional, and cognitive development. They were always able to frame the particular challenges faced by their students through the lens of appropriate adolescent development. Furthermore, the teams are able to communicate these adolescent characteristics to the parents, when necessary and appropriate. The teams possess and convey very clear suggestions to parents for home-based interventions for struggling students. The teams did not hesitate to share what they felt should take place at home in order to intervene positively.

Lastly, the teams clearly outlined their own expectations for parents, in terms of student accountability as needed. Team A feels that most of their parents are more than capable to aid at home when their student is struggling. Teams B and C were less optimistic about the parental efficacy represented on their team, citing that less than half of the parents on their team have the skills and knowledge to provide support at home. All three teams, however, recognize that many parents are not automatically aware of the appropriate interventions to take place at home when a student is struggling. Therefore, the teams ensure that the parent is aware of specific steps they can take to help their child be more successful in school.

Table 9. – *Description of Theme 3*

Theme	Alpha Middle School	Beta Middle School	Gamma Middle School
Effective middle school teams serve as a resource to the parents of adolescents.	*Therefore, they:* *Exhibit a clear understanding of the unique nature of adolescent development through ideas and strategies for success they suggest parents implement at home.* *Clarify the role of the parent in facilitating middle school success.*	*Therefore, they:* *Exhibit a clear understanding of the unique nature of adolescent development through ideas and strategies for success they suggest parents implement at home.* *Clarify the role of the parent in facilitating middle school success.*	*Therefore, they:* *Exhibit a clear understanding of the unique nature of adolescent development through ideas and strategies for success they suggest parents implement at home.* *Clarify the role of the parent in facilitating middle school success.*

Theme 4 – Effective middle school teams approach problem-solving opportunities as a team instead of individuals

All three effective middle school interdisciplinary teams in this study approach problem-solving opportunities as a team rather than individuals (see Table 10). The teachers on the teams in this study are all avid proponents of the middle school concept. All three interdisciplinary teams meet regularly each week as a middle school team, and utilize this time to problem-solve student issues and plan appropriate interventions. The teams works together with each other to implement the interventions as a team, including the team teachers, the student, and the parents, providing greater accountability to the student and a crossover of supportive expectations.

These team teachers nearly always conference with parents as a team instead of as individuals, lending strength and credibility to their ability as a team to affect changes in student behaviors. Team C was the only team to entertain the option of meeting one-on-one with parents, since many of their parent conferences take place in an unplanned and impromptu manner. However, they work hard to meet with parents as a team when possible. Teams A and B take teaming to the next level by establishing team procedures and expectations for behavior and academics, and communicates these to the students and the parents. Only team A, however, presents these team policies, expectations, and procedures within the context of their team goals and spirit.

Table 10. – *Description of Theme 4*

Theme	Alpha Middle School	Beta Middle School	Gamma Middle School
Effective middle school teams approach problem-solving opportunities as a team rather than individuals.	*Therefore, they:* *Meet regularly each week as a team during a designated team meeting time.* *Develop team approaches to student issues, and convey the team plan to parents.* *Create team procedures, policies, and expectations and communicate them clearly within the context of team goals and objectives.* *Conduct all parent conferences as a team.*	*Therefore, they:* *Meet regularly each week as a team during a designated team meeting time.* *Develop team approaches to student issues, and convey the team plan to parents.* *Create team procedures, policies, and expectations.* *Conduct all parent conferences as a team.*	*Therefore, they:* *Meet regularly each week as a team during a designated team meeting time.* *Develop team approaches to student issues, and convey the team plan to parents.* *Conduct a majority of parent conferences as a team.*

Summary

Chapter 4 presents a detailed and descriptive report of the findings of this study. Each case is described in rich detail, including background on the community, the school, the team, and the teachers. Thick and detailed descriptions, direct quotations, summarized findings, and observational data are used to illustrate a vibrant picture of each case. After each of the case descriptions, the sub-questions are answered for each case, and within-case themes are presented. Lastly, a cross-case analysis presents four cross-case themes, which summarize the strategies utilized by effective middle school interdisciplinary teams.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Middle school interdisciplinary teams are uniquely designed in order to best address the needs of the adolescent students they serve. Adolescents often struggle through a turbulent period of self-discovery and identity formation, which exhibits itself as moodiness, an argumentative nature, self-questioning, and/or a shifting of priorities in relationships (Erikson, 1950; Muuss, 1975; Thornburg, 1983). The middle school interdisciplinary team is an appropriate and effective mechanism through which these unique characteristics are addressed in an educational setting (Wallace, 2007). Middle school interdisciplinary teams provide adolescents with smaller learning environments for a school-within-a-school experience, where a middle school student becomes familiar with four or five core academic teachers and approximately 100 students, rather than an entire grade level. The team teachers foster a sense of belongingness to the team within their students, and provide support to their students within a smaller learning community (Alspaugh & Harting, 1997; Hansen, 2009; Mills & Pollack, 2009). Inherent to middle school teaming is a team approach to problem-solving and parental engagement.

Current research clearly ties high levels of parental involvement in schools to increased levels of academic achievement and overall student competence (Carr & Wilson, 1997; Griffith, 1996; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005; Thorkildsen & Stein, 1998). Specific parental involvement strategies for teachers and schools have been clearly tied to increased student motivation for academic success (Bronstein, Ginsburg, & Herrera, 2005). However, definitions of parental involvement vary between parents, students and teachers, as well as schools and geographic locations. Barge and Loges (2003) stated,

"….an implicit assumption in the existing research is that parents, students, and teachers hold similar conceptions of what counts as parental involvement" (p. 142). Involvement levels are heavily impacted when there is a disconnect between what schools perceive as effective parental involvement versus the perceptions of their parents on effective parental involvement (Baker, 1997a,1997b; Barge & Loges, 2003). Middle school interdisciplinary teams will benefit from a clearly outlined and established set of parental involvement strategies constructed for middle school teams to utilize with the parents of adolescents. This current research endeavored to elicit those strategies.

The central research question for this study was, "What are the strategies utilized by interdisciplinary middle school teams to effectively involve the parents of their students in the educational process?" As previously described in Chapter 3, the researcher utilized a multiple-case study approach with three central Alabama middle school interdisciplinary teams: one from a suburban setting, one from a rural setting, and one from an urban setting. All three middle schools were active members of Making Middle Grades Work (MMGW), a regional middle school improvement initiative. The three middle school sites displayed a dedication to the key practices of MMGW schools, specifically: (a) a strong academic core; (b) engaging classroom practices; (c) dedication to interdisciplinary teaming; (d) high expectations for all students; (e) quality professional development; and (f) strong middle school leadership (Southern Regional Education Board, 2008). Each interdisciplinary team at each of the three middle schools participated in multiple team interviews, responded to journal questions, and was subject to observation at parent nights and related events. As a subgroup of each case, parents of

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students on the interdisciplinary team were also included as participants through the use of focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and written questionnaires.

The central research question and the seven sub-questions were addressed for each case, and multiple themes were identified for each case. Four cross-case themes were identified which describe the strategies utilized by effective middle school teams in order to involve parents in the educational process (see Table 6).

Addressing the Research Sub-questions

The data from the first sub-question, "How do middle school interdisciplinary teams of teachers define parental involvement?" revealed the similarities and differences in the perceptions of the role of the parent between schools and communities. All of the interdisciplinary teams in this study cited as a component of effective parental involvement the need for parents to be supportive of teachers, particularly when the teacher is reporting student behavior problems to the parent. Effective parental involvement, one teacher cited, "places the responsibility back on the child." This definition is consistent with the Gettinger and Guetschow (1998) study which sought to connect teacher and parental definitions and preferences for involvement. In their study, the researchers describe an emphasis on home-based accountability strategies which affect school-based outcomes. This phenomena was also seen in the current study. The teams in this study placed a high value on parents becoming active in student accountability for academics. "I think there are things that they can do at home that wouldn't even involve us that can help their child perform better," another teacher stated. Examples of these behaviors cited by teachers include (a) checking the student's student

planner regularly; (b) reviewing homework assignments nightly; (c) reviewing student grades online; (d) and keeping up with upcoming project, quiz, and test dates.

An interesting additional component of effective parental involvement for team C at Gamma Middle School, the urban school, was the team's recognition that the parent may not be capable or knowledgeable enough to provide aid to the student, and therefore, seeks out help when it is needed. Team C described their parents as "definitely not knowledgeable" enough to help with academics, but quickly added that many of their most supportive parents seek out help from community or family members when academic help is needed. This component was not seen in the other two sites. This result is consistent with research conducted by Swick and Broadway (1997) which described the impact of parental efficacy on parental involvement. According to Swick and Broadway (1997), in order to effectively engage, parents must have a positive self-image, perceive the issue is within their control, be developmentally mature, and have a strong intrapersonal support system. For the team teachers in the present research, involvement was much more than volunteering or attending parent nights. Increased parental efficacy equates to effective parental involvement, which results in the active and ongoing process of the parent providing accountability at home for a student's academic needs.

The influence of socio-economic status on parental involvement levels was evident throughout this research, and created differences in definitions of parental involvement in the three communities. The suburban participants, both teachers and parents, focused on at-home strategies to help their students be more successful in school. The higher socio-economic support, at-home parental expectations, and availability of technology highly influenced the perceptions of the parental role. In the rural and urban

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communities, parental efficacy was obviously lower, and parents inquired and attempted to control what they were capable of controlling – student behavior. Parents were much more interested in the students' behavioral choices, and therefore, established clear expectations for such. Overall, the rural and urban parents were less confident in their own ability to affect change in the academic realm, and therefore did not take explicit steps to intervene.

This study confirmed earlier research conducted by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005), which described the connection between socio-economic status and parental involvement. Although clear ties between parental involvement and socio-economic status exist, other research may suggest that socio-economic status does not generally explain why parents do or do not become involved (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2005). A more appropriate tie can be made between socio-economic status and availability of resources for involvement. According to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005), "The advantage of focusing on resources is that teachers, schools, and families….can take steps to accommodate variations in many associated resources" (p. 114). While schools do not have the ability to directly impact a family's socio-economic status, schools can take measures to increase the resources and support for the family.

The second sub-question, "What are the attitudes of middle school team teachers toward parental involvement?" provided a glimpse into the team teachers' belief regarding the essential role of the parent. From the very start, all three teams took advantage of every opportunity they had to speak with or engage a parent. Corporately, they sent out daily and weekly parent emails, made regular phone calls, had parent conferences before the school year even started, met parents early in the day, stayed with

parents late in the afternoon, conferenced with parents in the carpool lines and at the baseball fields, and everything in between. These teachers, even at their own inconvenience and sacrifice of personal time, worked tirelessly to keep parents informed of their child's progress. "Whatever it takes," responded one Gamma Middle School teacher, when asked about what they do to connect with parents. This attitude accurately summarizes the approach of all three teams. These teams of teachers worked with each other to develop and implement a plan to correct any issues or challenges, and attempted to engage the parents in the academic improvement process. They presented themselves to parents as welcoming and open, and reinforced their openness and approachability with their words, responses, and actions.

The findings of this research were consistent with those of Barge and Loges (2003) regarding teacher perceptions of parental involvement. The teachers in the Barge and Loges (2003) study considered high-quality parental involvement embodying parental positive relationships with teachers and parental monitoring of their child's academic progress. These two aspects were reflected throughout the definitions of and attitudes towards parental involvement by the teams of teachers in this research. However, the teachers in this research focused on team-based strategies, engaging willing parents, and overcoming parents' resistant to involvement. As in the Barge and Loges (2003) research, the teachers cited effective communication techniques, active participation and supervision, and effective discipline as key to positive parental involvement. Additionally, negative communication, lack of support, and poor parenting skills were cited by the teams as major hindrances to effective parental involvement.

The third sub-question for this study was "What are the strategies that middle school interdisciplinary teams of teachers utilize to involve parents?" The first strategy used by these teams to involve parents is a hard-nosed persistence in making contact with parents in varied ways. Through multiple means, the teams took advantage of any opportunity to speak or meet with any parent, in many cases before or after school, in the office area, off-campus, on the phone, through email, or during scheduled team meetings. The teams had a pre-scheduled time designated to meet parents during the school day, but they were quick to veer from that meeting time, to accommodate the parents' schedules and availability. The teams also utilized written means of daily communication, such as student planners or academic contracts, with the parents of some students, primarily those students on their team who were struggling the most academically. Another strategy the teams utilized was verbalizing an open door policy to the parents of their students through parent nights, weekly team e-newsletters, daily email communication, class documents, phone calls, and conferencing. The team teachers established this climate of openness and approachability from the outset, and worked hard to maintain it throughout the year. The teachers were welcoming, friendly, thoughtful, and understanding in their words and responses to parent requests for information or clarification.

One additional strategy the team teachers utilized was to serve as a resource to their parents by suggesting adolescent-specific improvement strategies for parents to implement at home. The overall strategies uncovered in this research are reflected in a Seitsinger, et al. (2008) study which outlined the prevalence and effectiveness of particular parental engagement strategies. Seitsinger, et al. (2008) found that engagement strategies utilized by teachers could be classified as either providing information to

parents regarding student performance or providing suggestions for improvement at home. The strategies utilized by the middle school teams in this study could be classified into these categories as well, as each sought to provide information to the parents along with suggestions for implementing the strategies at home. The teachers in the current study were well-trained and knowledgeable regarding the unique characteristics of adolescents, and recognized the importance of a structured and supportive learning environment at home, one that is centered upon adolescent-specific challenges. The teams worked together to outline these home-based strategies to the parents of the students on their team, and took advantage of opportunities to clarify the role of the parent in creating an environment for success at home. "You have to educate them when you call them, you have to tell them exactly what they need to do," describes one teacher.

Lastly, a strategy the middle school teams used to involve parents was approaching parents as a team rather than individuals. The interdisciplinary team structure and schedule allowed the teams to meet regularly to identify challenges with students and create team approaches to address the areas of concern. "We are constantly working together as a team," a teacher stated. Parent conferences took place as a team, rarely one-on-one with parents. The teams established clear team procedures, policies, and expectations, and communicated these to their students and parents. "We probably meet more than we are supposed to," one teacher admitted. Through these strategies, these middle school teams were able to maintain parental engagement of the parents for the students on their teams.

The data associated with the fourth sub-question, "What do middle interdisciplinary teams of teachers view as the most effective strategies for involving

parents?" did not point to any one set of most effective parental involvement strategies beyond the strategies that have already been cited. The most effective strategy, however, did vary from site to site. Team A's most effective strategies centered upon the use of technology to engage parents. "Email has totally changed the game of parent communication," Team A believes. "It's instant," one teacher said. These teachers also regularly utilized weekly e-newsletters, daily email as needed, webpage maintenance, and online gradebooks to involve parents. Team B's most effective strategy to involve parents focused on providing one-on-one information to their parents through individualized contact such as phone calls, conferences, emails, and online gradebook programs. Team C's most effective strategy to involve parents was making contact with any parent, at any time, in any way necessary. Without the luxury of technology or an overwhelming physical presence of parents at school, team C took advantage of every opportunity they had to make contact with parents by attempting to educate the parent on how they can help the child by providing support at home.

The fifth sub-question, "How do the parents of middle school students define parental involvement?" related to the role the parents feel they have in a student's academic success. The parents of students from all three research sites identified their primary role in parental involvement as helping to monitor and maintain appropriate student behavior and academic progress. "It's my job to make her behave," a Gamma Middle School parent stated – a common statement from parents from all three schools. This perception of the parents wanting responsibility for their children's behavior was also reflected in a Gettinger and Guetschow (1998) study, which outlined parental perceptions of involvement. An interesting difference from site to site, however, was the

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manner and extent to which the parents attempted to accomplish this task. All of the parents desired to know immediately if their child was misbehaving, disrespectful, or breaking classroom rules. The parents all saw themselves as the primary enforcer of school rules. Alpha team parents tended to be mostly concerned about academic progress, while Beta and Gamma team parents sought out information about their child's behavioral choices. "They were asking more about behavior than grades. That's what shocked me," stated a teacher from Gamma Middle School.

Academically, however, there were differences. Parents of students on Alpha team utilized a plethora of technology in order to keep abreast of all student assignments, grades, projects, tests, quizzes, and otherwise. These parents saw themselves as informed and involved in their child's education. Parents of students on Beta team attempted to monitor the same items, albeit much less successfully, through school-related publications and student planners. These parents largely saw themselves as uninformed or involved, but not for a lack of their own effort. Parents interviewed from Gamma team were interested in knowing and learning the academic details of their child's progress, or lack of progress, in school. However, they expressed that they did not know how to do so, aside from calling the school or speaking with the teacher face-to-face, which made contact less frequent and more challenging. "I finally just got in my car and came up here," one parent from Gamma team said, about making contact with the school. Parental involvement, essentially, can be defined in the same manner at all three school sites: parental influence on monitoring and maintaining appropriate student behavior and academic progress.

The data for the sixth sub-question, "What are the attitudes of parents of middle school students toward parental involvement?" outlined the expressed desires of the parents to be involved in their middle school child's education. The parents included in this research study emphasized a blatant recognition of the importance of the role of the parent in a child's education. All of the parents recognized adolescence as a particularly difficult transition period for their children, and desired to play a role in their child's educational life. These parents desired teacher feedback regarding their child's progress. However, Alpha team parents exhibited great confidence and knowledge of fulfilling their role – Beta and Gamma team parents did not. Alpha team parents identified their struggle in knowing when to, "….back off from being a helicopter parent," as one Alpha team parent expressed. Alpha team parents were concerned about the possibility of being too involved, and recognized the potential for them to do so, to the detriment of their child learning to be responsible. Hill and Tyson (2009) also addressed the issue of invitations for involvement to parents from their children. The researchers described the transition parental involvement makes from one of helping in the classroom to that of helping within the school building and on school committees.

Beta and Gamma team parents often voiced frustration with parental involvement at their schools, citing difficulties in keeping up with both team and school related events. Overall, the parents from all three school sites desired to be involved, but felt that the availability of information from the school was the determining factor in their involvement. Beta team parents relied heavily on their students for information, and therefore, were disappointed with the frequency and type of communication experienced. Hill and Tyson (2009) also cited this method of communicating between home and

school as unreliable. The lack of reliable technology at Gamma Middle School impacted the overall parental perceptions of school communication. Clearly, parental involvement would increase at the school with the availability of technology which supports this type of communication.

The seventh sub-question, "What are the strategies that parents describe as useful in the education of their student?" elicited strategies that parents viewed as most effective in keeping them involved. Alpha and Beta team parents both cited technology-related items as the most effective means of maintaining parental involvement. Alpha team parents cited the weekly e-newsletter as the single most valuable tool for keeping them informed. Repeatedly, these parents expressed how invaluable the information was, and the essential role it played in keeping them informed of upcoming important dates and deadlines. Beta team parents described the importance of the online grading system in keeping them up-to-date on their child's progress. The parents could log-in to view their child's most recent grades, and contact the teachers if they had any questions or concerns. Gamma team parents cited personal phone calls from teachers as the most effective strategy the team teachers used to keep them involved. With the absence of reliable technology at the school and a lack of Internet availability in many homes, teachers utilized phone calls to parents as the primary means of communication. Regardless of the form or medium, parents in this research study appreciated personal contact from teachers when it was required.

The parental participants in this research and in the Barge and Loges (2003) research characterized parental involvement similarly. Both parental groups placed an emphasis on monitoring student progress, both academically and behaviorally. The

parents in these studies had similar mechanisms through which monitoring could take place, such as viewing report cards, reviewing assignment books, and asking the student directly about their progress. The parents in this research have the added ability to check and monitor student grades by utilizing technology, such as email and online grading websites. However, the parental participants in this study did not emphasize cultivating personal relationships with teachers, utilizing extra-curricular school programs, or developing community support programs as did the parents in the Barge and Loges (2003) study. One possible explanation for this difference may be variances in the overall purpose of the research projects. The purpose of the Barge and Loges (2003) study was to uncover varying perceptions of parental involvement between teachers, parents, and students. This current study focused on the strategies middle school teams utilize to involve parents, rather than perceptions of parental involvement.

Theoretical Framework Revisited

The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model of Parental Involvement (1997, 2005) described the process of parental involvement and its influence on student outcomes, levels one and two of which are illustrated in Figure 3 below.

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┌──────────┐        ┌──────────┐
│  School  │        │Home-based│
│  Based   │        │ Behaviors│
│ Behaviors│        │          │
└──────────┘        └──────────┘
        \              /
         \            /
         defined as
              │
        ┌──────────────┐
        │   Parents'   │          LEVEL 2
        │  Involvement │
        │    Forms     │
        └──────────────┘
              ↑
         contribute to
              │
    ┌─────────┼─────────────┐
    │         │             │
┌─────────┐ ┌──────────┐ ┌──────────┐
│Parents' │ │Parents'  │ │Parents'  │   LEVEL 1
│Motiva-  │ │Percep-   │ │Perceived │
│tional   │ │tions of  │ │Life      │
│Beliefs  │ │Invita-   │ │Context   │
│         │ │tions from│ │          │
│         │ │Others    │ │          │
└─────────┘ └──────────┘ └──────────┘
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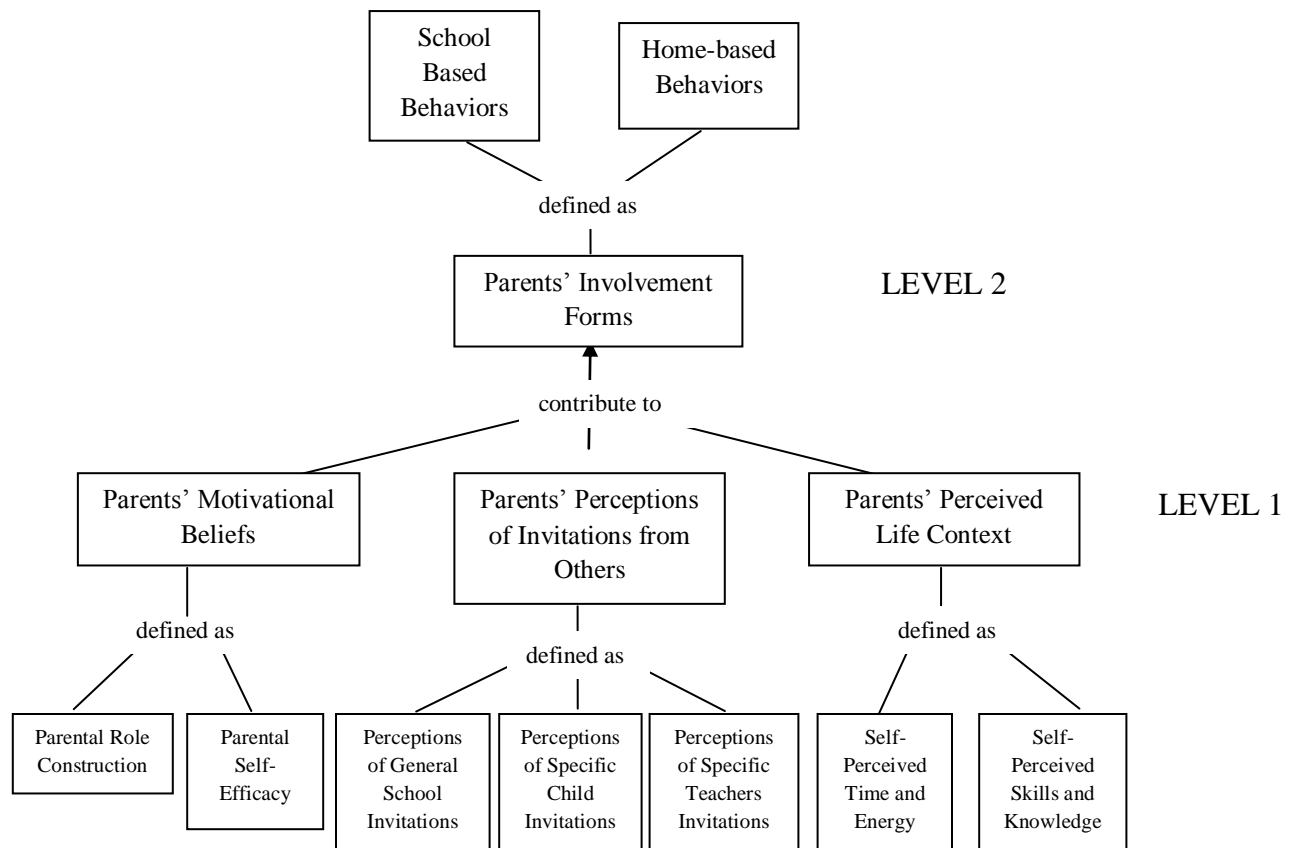
Figure 3. REVISED Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler Model of Parental Involvement

The theoretical model aimed to uncover the answers to three primary questions: 1) Why do parents become involved in their children's education? 2) What do they do when they get involved? 3) How does their involvement influence the student's outcomes? (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997, 2005). The revised model (2005) is constructed in five sequential levels. Level one of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model of Parental Involvement (2005) identified three psychological contributors to a parent's decision to become involved in their child's education: motivational beliefs, perceptions of invitations from others, and perceived life context. Motivational beliefs were influenced by their perception of their role as a parent and the perception of how much they believed

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they could impact the child's performance. The second contributor, perceptions of invitations from others, was affected by the parents' perceptions of invitations from their school, their child, and their teachers. The third contributing factor was the parent's perceived life context, which was influenced by their perceptions of time, energy, skills, and knowledge. The revised parental involvement model by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) outlined these three contributing factors that determined a parent's decision to become involved in their child's education, as encompassed within the first level of the framework.

Level two of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model of Parental Involvement (1995, 1997) described how, once the decision has been made to become an involved factor, the parent considered the form that the involvement might take, based upon time, energy, or perceptions of openness from child and teacher. Levels three through five described the means through which the parent was involved, the "fit" between the means of involvement delivered by the parent and the developmental needs of the child and the student outcomes influenced by the parental involvement strategies. However, levels three through five were not as applicable to this study, and therefore were not expounded upon in this discussion section. This theoretical framework described the process through which parental involvement occurs, which is integrally connected to the process through which interdisciplinary middle school teams involve parents.

The parental involvement strategies utilized by the middle school interdisciplinary teams in this research study addressed the three primary components of level one of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model of Parental Involvement: parents' motivational beliefs, parents' perceptions of invitations from others, and parents' perceived life

context. Table 11 outlines the specific strategies utilized by the interdisciplinary teams in this study in order to best address these three contributing factors toward parental involvement.

Table 11. *Interdisciplinary Team Parental Involvement Strategies Categorized by Level One of the Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler Model of Parental Involvement (1997, 2005)*

Level One Descriptor	Involvement Strategy Utilized By Interdisciplinary Team
Parents' Motivational Beliefs	Teams educate parents regarding adolescent-specific developmental characteristics and needs.
	Teams explicitly suggest and follow-up on at-home strategies for parents to implement.
Parents' Perceptions of Invitations from Others	Teams maintain an open and approachable attitude toward parents.
	Teams actively and continuously invite parents of struggling students to face-to-face parent conferences.
	Teams create plans of improvement requiring parent-student interaction at home.
Parents' Perceived Life Contexts	Teams understand the challenges unique to their community's socio-economic status.
	Teams attempt to serve as a resource to parents who lack the time, energy, skills, or knowledge to become involved by providing specific intervention strategies.

Middle School Teams Addressing Parents' Motivational Beliefs

In order to adequately address parental motivational beliefs, these interdisciplinary team teachers defined the role of the parent and attempted to build their parents' efficacy. Generally on a one-on-one and "as needed" basis, the middle school teams educated parents regarding adolescent-specific developmental characteristics, as

well as provided the parents with a picture of common adolescent challenges and issues related to physical, cognitive, and social development. In light of these characteristics, the teams attempted to further define the parental role for effective involvement by explicitly stating what strategies parents should be monitoring and implementing at home to aid in their child's educational process, and created a team-based plan to hold the students and the parents accountable. Deslandes and Bertrand (2005), in a study involving perceptions of parental roles in involvement, had similar results, which indicated that, "school interventions should first focus on individualized contacts that teachers make with parents" (p. 173). The teams painted a portrait of an adolescent-centered home learning environment, and attempted to convey this to the parents of their students through various means to motivate parents toward involvement.

The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model of Parental Involvement accurately represents the critical connection between middle school team teacher intentionality and middle school parental response. The findings in this study highlighted the importance of the middle school team intentionally ensuring that the parent has an accurate view of the challenges relating to educating an adolescent – essentially, who is their child? Additionally, the team intentionally worked to establish a clear definition of parental role in parental involvement – essentially, what is the parent expected to do to help? The theoretical framework cited outlines these two important factors contributing toward parental involvement, and accurately correlates to the middle school interdisciplinary teaming model. The findings in this research aligned well with the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model of Parental Involvement (2005), and served to confirm the factors contributing to parental involvement levels.

Middle School Teams Addressing Parents' Perceptions of Invitations of Others

Invitations for parental involvement must be intentionally developed by teachers conveying to parents that their participation is important, valued, and expected by the school (Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005). The interdisciplinary teams in this study worked to increase the parents' perceptions of invitations for involvement from the school, the team, and the child. One critical theme throughout the study was the teams' openness toward parents. The team teachers contacted parents early in the year, and welcomed parents to communicate with them as well. Teachers actively and continuously invited parents of struggling students to face-to-face parent conferences. At these conferences, parent input was sought, and parents were invited to take part in the improvement process. The improvement plans often required parent-student interaction at home. Through these strategies, middle school interdisciplinary teams sought to increase parental perceptions of invitations for involvement.

Deslandes and Bertrand's research (2005) on parental involvement motivations highlighted the value of personal parent contact in creating open invitations for involvement. These instances of personalized contact created "trusting relationships that will be manifested subsequently by parental involvement activities at school and by other forms of parents' willingness to help" (p. 173). Personalized middle school team contact with parents is of equal value. Teams creating an inviting and welcoming foundation for parental involvement in middle school opens the door for increased parental involvement later in the school year. Parental involvement increases with invitations, which is directly correlated to student achievement (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey &

Sandler, 2005). Middle school teams are the mechanism through which invitations can be offered for the parents of adolescents.

The first level of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) framework centered upon the invitations for involvement from the school, teachers, and students. Although perceptions of invitations from the school and students were not examined in this study, the perceptions of invitations from teachers were examined within the context of middle school interdisciplinary teaming. Placing a focus on middle school teaming was a more appropriate approach to studying parental involvement at the middle school because the primary unit for communication was the middle school team. A middle school specific version of the theoretical framework should include a greater emphasis on the impact of interdisciplinary teaming on parental perceptions of invitations for involvement.

Middle School Teams Addressing Parents' Perceived Life Contexts

The interdisciplinary team teachers in this study also recognized the impact of their team parents' perceived life context, which is composed of the time, energy, skills, and knowledge their parents perceived that they possessed. A clear tie existed between socio-economic status and parental involvement; however, the parental involvement increased when schools provided avenues through which families could receive needed resources and support systems (Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005). The middle school teams in this study understood the unique challenges related to the socio-economic status of their community, and were prepared to address concerns by filling those educational voids as needed. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) stated that schools should "target and create involvement opportunities that are responsive to differences in parental

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knowledge, skills, time, and energy" (p. 114). At the middle school level, the mechanism through which this is accomplished is the middle school team.

The middle school teams attempted to serve as a resource to parents who lacked the time, energy, skills, or knowledge to become involved by providing specific intervention strategies. Essentially, the teams viewed themselves as teachers-of-parents, as well as teachers-of-students. This important characteristic of these teams served as an excellent tie to the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model of Parental Involvement cited. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 2005) stated, "parents' perceptions of their personal skills appear to shape their thinking about the kinds of involvement activities that may be possible for them to undertake with a reasonable likelihood of achieving success" (p. 114). Parental perceptions of the probability of success motivates their decision to become involved. Therefore, the potential impact of an effective middle school team on the perceptions of life context can yield powerful results in the lives of their students.

Because of the high level of parental interest in grades at Alpha Middle School, the affluent suburban school, team A focused on teaching parents to keep and respect educational boundaries while holding their students more individually responsible for results. Team Alpha recognized the need for some parents to "back off" of the supervision of their child's grades on the grading website, and focus rather on daily assignments and progress. Team B at Beta Middle School, the rural school, which experienced mixed levels of involvement and a higher poverty rate, focused on teaching at-home strategies for parents to implement. This team consistently reinforced with their parents the simple strategy of parental oversight of assignment completion, as well as important dates. With a high level of poverty present at Gamma Middle School, team C

focused on teaching the parents the importance of involvement as well appropriate at-home strategies to help support their students.   Team C found themselves consistently convincing parents that they do play an important and essential role in their child's success. In each demographic setting, middle school teams considered the life contexts of their own parent group when deciding on strategies to encourage parental involvement.

This study contributed significantly to the body of current research on parental involvement strategies in middle schools. Current research already recognizes the important role that parents play in their child's education, and even clearly ties parental involvement to student achievement (Carr & Wilson, 1997; Griffith, 1996; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005; Thorkildsen & Stein, 1998). Additionally, current research outlines the unique challenges of an adolescent's developmental needs, as well as middle school best practices in order to address these needs. The findings of this study serve as a bridge between what is known about adolescent development, best middle school interdisciplinary teaming models, and the essential nature of parental involvement in education.

The findings of this study inform and confirm the three contributing factors toward parental involvement, as described by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997, 2005). The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model of Parental Involvement (1997, 2005) is teacher and school-centered, focusing on broad school attempts or specific teacher's efforts to involve parents by considering parental motivational factors, parent perceptions of invitations from others, and parents' life contexts. However, the findings of this study extend beyond the model, and break new ground by specifically identifying strategies employed by effective middle school teams in order to involve parents. A middle school

specific (i.e. interdisciplinary middle school team) model should be developed in order to address the unique contributions of interdisciplinary teams toward parental involvement.

Interpretations of Findings

The researcher encountered several "a-ha" moments throughout the data collection and analysis processes, which truly has provided some thought-provoking moments. First and foremost, the lack of parental interest in the research study was more than noticeable. All of the parental participants included in this study were gracious, friendly, honest, and helpful. The parental focus groups and interviews were full of laughter, food, and open dialogue. However, the difficulty in getting parents to become official participants in the research study was frustrating and staggering. Without a doubt, the questionnaires were the most successful means through which parental participants were engaged. Creative means of parental participant recruitment had to be utilized. Through persistent advertising throughout the data collection period and using creative incentives, such as offering gift cards, meals, and even cash prizes, the researcher was able to recruit parents for focus groups and one-on-one interviews. Even Alpha Middle School, located in a community nearly notorious for an overflow of parental involvement, was a surprisingly difficult site from which to recruit focus group participants. Out of a total of nine parent focus groups conducted across three schools, four of the focus groups had zero parents show up to participate. This phenomenon may be due to an overall lack of interest in the researcher's study, parents placing low priority on the offer, and parental time and schedule restraints. The suburban community had

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families that had overbooked schedules already, and therefore, participation in a research study was not high on the list of priorities.

Secondly, there was an extraordinary lack of knowledge among parents regarding the overall purpose of the middle school concept. Parents saw interdisciplinary teaming as a means to manage a large population of students, rather than serving a developmental need or providing opportunities for cross-curricular ties in lesson planning. The middle school concept has specific benefits to students and teachers, and it would behoove parents to be knowledgeable in these areas. Overall, middle school interdisciplinary teams are tied to increased parental involvement, improved work climate, increased job satisfaction, and increased student belongingness (Erb, 1997; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 1999; Quine & Restine, 1995; Wallace, 1997; Warren & Payne, 2001). Middle school teams can take the lead in educating parents about the purpose of middle school teaming.

The third realization was the connection between poverty and middle school team parental involvement strategies, specifically the impact that technology has on levels of involvement. "There is no email ever," a Gamma team parent expressed in frustration. "They have got to get email going….lots of folks got it and it's a good way to keep people up [to date]……I got it at work and could email if I need to," another Gamma team parent exclaimed. If Gamma Middle Schools had the same technological framework within their school system and the community that Alpha Middle School had, the face of parental involvement would be drastically altered. In an age when technology impacts every facet of our lives, schools must keep pace.

Lastly, middle school teachers and parents struggled with finding a balance between student responsibility/independence versus forced accountability. Parents noted their own struggle to know "where the line is," as one parent from Alpha Middle School described. The teachers in this study longed for parents to hold their children responsible daily for assignments at home. "The parent has to take the initiative," one teacher stated. However, the parents desire to teach responsibility to their children. "I want them to have their independence," an Alpha team parent stated, which is a common statement from a middle school parent. "We're trying to force our kids to make their own way with the teachers," one parent added. "Well, you can't be there when they graduate from college....they need to start growing up," stated an Alpha team parent. As a result of these attitudes, many parents remained hands-off until the child proved he/she could not handle the responsibility on his/her own, which frustrated teachers and caused students to fall behind.

Limitations

Although the researcher made every attempt to conduct a scholarly study with notable contributions to the current body of literature, there were limitations to the research. First, this qualitative study only considered the experiences, input, and perceptions of the parents consenting to participate in the study. Therefore, as with all qualitative research, the data from this study relating to parents cannot be generalized to the other parents from the middle school team. Additionally, as cited earlier, the parental participation rates were extremely low at Beta Middle School and Gamma Middle School. Secondly, only one school from each geographic community (one suburban, one

rural, and one urban) was selected for this study. Therefore, the data from any one of the

locations is simply a snapshot of that location during that period of time. Another

limitation is the exclusive nature of case study research. The researcher sought to collect

the thoughts, experiences, beliefs, and behaviors of the teachers and parents on a single

interdisciplinary team within one middle school in one context. In some cases, there

were as many as 11 additional interdisciplinary teams within the middle school, and the

thoughts, experiences, beliefs, and behaviors of those teachers and parents were not

included in this study. Lastly, the case-selection process, although intentionally and

carefully conducted using current research and experts in the field of middle school,

leaves interdisciplinary team effectiveness open to interpretation.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

In the process of examining the current body of literature on middle school

interdisciplinary teaming and parental involvement, it was determined that no significant

body of literature existed. Therefore, this research study impacts the world of middle

school pedagogy by facilitating the creation of a description of effective middle school

interdisciplinary team parent involvement strategies.   Specifically, school administrators,

middle school teams, and middle school parents, and teacher preparation programs stand

to benefit from the results of this study.

Implications for Middle School Interdisciplinary Teams

Teachers are, many times, frustrated with the lack of involvement of many of the

parents of their students. Middle school teachers, although often organized into unique

team structures, do not receive specific training regarding strategies that effectively involve parents. The data resulting from this study may inform middle school teachers regarding effective parental involvement strategies, and may springboard interdisciplinary team teachers toward implementation of proven and effective parental involvement strategies (see Table 12). If middle school interdisciplinary teams implement the strategies from this study, middle school students and their parents will benefit from the increased effectiveness of parental involvement strategies utilized by the team teachers. The following table outlines the effective strategies utilized by the middle school interdisciplinary teams in this research study.

Table 12. *Middle School Interdisciplinary Team Strategies for Effective Involvement*

Effective Middle School Teams:	Therefore they:
Believe that parental involvement is essential to student success.	Are persistent in making parental contact, through whatever means are most common, prevalent, and useful within their community.
	Conduct face-to-face parent conferences regularly.
	Require struggling students to utilize various forms of daily school-home communication.
Are open and approachable.	Establish a clear open door policy.
	Are welcoming and friendly with their words and actions.
Serve as a resource to the parents of adolescents.	Exhibit a clear understanding of the unique nature of adolescent development through suggestions of strategies for parents to implement at home.
	Clarify the role of the parent in facilitating student success.
Approach problem-solving opportunities as a team.	Meet regularly as a team during a designated time.
	Develop team approaches to problem-solving student issues.
	Create team procedures, policies, and expectations and communicate them to students and parents.
	Conduct all conferences as a team.

The overlapping and ongoing nature of the specific parental involvement

strategies utilized by the interdisciplinary teams in this study can be best represented in

the cyclical model below. The strategies did not occur in isolation or on a specific team

or school timeline. The middle school teams adopted and exhibited the four overall

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characteristics or beliefs outlined in the central area of the model. The parental

involvement strategies, located in the surrounding area of the model, emerged as

evidence of their dedication to these four characteristics. As a result, four primary

thematic categories were discovered in this research study, and multiple strategies were

listed within each area. The creation of this middle school specific parental involvement

model (see figure 4) significantly impacts the current parental involvement practices of

middle school interdisciplinary teams.

What do effective middle school teams do to involve parents?

- Are persistent in making contact.
- Conduct regular face-to-face conferences.
- Require strugglers to maintain school-home parental contact.

Believe that involvement is essential.

Are open and approachable.

Effective middle school teams….

Serve as a resource.

Approach problem-solving opportunities as a team.

- Establish a clear open door policy.
- Are welcoming and friendly with their words and actions.

- Exhibit a clear understanding of adolescent development and effective at-home strategies.
- Clarify the role of the parent in facilitating student success.

- Meet regularly as a team.
- Develop team approaches to problem-solving issues.
- Create team procedures, polices, and expectations and communicate them to students and parents.
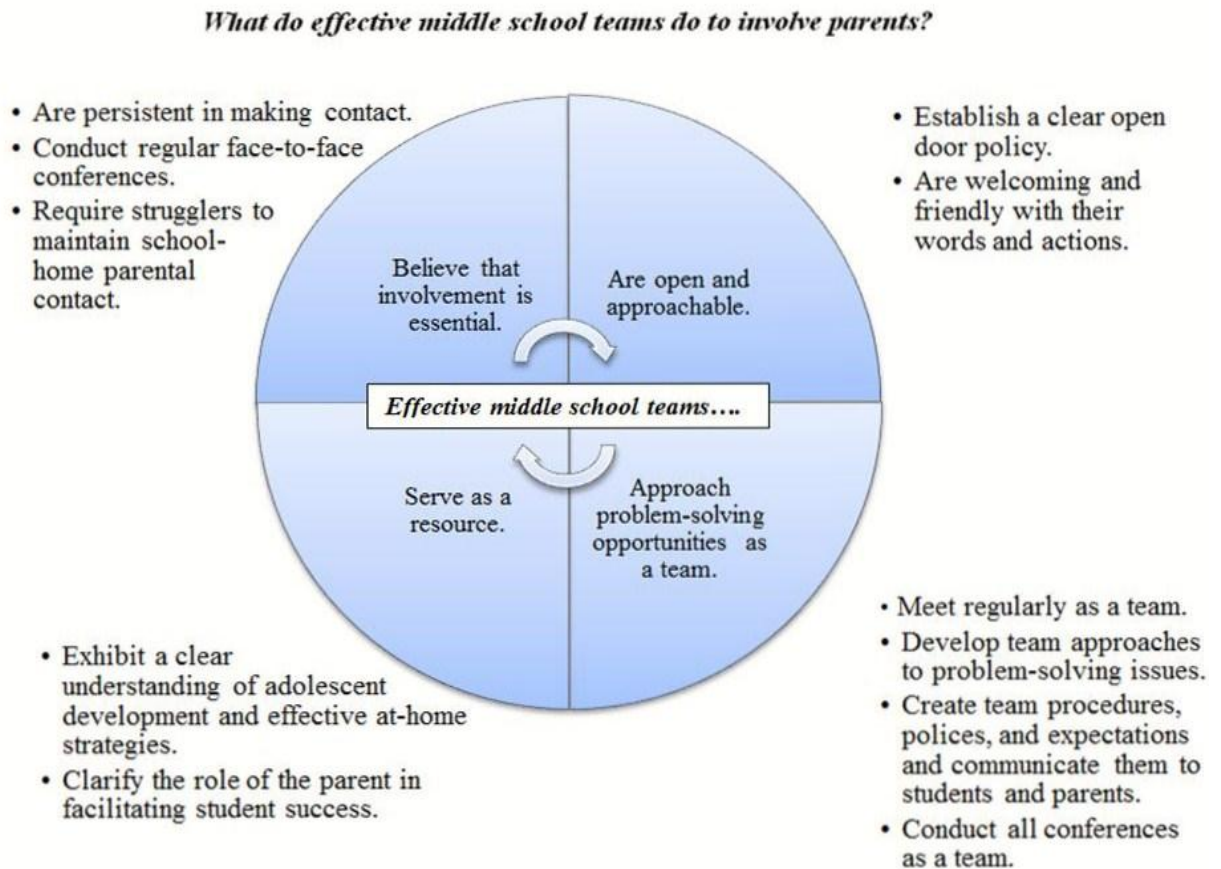- Conduct all conferences as a team.

Figure 4. Model for Middle School Interdisciplinary Team Parental Involvement Strategies

Implications for Parents

The parents of middle school students in this study consistently voiced a struggle between holding the student accountable and teaching them personal responsibility. "I think it's time for her to grow up, so I am trying to back off," one Beta Middle School parent stated. Another asked, "Where is the line?" "I don't want to be one of those 'helicopter parents,'" one Alpha Middle School parent claimed. The findings of this study may help guide parents in discovering answers to their questions regarding appropriate boundaries, involvement, and accountability. Many parents from this study knew that it was important for them to be involved, recognized their child's need, but did not know how to do so appropriately. Middle school teams, when equipped with this information, can take steps to train parents on appropriate interventions and strategies to support their children's educational progress.

Implications for Teacher Preparation Programs

Additionally, teacher preparation programs may benefit from using this data to create training modules regarding middle school parental involvement. "I didn't learn this in college," one teacher stated about strategies to involve parents. "It's on the job training," she continued. The teachers across all three schools consistently referred to experience and time as the best teacher of parental involvement strategies. Teacher preparation programs can address these issues directly before the teacher even enters the classroom by implementing specific learning goals for their pre-service candidates related to parental involvement strategies. Specifically, teacher preparation programs should gear middle school specific strategies toward their candidates who are most likely to

begin their careers in the middle school classroom. Learning to involve parents does not have to be "on the job training." Teacher preparation programs can work proactively to teach these strategies.

Implications for School Administrators

The results of this research study will aid middle school administrators in the process of creating professional development opportunities for middle school interdisciplinary team teachers to work together to involve parents in the educational process. Additionally, the data may serve as a critical component of middle school improvement initiatives, and may serve as the foundation for newly formed middle schools in creating a climate of excellence through teaming opportunities and expectations.

In order to maximize the impact of this study on the middle school interdisciplinary team structure and parental involvement, middle school teachers and leaders should consider the following initiatives:

- Middle school teachers and leaders should make every effort to educate their parents regarding the middle concept and philosophy, and the overall purposes of the middle school structure;

- Middle school teachers and leaders should evaluate the effectiveness and usage of technology in communicating with parents;

- Middle school teachers should reflect on the potential benefits of increasing the role of parental involvement at the middle school level;

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- Middle school teachers and leaders should reflect on the current operational state of their middle school interdisciplinary teams;

- Middle school teachers should reflect on the current state of implementation of the parental involvement strategies in their interdisciplinary teams;

- Middle school administrators should ensure that their teachers are knowledgeable about adolescent-specific cognitive, social, and emotional developmental characteristics and the challenges associated with each;

- Middle school administrators should train their current middle school teams with the specific strategies utilized by effective middle school teams to involve parents;

- Middle school leaders should create appropriate middle school teaming training opportunities for newly formed or dysfunctional middle school teams;

- The Making Middle Grades Work Middle School Improvement Initiative should reevaluate the interdisciplinary teaming component of the program to ensure that significant emphasis is placed on parental involvement;

- The Making Middle Grades Work Middle School Improvement Initiative should evaluate the parental involvement component of the program by ensuring that the middle school interdisciplinary team is the primary means through which parents are involved.

Overall Significance

The overall significance of this study is the discovery of a body of strategies utilized by effective middle school interdisciplinary teams in order to involve parents in

the educational process. Through the careful identification and description of these strategies, the researcher outlined strategies utilized by effective middle school teams in order to involve the parents in their community. Many recommendations for implementation were made to middle school teachers and leaders in order to best utilize these parental involvement strategies within the middle school interdisciplinary team organizational structure.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research in the area of middle school teaming and parental involvement strategies should examine the connection between the implementation of these strategies and overall parental perceptions of middle school team effectiveness. Additionally, the voices of the students on the middle school teams need to be examined to determine the impact of these parental involvement strategies on student perceptions of team effectiveness. Lastly, a quantitative study of multiple middle school teams could reveal the prevalence of the utilization of these strategies among a large cross-section of middle schools.

The conclusion of this study still breeds questions for the researcher. While it is clear that the teams of middle school teachers in this study value parental involvement and seek out opportunities to engage parents, the following questions still exist:

- How does school climate impact middle school teaming and parental involvement?

- What is the impact of poverty on parental involvement in middle school?

- How is the impact of a middle school's geographical location reflected in the Making Middle Grades Work model for middle school improvement?

- What is the connection between the implementation of middle school parental involvement strategies and overall parental satisfaction?

- What are the perceptions of the students on these middle school teams regarding their team teachers and parental involvement?

Summary

There is tremendous potential for middle school improvement when the unit of focus is the interdisciplinary team. Wallace (2007) described the middle school team as the heart of the middle school concept; improvement in parental involvement initiatives at this level must focus on the implementation of team-related strategies. Research has clearly tied positive parental involvement in school to increased levels of academic achievement and overall student competence (Carr & Wilson, 1997; Griffith, 1996; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005; Thorkildsen & Stein, 1998). This study uncovered the middle school specific strategies that interdisciplinary teams utilized to in order to involve the parents of their students. Middle school teams, acting as a unit and implementing these specific strategies, have the potential to impact students, parents, and families in lasting and substantial positive ways.

Parents who are motivated to be involved, feel invited to be involved, and are empowered with specific strategies through which they can become involved are a powerful force in the life of an adolescent. Adolescence is a notoriously difficult developmental time, and the adolescent-parent relationship is a regular source of stress in

many families (Richardson, 2004). During a developmental time in which parents typically retreat, middle school teams have the potential to turn this tide by making lasting impressions on middle school students and their parents. Middle school interdisciplinary teams of teachers have available to them a unique "table of opportunities" (Rottier, 2000, p. 214), with great potential to engage students and parents with specific involvement strategies. However, many middle school interdisciplinary teams are simply settling for "hors d'oeuvres" (Rottier, 2000, p.214) – only sampling what can be done to engage parents as partners in their child's education.

One of the primary purposes of middle school interdisciplinary teams is to communicate and engage parents while developing and implementing curriculum based on an adolescent's developmental needs (Conley, Fauske & Pounder, 2004). When middle school teams simply go through the motions of their structure, not fully realizing their potential, they can become stagnant. Parents become an untapped resource, and students continue down old educational paths. However, through the implementation of these middle school specific parental involvement strategies, middle school teams will not have to settle for "hors d'oeuvres" (Rottier, 2000, p. 214). Middle school teams, their parents, and students will feast on lasting academic progress and quality relationships upon which many years of success can be built.

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APPENDIX A

DISTRICT RECRUITMENT LETTER

February 9, 2010

Dear _____,

I am writing to request provisional approval to conduct research within your school district in the fall of 2010 at _____. Attached you will find the documents to be submitted along with your provisional approval to the UAB Institutional Review Board (IRB). Your written approval on your district's letterhead is necessary in order to conduct this dissertation research. Documents enclosed with this letter include (a) *Teacher and Parent Informed Consent*, (b) cover letter to parents, (c) cover letter to teachers, (d) copies of all surveys and interview protocols, and (e) pending *Application of Investigations Involving the Use of Human Subjects*. Upon final approval by UAB's Institutional Review Board, I will submit documentation to your office to obtain your final approval to conduct research within your district.

Allow me to briefly describe the research study - I am investigating the nature of parent-teacher relationships as it pertains to middle school interdisciplinary teams of teachers. I would like to begin collecting data on August 1, 2010, and would complete the data collection process by the October 31, 2010. Data collection methods and means will include two 45-minute interviews with interdisciplinary teams of teachers, team teacher surveys and journaling, parent questionnaires, and collecting copies of team documents (parent letters, class syllabus, team teacher emails, and other similar team teacher documents). Survey data collection and team teacher interviews will take place during non-academic instructional time. All confidential or otherwise sensitive data will be reported in such a way that no reader will be able to identify individual participants, schools, or school districts. No students or student information will be included in this research project. _____ is one of four middle schools across three school districts to which I am seeking approval to conduct research. All participation is voluntary, and a $25 gift card will be given to each teacher as a small token of appreciation for their time invested in this research.

I have enclosed a self-addressed stamped envelope for your response to my request to conduct research at _____ in the fall of 2010. Upon your district's approval, I will contact _____, principal at _____, for further assistance.

Thank you for your assistance,

Chris Robbins
205.566.8063 (cell)
crobbins@hoover.k12.al.us

APPENDIX B

PRINCIPAL RECRUITMENT LETTER

February 9, 2010

Dear _____,

I am writing to request provisional approval to conduct research within _____ in the fall of 2010. I have already received approval from_____ at your Central Office, but wanted to provide you with the opportunity to respond to this request and learn more about the research project. Attached you will find the documents to be submitted along with your provisional approval to the UAB Institutional Review Board (IRB). Your written approval on your school's letterhead is necessary in order to conduct this dissertation research. Documents enclosed with this letter include (a) *Teacher and Parent Informed Consent*, (b) cover letter to parents, (c) cover letter to teachers, (d) copies of all surveys and interview protocols, and (e) pending *Application of Investigations Involving the Use of Human Subjects*. Upon final approval by UAB's Institutional Review Board, I will submit documentation to your office to obtain your final approval to conduct research within your school.

Allow me to briefly describe the research study - I am investigating the nature of parent-teacher relationships as it pertains to middle school interdisciplinary teams of teachers. I would like to begin collecting data on August 1, 2010, and would complete the data collection process by the October 31, 2010. Data collection methods and means will include two 45-minute interviews with interdisciplinary teams of teachers, team teacher surveys, teacher journals, parent questionnaires, and collecting copies of team documents (parent letters, class syllabus, team teacher emails, and other similar team teacher documents). Survey data collection and team teacher interviews will take place during non-academic instructional time. All confidential or otherwise sensitive data will be reported in such a way that no reader will be able to identify individual participants, schools, or school districts. No students or student information will be included in this research project. _____ is one of four middle schools across three school districts to which I am seeking approval to conduct research. All participation is voluntary, and a $25 gift card will be given to each teacher as a small token of appreciation for their time invested in this research.

I have enclosed a self-addressed stamped envelope for your response to my request to conduct research at _____ in the fall of 2010. Upon your approval, I will contact you with further information regarding the research project.

Thank you for your assistance,

Chris Robbins
205.566.8063 (cell)
crobbins@hoover.k12.al.us

APPENDIX C

TEACHER RECRUITMENT LETTER

April 12, 2010

Dear Teacher,

Middle school teachers are uniquely positioned on interdisciplinary teams to make a difference in the lives of adolescents. But, what are the most effective means utilized by middle school teams to engage parents?

I am writing to invite you to participate in a qualitative research study that I am conducting as a part of my doctoral research study at The University of Alabama at Birmingham. Through a coordinated effort between myself, district staff, and school principals, three interdisciplinary teams of middle school teachers have been selected at three different middle school sites to serve as participants in this study. Your middle school teaching team has been selected to serve as participants; however, your participation is completely voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw from this study at any time. I will not use your name, your school's name, or your district's name at any point in the reporting process of this study. The purpose of this research study is to investigate the nature of parent-teacher relationships as it pertains to middle school interdisciplinary teams teaching. The data from this research will provide middle school interdisciplinary teams of teachers with a more complete and clear picture of what effective parental engagement looks like at the middle school level. I will begin collecting data on August 1, 2010, and will complete the data collection process by the October 31, 2010. Three to five team interviews with interdisciplinary teams of teachers will take place (each lasting between 15 and 45 minutes), along with observations of team meetings, parent questionnaires, parent focus groups, and the collection of copies of team documents (parent letters, class syllabus, team teacher emails, and other similar team teacher documents). No students or student information will be included in this research project.

During the interview process, I will ask you about your experiences associated with working with parents as a team of interdisciplinary middle school teachers. There are not right or wrong answers to our interview questions and discussions. I am simply trying to learn as much as I can about your experiences in attempting to involve the parents of your students on your team. I will provide you with a copy of the interview questions in advance, and I will be asking clarifying questions during the interview so that you can provide additional details. If you decide to participate or if you have questions, please feel free to contact me by phone or email. At the conclusion of the research project, a $25 gift card will be given to each teacher as a small token of appreciation for their time invested in this research.

Thank you for your assistance,

Chris Robbins
205.566.8063 (cell)

APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT FOR TEACHER DATA COLLECTION

Informed Consent for Teachers

Title of Research: EXPLORING EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES UTILIZED BY MIDDLE
SCHOOL INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAMS TO INVOLVE PARENTS

Protocol Number: X100506015

Investigator: Christopher C. Robbins

Sponsor: University of Alabama at Birmingham Department of Educational Leadership

Explanation of procedures:

The purpose of this research project is to explore the effective parental involvement strategies
utilized by middle school interdisciplinary teams. You will be asked to provide data to the
research in several different formats over the course of the first nine weeks of school. First, the
researcher will interview your interdisciplinary team several times (between three and five total
times) over this period of time. These interviews will last from as little as 15 minutes to 45
minutes. Second, the researcher will attend several interdisciplinary team meetings as an
observer only. These interviews and meetings will be audio-taped. Third, the researcher will
collect many team documents throughout this period of time, such as team-parent emails, parent
letters, parent night documents, class syllabi, or similar type documents. Fourth, the researcher
will periodically email you requesting your response to a quick journaling prompt relating to
involving parents. The researcher will also collect data from your team's parents by conducting
a few parent focus groups and a sending out a written questionnaire. Your team is the only team
at your school that will be participating in this study, and there are two other teams, each at
different schools from this area, that are also participating.

Risks and Discomforts:

The risks and discomforts from participating in this research are no greater than risk or
discomforts in any other daily living activity.

Benefits:

You will not receive any benefits to from participating in this study. However, the information
gained may help to improve the nature of parental involvement at your school.

Alternatives:

The alternative to participating in this research project is not to participate.

Page 1 of 3
Version Date: 5/24/10

UAB – IRB
Consent Form Approval __5/25/10__ Participant's Initials _____
Expiration Date _____5/25/11_____

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Confidentiality:

Information obtained about you for this study will be kept private to the extent allowed by law. However, research information that identifies you may be shared with the UAB Institutional Review Board (IRB) and others who are responsible for ensuring compliance with laws and regulations related to research, including people on behalf of Christopher C. Robbins and the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP). Additionally, the results of this study may be published in scientific journals. All electronic data and audio files will be stored will be stored on computers within password protected and encrypted computer files. The researcher will have sole access to the passwords. Audio files will be destroyed within 3 years after the interview has taken place. All hard copies of transcripts from interviews will be stored in a locked metal file cabinet throughout the study.

Refusal or Withdrawal from the Study without Penalty:

Your taking part in this study is your choice. There will be no penalty if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide not to be in the study, you will not lose any benefits you are otherwise owed. You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time. Your choice to leave the study will not affect your relationship with your school. Your participation in this study may be ended without your consent if the researcher determines it is in your best interests.

Cost of Participating in Research:

There is no cost to participating in this study.

Payment for Participation in Research:

As a token of appreciation at the end of the study, you will be given one $25 Visa gift card

Questions:

If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about the research, please contact Christopher C. Robbins. He will be glad to answer any of your questions. Mr. Robbins's phone number is 205- 439-2214. Mr. Robbins may also be reached after hours at 205-566-8063.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or concerns or complaints about the research, you may contact Ms. Sheila Moore. Ms. Moore is the Director of the Office of the Institutional Review Board for Human Use (OIRB). Ms. Moore may be reached at (205) 934-3789 or 1-800-822-8816. If calling the toll-free number, press the option for "all other calls" or for an operator/attendant and ask for extension 4-3789. Regular hours for the Office of the IRB are 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. CT, Monday through Friday. You may also call this number in the event the research staff cannot be reached or you wish to talk to someone else.

Legal Rights:

You are not waiving any of your legal rights by signing this form.

Signature for Research Consent

Your signature below indicates that you agree to participate in the study titled <u>Exploring Effective Strategies Utilized by Middle School Interdisciplinary Teams</u>. You will receive a copy of this signed document.

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

_____   _____
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent   Date

APPENDIX E

PARENT FOCUS GROUP INVITATION LETTER

April 12, 2010

Dear Parent,

What are the most effective things middle school teams can do to get parents like you involved in their child's education?

I am writing to invite you to participate in a research study that I am conducting as a part of my doctoral research study at The University of Alabama at Birmingham. Your child's middle school teaching team has been selected to serve as participants in this study; however, your participation as a parent is completely voluntary. I will not use your name, your student's name, your school's name, or your teachers' names, or your district's name at any point in the reporting process of this study. No student data or information is included in this study.

The results of this research will provide middle school teams of teachers with a more complete and clear picture of what effective parental involvement looks like. I will begin collecting data from the team teachers on August 1, 2010, and will complete the data collection process by the October 31, 2010. In order to gain information from parents, I will be conducting two or three 45-minute parent focus groups throughout the study, the dates and times of which will be announced at least two weeks prior. Additionally, I will issue one parent written questionnaire via regular mail during the study. Again, no personally identifiable information will be included in this research project.

During the focus group time and in the written questionnaire, I will ask you about your experiences in working with middle school teachers. There are not right or wrong answers to our interview questions and discussions. I am simply trying to learn as much as I can about how middle school teams of teachers can work to involve parents in their student's education. I will provide you with a copy of the interview questions at the beginning of the focus group, and I will be asking clarifying questions during the focus group so that you can provide me with additional details. If you decide to participate, please read the enclosed informed consent information, and return the signature page in the self-addressed stamped envelope provided. If you have questions, please feel free to contact me by phone or email.

Thank you for your assistance,

Christopher C. Robbins
205.439.2214 (office)
205.566.8063 (cell)
crobbins@hoover.k12.al.us

APPENDIX F

INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARENT FOCUS GROUPS

Informed Consent for Parents

Title of Research: EXPLORING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT STRATEGIES UTILIZED BY MIDDLE SCHOOL INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAMS

Protocol Number: X100506015

Investigator: Christopher C. Robbins

Sponsor: University of Alabama at Birmingham Department of Educational Leadership

Explanation of procedures:

The purpose of this research project is to explore the effective parental involvement strategies utilized by middle school interdisciplinary teams. The researcher will collect data from the parents on your child's team by conducting two parent focus groups and a sending out a written questionnaire. The focus groups will last approximately 45 minutes each, and will be audio recorded. Written questionnaires will be mailed to all parents of students on this team. The questionnaire will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. The group of parents on your child's team is the only group of parents at your child's school that will be participating in this study. There are two other teams, each at different schools from this area, that are also participating.

Risks and Discomforts:

The risks and discomforts from participating in this research are no greater than risk or discomforts in any other daily living activity.

Benefits:

You will not receive any benefits to from participating in this study. However, the information gained may help to improve the nature of parental involvement at your child's school.

Alternatives:

The alternative to participating in this research project is not to participate.

Confidentiality:

Information obtained about you for this study will be kept private to the extent allowed by law. However, research information that identifies you may be shared with the UAB Institutional Review Board (IRB) and others who are responsible for ensuring compliance with laws and regulations related to research, including people on behalf of Christopher C. Robbins and the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP). Additionally, the results of this study may be published in scientific journals. All electronic data and audio files will be stored will be stored

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Version Date: 9/21/10

UAB – IRB
Consent Form Approval 9-23-10
Expiration Date 5-25-11

Participant's Initials _____

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on computers within password protected and encrypted computer files. Audio files will be destroyed within 3 years after the interview has taken place. The researcher will have sole access to the passwords. All hard copies of transcripts from interviews will be stored in a locked metal file cabinet throughout the study.

Refusal or Withdrawal from the Study without Penalty:

Your taking part in this study is your choice. There will be no penalty if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide not to be in the study, you will not lose any benefits you are otherwise owed. You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time. Your choice to leave the study will not affect your relationship with your child's school. Your participation in this study may be ended without your consent if the researcher determines it is in your best interests.

Cost of Participating in Research:

There is no cost to participating in this study.

Payment for Participation in Research:

You will not be paid for participating in this study. Participants will have the opportunity to win door prizes at the conclusion of each parental focus group.

Questions:

If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about the research, please contact Christopher C. Robbins. He will be glad to answer any of your questions. Mr. Robbins's phone number is 205-439-2214. Mr. Robbins may also be reached after hours by calling him at 205-566-8063.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or concerns or complaints about the research, you may contact Ms. Sheila Moore. Ms. Moore is the Director of the Office of the Institutional Review Board for Human Use (OIRB). Ms. Moore may be reached at (205) 934-3789 or 1-800-822-8816. If calling the toll-free number, press the option for "all other calls" or for an operator/attendant and ask for extension 4-3789. Regular hours for the Office of the IRB are 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. CT, Monday through Friday. You may also call this number in the event the research staff cannot be reached or you wish to talk to someone else.

Legal Rights:

You are not waiving any of your legal rights by signing this form.

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Participant's Initials _____

Signature Page for Research Consent

Your signature below indicates that you agree to participate in the study titled <u>Exploring Effective Strategies Utilized by Middle School Interdisciplinary Teams</u>. You will receive a copy of this signed document.

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

_____   _____
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent   Date

APPENDIX G

PARENT LETTER AND QUESTIONNAIRE

October 1, 2010

Hello parents!

If you haven't already met me personally, my name is Chris Robbins and I am a doctoral student currently conducting a research study with your child's middle school team teachers. The purpose of the research project is to gain a better understanding of how middle school teams involve parents. I have already conducted a focus group for the parents of the students on your child's team, and will be conducting at least one more. If you attended the first focus group – thanks for coming! If you were not able to attend, I would love to have you at the next one! Stay tuned for a specific date and time.

It would be a great help for me to get additional perspectives on parental involvement from the parents/guardians of the children on this middle school team. If you agree to provide feedback to me regarding this topic, please complete the anonymous questionnaire below and return it to me in the postage-paid envelope. You are certainly welcome to answer some questions and skip others. You may answer any or all of the questions; it's up to you. If you would rather not participate at all, you may choose not to respond at all. Please do not include your name on this anonymous questionnaire, although feel free to write freely in the response area. <u>All responses will remain completely confidential; no teacher, student, parent, or school names will be used in reporting the results of this questionnaire</u>. No student data is used in this research study. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and is not reported to the school or the team teachers.

The questions used on this parent questionnaire are based in research that has already been done on parental involvement by other researchers. The goal of this questionnaire is to attempt to explore the parent's perceptions of how middle school teams involve parents. Your school (and many schools, hopefully), will benefit from the results of this questionnaire and this study.

Please read the enclosed "Informed Consent" procedures for more information on this questionnaire and the overall study. If you agree to participate in the questionnaire portion of this study, please return the questionnaire in the postage-paid envelope. If you would rather not participate, you don't need to do anything. Feel free to call or email me with any questions or concerns you may have.

Thanks!

Chris Robbins
205.439.2214 (office)
205.566.8063 (cell)
crobbins@hoover.k12.al.us

Parental Involvement Questionnaire

- School Name: _____

1. How does this middle school team of teachers show you how or encourage
   you to create a supportive learning environment at home?

2. What do you see as the <u>most effective</u> methods this team of teachers uses to
   communicate or involve you in your child's education?

3. What do you see as the <u>least effective</u> methods this team of teachers uses to
   communicate or involve you in your child's education?

4. How does this middle school team of teachers encourage your presence at
   school?

5. What ideas does this middle school team provide to you about how to help
   your child with homework and other projects?

6. Do you feel like you are a "member" of this team?

7. How does this middle school team involve you in team-related discussions or concerns?

8. In what ways do you feel like this middle school team could or does connect you with the community as a whole?

9. If you needed additional information or support for your family or child, do you feel like this middle school team may be a good resource for you?

   If yes, what types of resources might you ask to be connected to?

Thank you for your participation in this questionnaire!

- Questionnaire based on Epstein's Six Types of Parental Involvement (1995) and Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler Model of Parental Involvement (1995, 1997, 2005)

APPENDIX H

PARENT FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Parent Focus Group #1 Interview Protocols

The parent focus group will take place in four stages:

Stage 1 – Ensuring consent, informal discussions, eating, informal introductions

The parents will enter the classroom and be introduced to the researcher. The researcher will have some snacks, drinks, and food provided. After introductions, the researcher will make sure that the parent returned the informed consent signature page prior to the focus group. If the parent shows up to participate in the focus group but does not have an informed consent signature page on file, then the researcher will provide one immediately. The parent will have the opportunity to review the informed consent and provide permission if they choose. After reading the informed consent, the parent may leave if they do not wish to participate. The first 5-10 minutes of the focus group will be reserved for talking informally with each other, eating snacks, and providing parents with an opportunity to leave if they do not wish to participate. Copies of the focus group questions will be distributed. The researcher will give a "one-minute warning" to signify that the focus group is about to begin.

Stage 2 – Formal introductions, introduction to the study, statement of purpose, opening questions

At the beginning of the focus group, the researcher will introduce himself, thank them for choosing to participate, and describe the purpose of the study. The researcher will outline the format for the focus group as "informal" and "laid back," encouraging the participants to "say what's on their mind." The researcher will begin the audio recording at this point, reminding the participants that the purpose of the audio recording is to enable the researcher to transcribe the conversations for later analysis, and will be kept strictly guarded and confidential. If any objections exist, the researcher will not audio record the session, but will take anecdotal notes instead. The researcher will remind the participants that the discussions and responses within the focus group time are strictly confidential. The researcher will state the questions provided are a general outline of the discussion topics, and that each question may be followed up with a clarifying question if needed. The researcher will begin with general opening questions:

1. How many students do you currently have in middle school?
2. Is this your first child in middle school?
3. What is the biggest challenge of being the parent of a middle school student?

4. How would you describe yourself as a parent of a middle school student: "a rookie," "knowledgeable but still somewhat of a newbie," "slightly experienced," or "experienced veteran?"
5. Describe what it's like to be the parent/guardian of an adolescent in middle school.

Stage 3 – Questions relating to Epstein's Six Types of Parental Involvement (1995) and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model of Parental Involvement (1995, 1997, 2005)

6. Describe your experiences (in general) so far this year with this middle school team of teachers.
7. Describe how this team of teachers has helped you better understand what your child needs at home to be successful at school.
8. How would you describe the overall communication from this school?
9. How would you describe the overall communication from this middle school team of teachers?
10. Do you feel like you are "in the know" in terms of what is going on on your child's team?
11. Have you ever been asked to volunteer your time on this team or at a team-related program or event?
12. Do you feel welcomed by this middle school team? Why or why not?
13. What do you feel like you need from the middle school team in order to better help your child at home with assignments or projects?
14. Do you feel like the middle school team provides this for you?
15. Have you ever been asked to be on a school committee or to provide input into a team-related decision?
16. Would you like the opportunity to do so?
17. If your family was going through difficult times, would you consider approaching this team of teachers in order to be connected to resources and services in the community?

Stage 4 – Closing questions, conclusions

18. What are your initial impressions of this team of teachers?
19. What would you like to see your child accomplish at school this year?

The researcher will stop the audio recording at this time, and thank the participants for their time. Also, the participants will be reminded of the confidentiality policy of this study, and will be asked not to discuss the content of the focus group outside of the focus group. They will be encouraged to attend the next parent focus group, date and time to be determined.

Parent Focus Group #2 Interview Protocols

The parent focus group will take place in four stages:

Stage 1 – Ensuring consent, informal discussions, eating, informal introductions

The parents will enter the classroom and be introduced to the researcher. The researcher will have some snacks, drinks, and food provided. After introductions, the researcher will make sure that the parent returned the informed consent signature page prior to the focus group. If the parent shows up to participate in the focus group but does not have an informed consent signature page on file, then the researcher will provide one immediately. The parent will have the opportunity to review the informed consent and provide permission if they choose. After reading the informed consent, the parent may leave if they do not wish to participate. The first 5-10 minutes of the focus group will be reserved for talking informally with each other, eating snacks, and providing parents with an opportunity to leave if they do not wish to participate. Copies of the focus group questions will be distributed. The researcher will give a "one-minute warning" to signify that the focus group is about to begin.

Stage 2 – Formal introductions, introduction to the study, statement of purpose, opening questions

At the beginning of the focus group, the researcher will introduce himself, thank them for choosing to participate, and describe the purpose of the study. The researcher will outline the format for the focus group as "informal" and "laid back," encouraging the participants to "say what's on their mind." The researcher will begin the audio recording at this point, reminding the participants that the purpose of the audio recording is to enable the researcher to transcribe the conversations for later analysis, and will be kept strictly guarded and confidential. If any objections exist, the researcher will not audio record the session, but will take anecdotal notes instead. The researcher will remind the participants that the discussions and responses within the focus group time are strictly confidential. The researcher will state the questions provided are a general outline of the discussion topics, and that each question may be followed up with a clarifying question if needed. The researcher will begin with general opening questions:

1. What are some words you would use to describe middle school so far?
2. What is the biggest challenge for your child so far this year in middle school?
3. What do you feel like is the middle school team's role in supporting your middle schooler?

4. What do you feel like is the middle school team's role in supporting you as the parent or guardian?

<u>Stage 3 – Questions relating to Epstein's Six Types of Parental Involvement (1995) and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model of Parental Involvement (1995, 1997, 2005)</u>

5. How has the team helped you understand what your middle schooler needs at home to be successful at school?
6. Are the forms of communication the middle school team uses adequate? Do you feel like you know enough about what's happening on the team?
7. What types of volunteering opportunities have you had or will you have on the team at school?
8. Does the middle school team make you aware of what specific content each of the teachers is covering as they move from unit to unit?
9. Do you feel confident in helping your child at home with school assignments and projects?
10. What can the middle school team do to help you feel more confident in helping your child with school work?
11. Have you been provided with opportunities to provide feedback to teachers about team-related issues? If not, would you like to have the opportunity to do so?
12. How could this middle school team serve as a resource for you as a parent of a middle schooler?

<u>Stage 4 – Closing questions, conclusions</u>

13. What are your overall impressions of middle school teaming?
14. Do you think teaming is the most effective way to teach a middle school student?
15. How do you feel middle school teaming could be improved?

The researcher will stop the audio recording at this time, and thank the participants for their time. Also, the participants will be reminded of the confidentiality policy of this study, and will be asked not to discuss the content of the focus group outside of the focus group. Parents will be encouraged to contact the researcher at any time with any questions, comments, or concerns that they have or that come up.

APPENDIX I

TEAM TEACHER INTERVIEW PROTCOLS

<u>Teacher Team Focus Group Interview Protocols</u>

This teacher team focus group will take place in three to five sessions throughout the nine week research study:

<u>WEEK OF AUGUST 2, 2010 - OPENING SESSION – Ensuring consent, informal discussions, informal introductions, formal outline of the study, confidentiality reminders, general opening questions</u>

The researcher will welcome the teachers to the research study, and will provide a general overview of the purpose of the research, as described on the teacher recruitment letter. The researcher will provide the teachers with a new copy of the informed consent, will review the informed consent protocols again, and ensure that the researcher has obtained signed informed consent from each teacher team member. The researcher will then outline the plan for the nine-week study, including each of the following components:
- Team interviews (3-5 over the course of nine weeks, lasting from 15 minutes to 45 minutes each).
- Team meeting observations (multiple throughout the study)
- Team document collection and review (ongoing)
- Team teacher email prompts (weekly)
- Parent focus groups (two total, September and October)
- Parent questionnaire (one in October)

The researcher will emphasize his desire to minimize the intrusion of the study on the team, and also to maximize the amount of information collected relating to middle school teams and parent involvement. The researcher will also reiterate the role of the researcher as a data collector, not an evaluator or a supervisor of teachers or teams. Confidentiality procedures will be outlined, and any questions regarding the confidentiality of the data collected will be answered.

The researcher will turn on the audio-recording device, and will open the dialogue to introductions and get-to-know-you type questions of each teacher and the entire team.

<u>GENERAL OPENING SESSION QUESTIONS</u>
1. How many years have you taught in middle school?
2. Have you taught different subjects or only one subject?
3. How many years have you taught at _____ Middle School?
4. How would you describe middle school students in general?
5. How many years have you been a member of an interdisciplinary team?

6. How many years has this team been teaching together?
7. What are the benefits of middle school teaming?
8. What are the drawbacks to middle school teaming?
9. How does this team feel about working with parents?
10. What is parental involvement?
11. Have you discussed as a team how you will work together to involve parents this year?
12. What are some strategies you may choose to use this year to get parents involved?
13. Why do you think these may be effective?

SESSIONS 2 - 5 – Subsequent teacher team focus groups (approximate dates listed above) will pull from the following question pool (Derived from the seven components of parental motivations for involvement from Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model of Parental Involvement, 1995, 1997, 2005).

Additional teacher team focus groups may take place during the weeks of:
- August 23, 2010.
- September 6, 2010
- September 20, 2010
- October 11, 2010

PARENTAL ROLE CONSTRUCTION
1. How would you describe the parents at your school?
2. How would you define "parental involvement"?
3. How would you define "effective parental involvement in middle school"?
4. Do you have involved parents on your team?
5. Do you have supportive parents on your team?
6. What does an effective middle school parent do to support their middle school student?
7. Describe a time this year when you felt the parent adequately understood and effectively filled their role as the parent.
8. Describe a time this year when you felt the parent DID NOT adequately understand and effectively fill their role as the parent.
9. Do the parents of your students know how to be a parent a middle school student? What evidence do you see?
10. Can a middle school team help teach parents about what their role should be in the academic life of their child?
11. What are some strategies your team can do or is currently doing to educate parents regarding what a parent's role should be in their child's life at school?

PARENTAL SELF-EFFICACY
1. What do your students' parents need from you as their child's teacher?
2. What do you need from the parents on your team?
3. Do you think the parents of your students believe they can make a difference in their child's education? Why or why not?
4. Describe the traits of a "parent leader" on your team.
5. Are the parents of your student confident in their abilities to help their students with assignments?
6. Can a middle school team help parents to feel they can make a difference in the academic life of their child?
7. What are some strategies your team can do or is currently doing to indicate to parents that they can make a difference in their child's school life?

PERCEPTIONS OF GENERAL SCHOOL INVITATIONS
1. How would you describe your school's approach to involving parents?
2. Are parents welcome at your school?
3. Do you think parents think they are welcome at your school?
4. How does your school handle parents who just "show up" with concerns?
5. How normal is it to see parents at your school? In general, what are they doing there?
6. Has your school ever conducted any formal training or inservices regarding parents? If so, did everyone have to participate?
7. What is the purpose of parent open house night?
8. What are some strategies your school can do or is currently doing to ensure that parents feel invited to take part in their child's life at school?

PERCEPTIONS OF SPECIFIC CHILD INVITATIONS
1. What are your students' perceptions of their parents' role in their school life?
2. Does your team require students to get regular parent signatures on team documents (agenda books, progress reports, etc.)?
3. What do you think your students think of their parents' abilities to help them with schoolwork?
4. Does your team encourage your students to ask their parents to help them with their homework or other assignments?
5. What would you do if a student who always does below average work came to school with an extremely well-done project to turn-in?
6. Do you ever require parental input / help with assignments or projects? Why or why not?

7. Can a middle school team help effectively connect students with their parents in a supportive way?
8. What are some strategies your team can do or is currently doing to encourage your students to invite their parents to take part in their life at school?

PERCEPTIONS OF SPECIFIC TEACHER INVITATIONS
1. In what ways do you invite parents to be involved in your team?
2. How would the parents describe the teachers at your school?
3. In what ways do parents get involved on your team?
4. Do the parents of students on your team initiate contact with you when needed?
5. How do you handle an angry parent?
6. What opportunities to volunteer are available for parents on your team?
7. How often do you communicate directly with a parent (phone or email)?
8. How often do you conference with a parent?
9. How much value does your team place on parental input?
10. How do you show parents that you need their help?
11. Would you ever meet with "drop-in" parents? Why or why not?
12. Do the parents on your team know what is going on in your classes? How do they know?
13. Can a middle school team make parents feel more welcome to be involved in their child's education?
14. What are some strategies your team can do or is currently doing to ensure that parents feel invited to take part in their child's life at school?

PARENTAL TIME AND ENERGY
1. How do you communicate to parents that you need their help with a student concern or issue?
2. What should the parent of a middle school student do to regularly take part in their child's school life?
3. What percentage of the parents on your team checks their child's grades and assignments regularly? What effect do you see from this?
4. Do you think the parents on your team have the time to be as involved with their students as you need them to be? Why?
5. How can a parent in a high-stress and time-consuming job play an active role in their child's life at school?
6. Can a middle school team help parents to better manage their time to benefit their child's school outcomes?
7. What are some strategies your team can do or is currently doing to encourage parents to take the time and spend the personal energy to take part in their child's life at school?

PARENTAL SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

1. Do you feel like the parents of your students have the skills necessary to help their child be successful in school? Why or why not?
2. Would you describe your parents as "confident"? Why or why not?
3. Do the parents on your team know how to help their child in school? How do you know?
4. Can a middle school team help parents feel more confident in their skills? How?
5. What are some strategies your team can do or is currently doing to ensure that parents have the necessary skills and knowledge to take part in their child's life at school?

APPENDIX J

RESEARCH-BASED CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE MIDDLE SCHOOL

INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAMS

Characteristics of Effective Middle School Interdisciplinary Teams

According to current middle school-centered research, effective middle school interdisciplinary teaming strategies include:

Structure-related Characteristics

1. Teams are composed of between three and five core content teachers, sharing between eighty and one hundred-twenty students.

2. Team teacher classrooms are located within a close physical proximity to one another.

3. Team teachers share a common planning time, during which team meetings, support team meetings, curriculum planning meeting, and parent conferences take place.

4. Students on the team are ability grouped heterogeneously for all classes (except for Math).

Curriculum-related Characteristics

5. Team teachers engage in curriculum-related discussions regarding current units of study.

6. Team teachers actively plan and regularly integrate curricular ties between content areas.

7. Team teachers engage in curriculum-related discussions regarding student progress, and engage in problem-solving strategies to aid in addressing skills deficits.

Instruction-related Characteristics

8. Team teachers engage students with hand-on discovery learning, where students are encouraged to think critically in an environment that encourages collaboration and problem-solving.

9. Team teachers encourage the use of higher-order thinking skills in classrooms and on assessment.

10. Team teachers use a variety of student assessment methods.

11. Team teachers integrate student remediation opportunities within the school day.

Responsive Practices

12. Team teachers take ownership of their students by fostering a sense of a team spirit, promoting team values, a team motto, team mascots, and team discipline strategies within their team of students.

13. Team teachers maintain open lines of communication with parents, and encourage parents regularly to contact them with questions, concerns, or issues.

14. Team teachers successfully resolve parental concerns as a team.

15. Team teachers serve as resource for parents regarding adolescent development.

16. Team teachers act as "advisors" to their students, actively providing guidance, mentoring, and direction for their students.

APPENDIX K

RESEARCH-BASED CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE MIDDLE SCHOOL

INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAMS REFERENCES

Characteristics of Effective Middle School Interdisciplinary Teams

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APPENDIX L

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPROVAL LETTER

Form 4: IRB Approval Form
Identification and Certification of Research
Projects Involving Human Subjects

UAB's Institutional Review Boards for Human Use (IRBs) have an approved Federalwide Assurance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP). The Assurance number is FWA00005960 and it expires on October 26, 2010. The UAB IRBs are also in compliance with 21 CFR Parts 50 and 56 and ICH GCP Guidelines.

Principal Investigator: ROBBINS, CHRISTOPHER

Co-Investigator(s):

Protocol Number: **X100506015**

Protocol Title: *Exploring Parental Involvement Strategies Utilized by Middle School Interdisciplinary Teams*

The IRB reviewed and approved the above named project on _5-25-10_. The review was conducted in accordance with UAB's Assurance of Compliance approved by the Department of Health and Human Services. This Project will be subject to Annual continuing review as provided in that Assurance.

This project received EXPEDITED review.

IRB Approval Date: _5-25-10_

Date IRB Approval Issued: _5-25-10_

Marilyn Doss, M.A.
Vice Chair of the Institutional Review
Board for Human Use (IRB)

Investigators please note:

The IRB approved consent form used in the study must contain the IRB approval date and expiration date.

IRB approval is given for one year unless otherwise noted. For projects subject to annual review research activities may not continue past the one year anniversary of the IRB approval date.

Any modifications in the study methodology, protocol and/or consent form must be submitted for review and approval to the IRB prior to implementation.

Adverse Events and/or unanticipated risks to subjects or others at UAB or other participating institutions must be reported promptly to the IRB.

470 Administration Building
701 20th Street South
205.934.3789
Fax 205.934.1301
irb@uab.edu

The University of
Alabama at Birmingham
Mailing Address:
AB 470
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BIRMINGHAM AL 35294-0104

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APPENDIX M

PERMISSISON TO REPRINT HOOVER-DEMPSEY AND SANDLER MODEL OF

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT (1991, 1997)

Robbins, Chris

From:	Hoover-Dempsey, Kathleen V <kathy.hoover-dempsey@Vanderbilt.Edu>
Sent:	Monday, February 14, 2011 11:13 AM
To:	Robbins, Chris
Subject:	Re: Hello -

Hi Chris,

I'm so glad to know that our work has been helpful! I'm happy to give you permission to reprint or incorporate our 1995/97 and 2005 revised models in your work.

I suspect you're going to have some very interesting findings from your study; please keep me posted, if and as possible.

All best to you in your continuing work (at school and on the dissertation!)

Kathy

On Feb 14, 2011, at 9:39 AM, Robbins, Chris wrote:

Dr. Hoover-Dempsey,

I hope that you are well – I appreciate the information you provided to me regarding the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model of Parental Involvement, which I am using as the theoretical framework for my doctoral dissertation. My study explores the parental involvement strategies utilized by middle school interdisciplinary teams.

I am seeking your permission to reprint the 1995/1997 and 2005 revised (levels one and two) versions of this framework in the body of this work. These models have been invaluable to my study – LOTS of implications for middle school teams!

Thank you – please let me know if there is anything else I need to do, or any other information you may need.

Chris

Chris Robbins, Assistant Principal
R.F. Bumpus Middle School
Hoover City Schools
205.439.2000 (main)
205.439.2214 (direct)
205.439.2201 (fax)
http://crobbins.wiki.hoover.k12.al.us

From: Dr. Kathy Hoover-Dempsey [mailto:kathleen.v.hoover-dempsey@vanderbilt.edu]
Sent: Tuesday, October 12, 2010 8:29 AM
To: Robbins, Chris
Subject: Re: Hello -

Dear Chris,

I write with great embarrassment. I'm not sure how it happened, but I've just 'found' your email of many months ago. I'm so sorry.

If it would still be of any help at this very late date, I've attached a copy of the most current version of our model along with specific references where you may find information regarding the current model or applications of the current model to specific arenas of parental involvement.

I hope all is going very well in your dissertation work, and apologize again for my own tardiness.

Sincerely,

Kathy

On Dec 30, 2009, at 10:47 AM, Robbins, Chris wrote:

<image001.jpg>

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