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Teachers' strategies for involving parents in the development of their children's literacy skills

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ABSTRACT

TEACHERS' STRATEGIES FOR INVOLVING PARENTS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEIR CHILDREN'S LITERACY SKILLS

Sadia Qamar, M.S.Ed.
Department of Special and Early Education
Northern Illinois University, 2017
Myoungwhon Jung, Director

Parental involvement plays a significant role in supporting children's literacy skills. However, limited research has been conducted to uncover effective strategies for increasing parental involvement in countries, such as Pakistan, where such involvement is limited. Therefore, this study focused on strategies used by elementary teachers in the United States to involve parents in the development of their children's literacy skills. Findings of the study will be helpful for increasing parental involvement in Pakistan's elementary schools. A qualitative collective case study method was used to analyze data from interviews with five elementary teachers who were recruited through purposive sampling technique. Data were collected through semi-structured interview protocols. Participant responses were summarized by developing descriptive and interpretative codes. Findings from the study indicate that the teachers believed parental participation results in improvements in students' literacy skills. Conversely, data also indicate that parental participation sometimes interrupts teachers' classroom instruction.

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TEACHERS' STRATEGIES FOR INVOLVING PARENTS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF
THEIR CHILDREN'S LITERACY SKILLS

BY

SADIA QAMAR
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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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DEDICATION

This document is dedicated to my family, particularly my parents who instilled in me a deep love of learning and a profound appreciation for education. I also dedicated this to my mother who allowed me to travel abroad and accomplish my successes through her support, love, sacrifices, and encouragement.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Researchers have regarded parental involvement as an important element in the effective education of children for at least 40 years (Hornby & Lafael, 2011). Over these decades, parental involvement has been represented in a variety of ways. Epstein et al. (2002) defined parental involvement within the framework of parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community. Powell (2013) argued that parents can contribute to building home-school connections through volunteering in school activities and noted that sharing reading practices at home influences young children's academic and social achievements. According to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995), parental involvement through modeling, reinforcement, and instruction of school-related behaviors and learning influences children's developmental and educational outcomes. Acknowledging the value of parental involvement, members of the United States Congress required all public schools to have a parental involvement policy starting in 2001 as a provision of the No Child Left Behind Act (Rapp & Duncan, 2012). Additionally, Section 102 of the National Educational Goals (2000) requires personnel in every school to promote parental involvement for children's social, emotional, and academic growth (Tan & Goldberg, 2009).

According to Bitter, Day, Gubbins, and Socias (2009), a central goal for elementary educators and district and school improvement efforts across the United States is to help children

become independent readers and writers. These researchers claimed that children's independence in reading and writing plays a significant role in developing a solid foundation for their literacy skills, which will ultimately help them succeed in social and academic areas. The work of Bitter et al. (2009) reinforced my belief that teachers could take advantage of parental strengths to help students develop their reading and writing skills. This belief was formed through my reading of an extensive body of literature that demonstrated how parental support and responsiveness in shared reading practices support children's growth in their reading and writing skills (Fawcett, Padak, & Rasinski, 2013; Powell, 2013; Roberts, Jurgens, & Burchinal 2005). Shared reading occurs when parents both read and discuss texts with their children.

Results from these studies revealed the significant potential of parental involvement for improving children's academic and social achievements, including literacy skills. However, despite the positive potential of parental support for improving the academic achievement of their children, there is a lack of parental involvement in Pakistan's public schools in activities and work related to their children's academic growth. Similarly, although Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) exist in Pakistan's public schools to build links between home and school, these groups do not play any role in involving parents in supporting their children's overall academic growth. According to Simkins, Garrett, Memon, and Ali (1998), in Pakistan's public schools, PTAs have been "created in name only" (p. 141). The reason these associations play a minimal role in promoting meaningful parental involvement is likely due to the lack of information about the benefits of parental involvement available to head teachers, teachers, and parents.

While interviewing Pakistan's public school head teachers, Simkins et al., (1998) discovered that head teachers considered parental involvement to be an interruption or threat to

school affairs. Head teachers thought that parents intended to politicize the school environment due to their personal interests and, thus, created problems for head teachers. Simkins et al. (1998) reported that head teachers considered parental involvement to be a threat to school discipline due to parents' diverse educational, cultural, linguistic, and political interests. Although the perspectives of head teachers are important to consider, neglecting the potential positive impact of parental involvement hinders the creation of meaningful connections between home and school, and consequently, children are deprived of their families' support for their overall academic growth, including literacy development. In such cases, children only receive classroom literacy instruction, which may limit their acquisition of writing and reading skills.

Researchers have concluded that the personal experiences of a researcher can trigger her or his motivation to further explore a specific situation (Bogdan & Bilker, 2007). For example, my teaching experiences inspired me to gain further insight into parental involvement and its role in children's academic success and literacy skills in particular. Specifically, I am interested in gaining this insight due to my own experiences and observations regarding parental involvement, which I found to be limited in Islamabad's (the capital of my country – Pakistan) public schools. I served as an elementary teacher in Islamabad Junior Model School for 10 years. During my tenure, I never found parents to be deeply involved in activities or work related to their children's academic achievements. Based on these experiences, I believe that there could be two major reasons for limited parental involvement in Islamabad's public schools. First, teachers lack information about the positive potential of parental involvement for encouraging their children's academic achievements (Simkins et al., 1998). Second, this limited recognition of the value of parental involvement prevents teachers from exploring strategies that could be used to include parents in their children's academic development.

My teaching experience motivated me to conduct this study to gain insight into how parents are encouraged to get involved in supporting their children's reading and writing skills in public elementary schools in the United States. The insights I gained from this study helped me identify effective strategies for involving parents in their children's reading and writing development in my home country. Additionally, this study will benefit other teachers in my country by making effective strategies for increasing parental involvement more accessible. Teachers in the United States may also benefit from this study in that it may encourage them to reflect on their own beliefs regarding parental involvement and increase their awareness of research-based strategies used for involving parents in developing children's literacy skills. Ultimately, researchers may build on this work to explore the relationships between parental involvement and children's academic development.

Problem Statement

The research study by Morrow and Young (1997) revealed that teachers were surprised by the amount of improvement and increased interest in the literacy skills of children whose parents actively participated in a literacy intervention program. It shows the significant potential of parental involvement in their children's literacy achievements. As an international student/educator, I assumed that elementary teachers in the United States witnessed active parental involvement. However, research showed that while teachers and parents acknowledged the benefits of parental involvement, the actual in-school practices are very different (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). According to Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, and Weiss (2006), the lack of parental involvement in the United States is particularly true among minority parents and may be due to socio-cultural differences.

I have ten years of teaching experience in a public elementary school in Islamabad, Pakistan. During my tenure, I have witnessed limited parental involvement in activities related to children's literacy skills. This, I believe, is due to a lack of teacher and parent awareness of the importance of parental involvement, particularly regarding the development of literacy skills. Additionally, there is a lack of available research relevant for use in Pakistan regarding the topic. Therefore, teachers there do not recognize the potential value of parental involvement for children's education. This hinders their quest to explore strategies for involving parents in the development of their children's literacy skills. Consequently, meaningful home-school connections do not develop, and the growth of children's reading and writing skills tends to be slow. Because the United States is far ahead of Pakistan in literacy-related programs, Pakistani teachers can benefit from the knowledge United States elementary teachers possess.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative collective case study was to gain insight into strategies used by elementary school teachers to engage parents in supporting the literacy skills of children in the United States' public schools. Specifically, this study was designed to identify strategies that elementary teachers used to increase parental involvement and improve the growth of children's reading and writing skills. The findings of the study may be helpful for introducing strategies that can be used to increase parental involvement in the development of children's literacy skills in Pakistan's public elementary schools. Future researchers may explore the significance of parental involvement and facilitate awareness among teachers and parents in Pakistan about the ways that parents can contribute to the growth of elementary students' literacy

skills. Future researchers may also explore different factors that affect parental involvement in the context of cultural and language diversity.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are teachers' general beliefs about parental involvement in the teaching-learning process, and more specifically, what roles do they believe parents play in improving children's literacy skills?
2. What challenges do teachers face while seeking to engage parents in the development of their children's literacy skills and what strategies do they use to overcome them?
3. How do elementary teachers promote home-school connections to engage parents and improve their children's literacy skills?
4. What professional development opportunities exist for teachers that can expand their knowledge about working with parents to support their children's literacy skills?

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Literacy

While researchers have specifically defined *literacy* in different ways, the term is broadly associated with the ability to read and write (Ortiz & Jasis, 2005). According to August and Shanahan (2010), literacy skills include phonological awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary, and reading and writing comprehension. This list shows that literacy is not just an ability to read and write; it also involves the skills of critical writing and reading to comprehend information. Therefore, literacy is considered an essential life skill. Former U.S. President Barack Obama used the term *critical literacy* in his blueprint for reform, *The Reauthorization of Elementary and Secondary Education Act*. Obama stated, “The education beyond basic reading and writing has to be about critical thinking – it has to be about developing a voice, agency, and the power of production across traditional and new media genres. Literacy has to be empowering, or else what is the point of demanding it?” (Morell, 2010, p.149). Considering literacy as an essential life skill in his blueprint for reforms, Obama emphasized the need for professional development for teachers and school leaders to create text-rich classroom environments for engaging learners in critical literacy programs.

Parent/Teacher Roles in Young Children's Literacy Development

The ability to read and write continues to be developed throughout a person's life.

According to leaders in the International Reading Association (IRA, 1998) and the National Associations for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the early years from birth through age eight are considered to be the most important years for the development of language, reading, and writing skills. The development of these skills is shaped by culture and, therefore, requires careful planning and instruction. Adults, especially parents and teachers, must work together to help children preserve their existing home language and cultural experiences, which contributes to building and extending children's later language and literacy experiences.

According to Boyd and Hirst (2016), social context promotes early literacy, and young children need encouragement and praise to explore writing and drawings available in their environments. Brown (2014) maintained that if children are to approach literacy as a social activity, they need to be engaged in reading and writing tasks with adults who create a social context for children. Such social contexts engage children actively in early language and print activities, and thus, children become more focused and motivated for successful literacy development. Levy, Gong, Hessels, Evans, and Jared (2006) argued that an adult's role is to involve children with a printed text rather than making them listen passively to the adult's reading.

Children live in two social contexts: home and school. Therefore, connections between the home and school environments should be developed cooperatively. These connections are based on the beliefs of both parents and teachers; however, it is more critical for teachers to promote these connections to intensify children's literacy development (Jonson, Baker, & Aupperlee, 2009). According to Auerbach (1989), "Literacy is meaningful to students to the

extent that it relates to daily realities. The teacher's role is to connect what happens inside the classroom to what happens outside, so that literacy can become a meaningful tool for addressing the issues in students' lives" (p.166). When teachers connect what happens inside to what happens outside the classroom, they help children approach literacy as a social activity. This approach may result in an increase in children's literacy skills as teachers create opportunities that allow students to relate their home language and literacy experiences to their classroom literacy experiences.

Benefits of Creating Connections between Home and School Environments

Parents are the experts on their children and, arguably, know their children better than anyone else. A large body of evidence has suggested that family involvement is the most accurate predictor of children's school achievements (Bitter et al., 2009; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1995; Powell, 2013; Tan et al., 2009). When families become involved in schooling and express high expectations for their children, their children earn higher grades and test scores, have better attendance, are less likely to be placed in special education, display more positive attitudes and behaviors, achieve higher graduation rates, and are more likely to enroll in post-secondary education (Henderson & Berla, 1994).

Although children benefit from initiating and regulating their own learning and interaction with peers, most of their learning is influenced by adults (teachers, parents). Feiler et al. (2008) indicated that parents have a wealth of information about their children's interests and abilities, and teachers have additional knowledge about their students' learning at school. When teachers and parents coordinate their activities, teachers have more opportunities to take advantage of parents' knowledge, and parents have easy access to teachers' expertise, making it

easier for them to be more aware of their children's learning experience at school. According to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995), children's roles can be conceptualized as boundary roles because children are responsible for absorbing and responding to the demands, expectations, and requests of both parents and teachers. Hoover-Dempsey et al. argued that children are the primary link between the two separate entities. If these entities have a warm and healthy relationship, it is more likely that children will become motivated and receptive to absorb and respond to tasks that could maximize their learning.

In addition to the general benefits of developing home-school connections, those relationships also play an important role in children's literacy skills. According to Crosby, Rasinski, Padak, and Yildirim (2015), children's early literacy learning through parental involvement substantially impacts their overall literacy development. Crosby et al. suggested that even students who struggle with reading or live in poor communities benefit from consistent parental involvement during the primary grades. According to Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, and Weiss (2006), regardless of maternal education, children from families on the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum show improved literacy performance when their families increase their school involvement. Larocque, Kleiman, and Darling (2011) demonstrated that teachers' connections with parents provided teachers with insight to better meet the needs of their students by developing a deeper understanding of those needs. This helps teachers plan appropriate activities and goals to engage students in literacy practices. If teachers plan literacy activities considering the unique needs of their students, then students are more likely to improve their literacy skills. According to Carter, Chard, and Pool (2009), connections between home and school environments provide teachers with tools to identify the strengths and routines of a family. Thus, teachers are better able to help parents create literacy opportunities in the home

environment by making use of their unique strengths and routines. Based on this review of related literature, it is evident that home-school connections positively impact teacher performance, student literacy learning, and parental understanding of how best to contribute to their children's literacy growth.

To develop parents' understanding of the roles they can play in their children's literacy growth, researchers have conducted numerous literacy projects. For instance, in a study examining a family literacy intervention that supported parents in encouraging children's early literacy learning, Steiner (2014) concluded that increasing parents' understanding of their roles in children's literacy development through parental involvement programs helped parents incorporate school-based literacy practices meaningfully into their existing home literacy routines. This increase in understanding changed the parents' beliefs about their roles in supporting their children's literacy learning. The parents understood the potential value of their involvement, and this resulted in an increase in their self-efficacy. Another study that focused on a home and school-based literacy program, conducted by Morrow and Young (1997), revealed that parents who were taught to implement literacy activities at home like those conducted by teachers at school, made a positive difference in their children's literacy skills. Teachers who were interviewed in the study noted that students whose parents were taught home-based literacy activities indicated greater interest in reading and writing. Teachers realized the significant potential of this program for bringing parents and teachers together to help children improve their literacy skills. Huebner and Payne (2011) also reported that when parents involved their children in strategies like dialogic reading, children's skills related to understanding and producing language began to develop, which helped them decode print. Findings of their study

revealed that parents who were taught dialogic reading techniques made a significant difference in the growth of their children's literacy skills.

The studies of literacy intervention programs referenced above clearly indicated that parents have the potential to make a positive difference in the literacy skills of their children if they receive guidance about how to implement literacy activities at home. However, some parents may not understand the extent to which their involvement matters in the development of their children's literacy skills. Given this situation, teachers should create opportunities to involve all parents, so parents recognize their roles in contributing to their children's literacy development.

Factors Affecting Home-School Connections

Building connections between home and school environments is a developmental process that requires a plan to be created, promoted, and maintained over a period. A diverse range of factors may hinder the creation of these connections. Hornby et al. (2011) categorized these diverse factors as parent, family, and societal factors; parent-teacher factors; and child factors.

Parent, Family and Societal Factors

According to Hornby et al. (2011), parents' beliefs about their roles in their children's education may act as a barrier. Some parents believe that their only responsibility is to get their children to school. These parents are less likely to be involved in school-based or home-based parental involvement activities that demand their participation in promoting their child's academic growth. It is likely that these parents lack awareness about their potential to contribute to their children's academic skills. During my teaching experiences, for example, I interacted

with parents who did not realize that helping their children to achieve academically was one of their parental responsibilities. Edwards (2004) indicated that parents' education, socioeconomic backgrounds, lack of common understanding of parental involvement, and limited participation in school activities were additional factors that hinder school involvement. Harris et al. (2008) identified work commitment as another constraint to parental involvement. Harris et al. suggested that parents have busy schedules, especially single parents. Due to their workloads, single parents are found to be the least responsive when teachers ask them to be involved in their children's schooling.

Parent-Teacher Factors

Parents and teachers are two distinct groups of proximal participants who play important roles in building connections between home and school environments. Johnson et al. (2009) emphasized that parental involvement is affected by teachers' and families' perceptions of their relationships. When teachers lack warmth and trust in their relationships with parents, parents become demotivated and less active in playing their roles in their children's school achievements. Drawing on the work of researchers associated with the National Education Association that attempted to address the needs and concerns of parents from minority groups, Edwards (2004) argued that the relationship between parents and teachers could be influenced by differences in culture, language, socioeconomic status, and educational background. Edwards noted that parents from minority groups were concerned that administrators and teachers in United States public schools use double standards when dealing with them. For example, participants indicated that school personnel viewed parents from minority groups as uninterested in supporting their children's educational achievements. Further, participants believed that some

school personnel maintained that these parents lacked necessary skills to contribute to their children's achievements. Therefore, when these parents become involved, they must overcome the perception that they tend to make the job of teachers and administrators more difficult. Per Larocque et al. (2011), family diversity can create complications for teachers who seek to involve parents from different backgrounds. Parents have diverse languages, cultures, socio-economic status levels, and educational backgrounds, so teachers who use a one-size-fits-all approach in seeking parental involvement will come short of their goal.

Child Factors

Children play boundary roles between the two groups of proximal participants: parents and teachers. In these boundary roles, the traits and behavior of children can pose barriers to parental involvement. According to the model presented by Hornby et al. (2011), children's gifts and talents sometimes create a conflicting situation between home and school. For example, when gifted children are insufficiently challenged by school environments, their parents maintain that school personnel are not responsive to the needs of their children. Such views generate conflicts that ultimately hinder meaningful parental involvement.

Strategies for Involving Parents in the Development of Children's Literacy Skills

Parental engagement needs to be considered as an integral part of children's learning processes. Meaningful parental engagement occurs when parents know that their involvement matters in facilitating their children's academic achievement (Harris & Goodall, 2008). A common notion among teachers and principals is that it is hard to reach parents, typically in working-class families (Lareau, 1989). On the other hand, Harris and Goodal (2008) noted that

some hard-to-reach parents felt “school itself was indeed hard to reach” (p. 284). According to Jonson, Baker, and Aupperlee (2009), the partnership between school and family is based on the beliefs of both parents and teachers. Parental engagement increases when relationships between parents and teachers are characterized by trust, warmth, and communication. Per Fawcett, Padak, and Rasinski (2013), teachers can increase parental engagement by choosing easy-to-implement strategies that are time-efficient, learning-effective, and family-enjoyable, so that all parents can engage with their children’s reading and writing skills, regardless of their personal workloads. Feiler, Greenhough, Salway, and Scanlan (2006) showed that “one size does not fit all, nor can it be made to fit all” (p. 464). Feiler et al. (2008) reported that during the Home-Knowledge Exchange project, teachers in some schools practiced literacy activities that involved parents. However, teachers observed that certain parents were not involved because those activities were unappealing to them due to their diverse backgrounds. Those parents had diverse languages, cultures, socio-economic status levels, and educational backgrounds. Clearly, when teachers fit all parents in “one size,” the result is that parents will be unable to support their children to their fullest potential.

In their work with The Home School Knowledge Exchange Project (HKSE), Feiler et al. (2006) suggested that parents would be engaged in literacy activities with their children at home if teachers developed videos accompanied by booklets based on classroom literacy instruction. This strategy, in turn, would help parents foster learning at home, an important role conceptualized by Epstein et al. (2002). Using this strategy, teachers exposed parents to classroom literacy lessons and helped them gain confidence for engaging children in home-based literacy activities. This enhanced confidence in parents regarding their potential to help their children increased their children’s participation in home and school-based literacy activities,

resulting in growth in literacy skills. Feiler et al. (2006) also suggested a strategy to engage parents in improving their children's writing skills. This involved parents and children writing captions of photographs from the children's out-of-school world. The researchers maintained that written captions would improve children's writing skills and help teachers learn more about families. This strategy is an example of collaborating with the community, another parental involvement role identified by Epstein et al. (2002). Strategies such as these develop effective communication and coordination between home and school that contribute to the growth of rich and extensive reading and writing skills for children.

Barbour (1999) shared another strategy for engaging parents in the development of their children's literacy skills, which involved sending home literacy bags containing collections of books and interactive activities. Barbour suggested that parents could be empowered by receiving high-quality literature aligned with home-based interactive activities for intensifying their children's language and literacy acquisition. Sending literature home increases parental involvement in the framework of parenting, another important parental role identified by Epstein et al. (2002). However, some parents may not understand how to use literacy bags to help their children's literacy growth. Therefore, teachers must provide sufficient written guidance that explains different options for parents to implement. For instance, parents could be offered the option of engaging their children in conversation during reading activities. They may also be offered the option of helping their children write about their reading experiences through daily or weekly journal entries. According to Fawcett et al. (2013), engaging children in conversation while reading aloud to them during paired reading and partner reading is one predictor of reading success, as it allows children to experience life beyond their own worlds. In their study investigating the relationships among parenting, parent-child shared reading, and children's

literacy development, Dexter and Stacks (2014) indicated that parental responsiveness and encouragement for shared reading predicted children's receptive language development.

Involving parents in literacy activities on a schoolwide level requires sustained collaboration among parents, teachers and school staff. Per Fawcett et al. (2013), schoolwide comprehensive family involvement programs developed with parents facilitate two-way communication between school and home. These programs are based on the philosophy of partnerships; therefore, parents and teachers together develop a sense of responsibility for children's literacy skills growth. Epstein et. al (2002) maintained that such programs increase parental involvement in the framework of decision-making and volunteering, as they are developed *with* parents rather than *for* parents. Fawcett et al. (2013) suggested that staff members, with the help of parents, can select literacy themes and goals to be addressed in these literacy programs over a period. A group of parents could be encouraged to volunteer for identified tasks at the individual student, classroom, and school levels to make these programs more exciting and effective. "Reading Millionaires" and backpack programs are two successful schoolwide literacy programs already in practice in many schools. Similarly, McGahey and Michelle (2005) claimed that hosting family literacy nights enable educators to celebrate students' literacy achievements, foster a sense of community, help improve their strategies, and enhance parents' information for helping their children's literacy growth. Developing literacy programs and hosting literacy events help teachers accept and respect parents who may otherwise feel hesitant to assume more active roles in the development of their children's literacy skills.

Summary of Literature Review

Previously conducted studies have demonstrated the positive effects of parental involvement on children's literacy and overall academic achievements. To fully reap the benefits of parental involvement, collaboration between home and school is vitally important (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). However, parents are sometimes less involved in their children's education due to certain factors that inhibit their involvement (Hornby et al., 2011). Although partnerships between home and school are influenced by the beliefs of both parents and teachers, teachers need to take active roles in building the partnerships. Strategies suggested by researchers could be used by teachers to involve parents in fostering children's literacy skills (Fawcett et al., 2013). Therefore, this study explored strategies used by elementary teachers to engage parents in developing the literacy skills of children in U.S. public schools. Knowledge of these strategies will be useful in increasing parental involvement in Pakistan's public schools and encouraging the growth of elementary students' literacy skills. Exploration of this topic also provides other researchers with insight into the connections between teachers' strategies and parental involvement, and its findings provide useful information for overcoming barriers to parental involvement.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed qualitative research methodology to explore strategies used by elementary teachers to involve parents in the development of early learners' literacy skills. Teachers' strategies were the central phenomenon that needed to be explored. To develop deeper understanding through explanations and descriptions, the study used a collective case study method. The collective case study method involves more than one case (Creswell, 2015); therefore, this approach was helpful in investigating the central phenomenon (teachers' strategies) by studying multiple cases.

Participants

The study was conducted in a large rural school district in the Midwest region of the United States. Because I taught in a rural school in Islamabad, Pakistan, I was interested in exploring strategies for involving parents used by teachers in rural Midwestern schools. Through purposive sampling technique, I applied snowballing methods to recruit a group of elementary teachers (Creswell, 2015). This sampling method provided the most opportunities for comparable analysis of a variety of experiences reported by elementary teachers related to engaging parents in supporting early learners' literacy achievements.

Participants in this study included five female elementary teachers with 12 to 29 years of teaching experience. One participants had experience teaching kindergarten through fifth grade. The remaining participants had experience teaching different grade levels ranging from preschool up to the university level during their past and current tenure at the time of the interview.

Table 1

Participants' Demographic Information

Participants (Pseudonym)	Years of experience	Educational background	School Location
Becky	14 years	Bachelor's degree in elementary education Master's degree in reading instruction.	Suburban
Victoria	26 years	Doctorate in instructional technology	Rural
Virginia	12 years	Elementary education degree	Suburban
Kathy	29 years	Master's in early childhood education	Suburban
Queen	21 years	Bachelor's degree in elementary education. Master's in curriculum and instruction Doctorate in curriculum and leadership	Rural

Becky

Becky teaches kindergarten in a far western suburb of Chicago. She started in the district in 2002 as a student teacher of fourth grade students. She began the position the next year teaching fourth grade. She taught fourth grade for six years and then took two years off to be at home with her children. When she came back to the same school, she taught fifth grade for three years and now is in her second year of teaching kindergarten. At time of interview, she was in her eleventh year of teaching, but she had been with the district for 14 years.

Victoria

Victoria is licensed to teach ages 0 through 3, grades K through 12, and grades K through 6. She is certified to teach deaf and hard of hearing students, all elementary grades, and middle and high school language arts and reading. She has a doctorate in instructional technology, enabling her to teach technology courses at the university level, as well. She also trains teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing and elementary level teachers. At time of the interview, she was still teaching. She had just finished teaching a traditional curriculum to six fifth-grade students who are deaf and hard of hearing.

Virginia

Virginia currently works for a local university's college of education, serving students in the elementary education program. She works with clinical pre-service candidates as well as student teachers. Currently, she is writing a field guide for clinical pre-service candidates and student teachers. She graduated with her elementary education degree in 1998 and taught full time. She has also substituted, was a para professional in a special education classroom, and tutored students one-on-one until she could obtain her full-time teaching position in a junior high. She took time off when she had her first son. After her time off she went back to teaching at a Hebrew school. At the time of this interview, she was working with fourth, fifth, and seventh grade students.

Kathy

Kathy's initial licensure was in special education, deaf and hard of hearing. She then earned her elementary and secondary licensures. Her master's degree is in early childhood education. She has taught preschool, elementary, high school, and in itinerant programs in which she traveled from school to school to work with specific students. At the collegiate level, she has taught teacher preparation for special education, early education, and elementary education. At time of this interview, she had been teaching for a total of 29 years.

Queen

Queen began her teaching career in 1975 with a B.A. in elementary education. She worked as a public-school teacher for 21 years, teaching kindergarten, fourth, fifth, and sixth grades. She continued her education and earned a master's degree in curriculum and instruction and an Ed.D in curriculum and leadership from Northern Illinois University. She then came to work at a local university teaching science methods, social studies methods, and classroom management and has also worked with partnerships and grants.

Procedures

After obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board, I mailed explanatory and invitational letters to several school district administrators in the target district. Administrators were asked to distribute letters to teachers willing to be interviewed. After obtaining approval from school personnel, I scheduled face-to-face meetings with the teachers to explain the study and obtain informed consent. After receiving informed consent, I scheduled and conducted the

interviews. Each participant was interviewed once regarding her strategies for involving parents to support their children's literacy skills. Interviews were audiotaped for transcription and future analysis. Participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts to verify the accuracy of their statements for member checking (Creswell, 2015). Each interview lasted approximately 35-55 minutes.

Measures

I used a semi-structured interview protocol comprised of four sections (see Appendix A). With the help of the developed interview protocol, participants were asked about a) their beliefs about parental involvement, b) the benefits of parental involvement for early learners' literacy skills, c) the strategies for collaborating with parents on literacy-related programs, d) the challenges faced by teachers while engaging parents with their children's literacy skills, and e) the amount of available teacher professional development opportunities. The protocol was piloted on an elementary teacher for possible revision. The interview protocol did not change between the pilot and its final implementation after receiving feedback. The final interview protocol consisted of ten open-ended questions aiming to know participants' beliefs regarding parental involvement, strategies they use to involve parents in children's literacy development, challenges they face while involving parents, and existence of professional development opportunities to promote their knowledge of working with parents. See Appendix A for the interview questions.

Data Analysis

An inductive approach was used to analyze the data. This approach aims to generate meaning from the data set to identify patterns and relationships to build a theory based on the learning from participants' experiences (Creswell, 2015; Bogdan and Biklen (2007) wrote that "by data analysis we mean the process of systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, field notes, and other materials that you accumulate to enable you to come up with findings" (p. 159). The audiotaped interviews were transcribed, and for the systematic arrangement of data for this study, I created separate files in my password secured laptop for each participant that described the context of the interview, summarized participants' responses, and listed topics discussed by each interviewee at the completion of each interview. In addition, I also saved soft copies of those documents using Google Drive and my email. Moreover, hard copies of these documents were also kept in a secured file in a locked cabinet in my home as a duplicate source (Creswell, 2015).

Coding Process

According to Creswell (2015) and Seidman (2013), one of the core aims of manual analysis is to get a hands-on feel for the patterns. Therefore, I read hard copies of interview transcripts several times to locate, organize, and categorize identified codes. I then conducted manual analysis by marking different themes that emerged from the data with color markers while reading the hard copies of the interview transcripts.

The general understanding I gained from reading and re-reading the interview transcripts and informal discussion notes further helped me identify different passages of interest, which I

labelled with specific phrases such as philosophy or beliefs about parental involvement, class and home-oriented strategies to involve parents with children's literacy development, etc.

Subsequently, utilizing an open coding strategy, I identified text segments by highlighting either a code word or a phrase to represent specific segments of the text. Open coding involves line-by-line close reading of data to allow codes to emerge from data (Johnson, 2017). At the completion of the coding process of one interview transcript, I created a coding manual to list all code words to identify similar and redundant codes during the coding of the rest of the interview transcripts. All participants' interviews were used to develop the coding manual to achieve an accurate overview of the ideas presented. After reading the transcripts, I revisited the coding manual to merge redundant or related codes. For example, I merged the related codes (parents' busy schedule, socio-economic and educational backgrounds, single parents, cultural differences) into a single theme "challenges faced by teachers while involving parents." I also highlighted specific quotes from research participants that supported the codes using the hard copies of transcripts and created a topic arrangement of different text segments. The coding process helped me develop themes in accordance with what was said by participants by aggregating similar codes from different data files to look for major patterns, which are called themes (Creswell, 2015) as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Coding Sample from Kathy's Interview

Categories	Codes	Examples
Teachers' beliefs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theme Parents' educational background • Geographical location • Cultural make-up • Schools welcoming environment • Opportunities offered to parents • Children's grade level • Parents' and teachers' beliefs about parental involvement. 	<p>"Literacy is everywhere; it's not just reading and writing. It's in all content areas, and there is such a difference between academic literacy and native literacy... literacy cannot be achieved in isolation." (Kathy)</p>
Teachers' strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take-home Folders • Guest Readers • Music Program • Portfolio Nights • Family Nights • Family Reading Nights • Reading Award Ceremonies • Parent's Library • Reading Log Journaling 	<p>"We had reading nights at the school and this was a whole school event, so four times a year we had literacy reading nights where the teachers and students were involved in planning the events. It's kind of like stations, so this section of the building the children read to the parents and then this section of the building the parents read to the children and this section of the building they play language games. So, they would move three different times to three sections of the building and that was for children and families, and it was well attended." (Kathy)</p>
Challenges Faced by Teachers While Engaging Parents and Strategies Used to Overcome Them	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers' and parents' beliefs • Divorce • Cultural differences • Language • Lack of English proficiency 	<p>"With literacy, specifically, I think the biggest barrier is language. So many of our parents don't speak the same language in the home as their students are learning. So, they almost feel like their 3rd grader has better knowledge than they do, so they don't want to participate in that literacy piece. They may be all about coming to the school, but that part of it, they are hands-off because they don't feel comfortable. So, I would say language is the number one barrier to literacy. And especially the academic language." (Kathy).</p>

(Continued on the following page)

Table 2 (continued)

Categories	Codes	Examples
Strategies to Overcome Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing cultural understanding • Validating and valuing parents' thoughts • Educating parents • Sending home detailed instructions • Creating websites • Providing supplies • Sending home grade and age-appropriate reading materials 	<p>“Meet parents where they’re at, validate their thoughts, value their ideas, and then talk about yours and hope that you can pull a piece of theirs and use that as a growth piece.” (Kathy)</p>
Professional Development Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Past/current professional development opportunities • Limited professional development opportunities • Professional development needs 	<p>“And I will tell you that the ESL [English as a Second Language] endorsement that we have here... is not mandatory in our teacher training program, but I... think we're headed in that direction. But if it were, it would be wonderful, because what those types of courses do is they teach teachers a) how these students are learning, and b) how to support them in their development. And some of these strategies are as simple as picture supports as you're talking... if our teachers are trained to support language development everywhere, that's going to support all the children's literacy for sure, right? If we get those kinds of methods embedded in all our programming, all our teacher training, it would only help” (Kathy).</p>

Evaluating the Trustworthiness of Qualitative Findings

My professional experience as a teacher and teacher’s trainer in my home country (Pakistan) has provided me with a theoretical and practical understanding of the studied phenomenon. At the time of my introduction to the research participants, I referred to my teaching experience, which was helpful in building a trusting relationship with participants. Because of our relationship, I found the participants were open and expressive in sharing their responses, which enabled me to develop an in-depth understating of the studied phenomenon. Before interviewing the participants, I assumed classroom teachers witnessed involvement of all

parents in U.S. schools due to accountability systems. However, the findings of the study demonstrated that in some schools, parental involvement is limited or non-existent.

Despite my teaching experiences, I looked at data objectively. Although I developed an understanding of teaching strategies regarding parental involvement, I had never implemented these strategies in a classroom environment due to differences in educational context between the US and Pakistan. Therefore, I kept an open mind by letting participants talk without any prompts beyond the questions and used direct quotes to avoid misinterpretation where there could be chances of bias. I emailed participants to verify or extend information from the interviews, thereby conducting member checking (Creswell, 2015). Three participants reviewed the electronic versions of their transcripts and subsequent codes and confirmed their agreement with my analysis. I also discussed results with professionals not involved in the study to overcome research bias and discussed major themes with participants to determine the degree to which the findings reflected the participants' experiences.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative collective case study was to increase understanding of strategies used by elementary teachers in the United States public sector schools to engage parents in the development of their children's literacy skills. More specifically, I intended to identify strategies useful for increasing parental involvement and, subsequently, improving the growth of children's reading and writing skills. I was also interested in learning about the challenges teachers face while involving parents and was curious about the professional development opportunities available for promoting teachers' knowledge about working with parents. Therefore, as a purposive sampling technique, the snowball method (Creswell, 2015) was used to recruit five retired and/or practicing elementary school teachers. Participants were reached through principal-distributed letters that requested teachers willing to be interviewed. To collect data, these participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol.

The study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are teachers' general beliefs about parental involvement in the teaching-learning process, and more specifically, what role do they believe parents play in improving children's literacy skills?
2. What strategies do elementary teachers use for promoting home-school connections that can engage parents in improving their children's literacy skill?
3. What challenges do teachers face while engaging parents in the development of their children's literacy skills and what strategies do they use to overcome them?
4. What professional development opportunities exist for teachers that promote their

knowledge about working with parents for supporting children's literacy skills?

Findings

The data analysis process led to the identification of four major themes: teachers' beliefs regarding parental involvement; strategies to engage parents in the development of children's literacy skills as well as strategies to overcome challenges; challenges teachers face while engaging parents; and need for and existence of professional development opportunities to promote teachers' knowledge of working with parents.

Teachers' Beliefs Regarding Parental Involvement

As mentioned in Chapter 2 of this study, parental involvement in children's education is one of the most significant aspects of delivering quality classroom instruction across different grade levels. However, teachers around the world hold different beliefs regarding parental involvement, and thus, the degree of parental involvement not only varies across countries, but within countries. Detailed discussions with the participants enhanced my knowledge of how and why the degree of parental involvement differs in various districts in one of the local regions of the United States. Victoria stated that,

In the United States parents really own the schools. They pay taxes and their tax dollar goes to the school, so I think the parents feel invested and want to be parent helpers, and the teacher says, "Yes, I want you to come and help." So, I think it's very give-and-take: it's a very equal opportunity investment. The parents want to be there; the teachers want them to be there.

Due to this give and take situation, from Victoria's perspective, parental involvement in the United States is relatively high. However, during a similar discussion with another participant, Kathy mentioned that,

It depends on where you are geographically, what district you're in. Some districts have incredible parental involvement, really one hundred percent, then there are some other districts within our country that are close to none. It's so interesting because there are diverse experiences depending on where you are at.

Findings from Kathy's interview indicated that the amount of parental involvement depends on the location. Another participant, Becky, had a similar perspective, saying, "It depends on the location of the district, the educational background of parents, and the cultural makeup of the family."

These findings demonstrated that, from the participants' perspectives, in the districts where parents were more educated, aware that their involvement matters, and more open to adopt changes, they were also more involved with their children's schooling. Moreover, if a school's location is accessible to everybody, parental involvement is increased in that particular district.

However, based on a discussion with one of the participants, I identified that along with these important factors, there is yet another important factor that contributes to increasing parental involvement. Victoria shared,

In this particular school, I worked in, the amount of parental involvement was phenomenal, and it was because the school welcomed it. They didn't ban the parents from being in the building, which, a lot of times, teachers don't want parents unannounced, because they might not be teaching perfectly. So, in this school, we were always on our toes, we were always teaching. We weren't pretending. So, I think if a school is open and welcoming to the parents, you are going to see a lot more involvement.

Findings from this interview suggest that parental involvement depends on the amount of emphasis school personnel place on parental involvement. In districts where parents are involved one-hundred percent, there are ample opportunities for parents to be involved. These educators want parents to aid teachers in different classroom activities, so parents can extend those activities at home to support their children's learning. On the other hand, in some other districts where teachers do not want parents to come and see what is going on with their children in school, they

may be resistant to inviting and involving parents. In addition, participants' responses suggest that parental involvement depends on their children's grade level as well. Becky reported that,

in fourth and fifth grade, I didn't use a lot of parents during the day because we were trying to promote independence with the kids and getting them to plan their parties, and we had a lot of different support staff helping us with reading and writing. But now in kindergarten, I couldn't do it without the parents. So, I think it just depends on the grade level and what kind of teacher you are, and how much control you like in your classroom versus how much help you like.

This finding not only indicated that teachers of young children are more dependent on parents' support as compared to the teachers of older children but also highlighted the role of a teacher in promoting parental involvement. Some teachers do not want parents visiting them every day, and other teachers have classrooms that are open to parents to come and visit at any time of the entire day. Another participant, Victoria, shared,

My classroom is open to parents at any time. They can come and visit for the entire day. They can come and visit for an hour. My philosophy is that it's *our* classroom because it's their children and they are entrusting me with their children every day of the week. It's our room and we are working together as a team to get the children to progress through the system.

In contrast to Victoria's view on parents' involvement in class, Becky said,

I love parents, but we need them at certain times, and then we need them to let us work with their child and get their child moving along. So, parents are invited into the school, but not necessarily into the classroom, because that would throw off our day. I have a few criers, so if they saw their mom, it would be tears—they would be done learning for the day.

Participants' beliefs on parental involvement reveal that the degree of parental involvement varies from district to district and teacher to teacher; however, every participant acknowledged the need for parental involvement. Some teachers may welcome parents in classrooms to work as a team to help children progress, whereas others may want parents more involved with their children at home. During another discussion about parental involvement, Becky said,

I think the best way that parents can support their kids is at home, when they are not here in the learning environment, in this structured environment that we set up. I mean, I love having parents come in, but I also want parents to do stuff with their kids at night.

Knowledge of participants' beliefs about parental involvement led to investigation of their perceptions of parental involvement in developing children's literacy skills. Victoria said,

in my opinion, literacy covers everything; it's in math; it's in science; it's in social studies. If you can get the kids loving reading a story, that's horrid you know at the fourth-grade reading level. At the fourth-grade level, they should love reading and they should love listening to the stories.

Victoria's perspective regarding literacy illuminated the significant need of literacy. Her view indicates that children need literacy in any content area; therefore, their love for reading should be enhanced during earlier grades to gain greater success in older grades. To share parents' contribution in inculcating this love for reading in children, Becky shared,

Not every parent is a high school graduate, but I think in kindergarten every parent can help. Every parent knows the alphabet; every parent knows most of the English words to read, so I think, just reading with your kids is getting them to love books and love reading.

The finding from Becky's interview clearly suggests that parents can get children to love reading by just reading with them. Virginia also believes that "it's important for the students and the parents to read together, so when students go to school, they can be successful in reading and language arts." During another discussion on the relationship between parental involvement and development of children's literacy skills, Kathy described that "literacy is everywhere; it's not just reading and writing. It's in all content areas, and there is such a difference between academic literacy and native literacy." She emphasized that even if parents cannot help their child to read in English, they can add value in time spent together. They can have their child read to them and appreciate without even understanding, which will develop a relationship between parent and child to read and talk, which Kathy suggests is helpful in developing literacy, as "literacy cannot be

achieved in isolation.” Yet another participant, Queen, reported that “Without a doubt, I feel that if you can get the parents involved, the children will be so much more successful.”

After hearing participants affirm that every parent can contribute in some way to helping children develop literacy, I explored how these teachers involved parents to help children in developing literacy skills. This exploration uncovered strategies elementary teachers used to involve parents.

Teachers’ Strategies to Engage Parents in Children’s Literacy Development

My discussion with the participants revolved around one common idea: Parental involvement is critical. Every participant in this study emphasized that the most important factor in gaining parental involvement is building a positive relationship with them. Participants shared that building these relationships requires making the parents feel comfortable by valuing their contributions. Queen shared,

You need to make sure that you’re building relationships and that you’re starting out positive. So, meet with them and talk to them about their child, because who knows more about their child than the parents? And so, together, starting that relationship and really showing that you care about their child and that you care about what they know about their child...is so important.

She also reported that “If the teacher is more personable and if the teacher really has some good strategies and experience [with getting] the parents involved, that’s what makes it successful.” In regards to starting relationships on a positive note, she said,

I think it’s important to set the goal of what you want to accomplish that year for the parents. If you can even write down the goals for them, I think that helps a lot because they really don’t know.

However, she also emphasized that while setting goals, communication with parents is key, and so teachers need to be careful while communicating with them. She said,

The one thing that I have found, it's very important to make sure you don't use educational jargon. If you have a meeting with the parent, and one of the goals is to increase comprehension or increase fluency, most parents would go, "I don't even know what that means and I definitely don't know how to do it." So, you have to be careful that when you're setting the goals and communicating with the parents, they understand.

While extending discussion on the concept of creating links with parents to start off healthy and positive home-school connections, all five participants indicated that open, clear, and honest communication is the key. Victoria shared that,

Communication is key in my book. It doesn't matter if you have 6 kids or 26 kids, you need to communicate with your families. When I had a large group of kids, 20, every week I would pick like 8 to 10 kids that I was going to communicate with their families and then the next week it was the other half of class, so that parents at least every other week heard about their child and what is going on at home.

She also shared that her classroom parents were more involved for a specific reason:

I was very honest and open with them. I do not play around with words if their child was misbehaving. I let them know right away, 'this is what your child did, this is what I did, and these are the consequences for the next week or two days, or at home.'

Discussion regarding the need to communicate with parents for creating home-school connections led participants to share different strategies for developing positive communication with parents. Virginia shared that,

I think communication is huge. My son's teacher had an app called the class dojo, and she would write us a letter almost daily, because first graders don't know how to tell their parents. So, I'd just go to log in, and I could see how his behavior was, and here the teacher would write what we should work on. I think daily communication like that really helps, and it's an app, so it's free, the schools don't have to spend money, the parents don't have to spend money, and it really opens that communication.

Victoria reported,

My kids have take-home folders which have all the graded homework in it, so that parents can delineate between 'this is the stuff we keep at home,' and 'this we need to work on and it goes back to school.' So, those things we do, and I communicate with parents. We all agreed texting using our phones was the best and most immediate way to communicate with the families, so it was just superb the last couple of years with my families that I worked with that we could text to each other.

Queen added,

If you have a homework folder and you tell parents every week you will send home their work, then you as a parent need to look at their work and praise your child, and I think that's very important because the child will then understand that the parents think that it's important. So, if the parents can visually see, 'oh, I understand, you're working on the letter A or you're learning this or you're learning that,' that I think is very important. And then you can even give little rewards for the parents to look at the homework and the child to bring back the folder, so then it's a really good communication.

The aforementioned findings not only demonstrated the value of technology in the communication process but also suggested the use of take-home folders as an effective way to bolster communication between parents and teachers. While Victoria and Queen indicated that this communication gave parents a chance to view the progress of their children at school, Kathy shared the other side of take-home folders. She said,

I love the folder idea, I really do, but the parents who are already involved are going to do it at 100%, but those who aren't, [those] that you're really trying to encourage [to be] involved...they're not going to pull them out of the backpacks, and I've seen that happen. And then, I've seen the students come back without the signed folder, and I've seen some teachers who have, if your folder isn't signed, you have to stay in for recess. Well, it's not the kid's fault that their folder wasn't signed. It's their... and so now they have this guilt that they've failed because their mom wouldn't sign their folder...It makes the kids not want to even take that folder home because there's a possibility it won't get signed. There's the parent going, "Are you kidding me? You're the teacher, why do I have to sign this folder?" You know, they see it as, "This is not my job, this is your job."

The findings from Victoria, Queen, and Kathy's interviews show that a strategy that is effective for one teacher may not be effective for another teacher. However, teachers still can think of some ways to make that strategy work, as Queen said that teachers can reward parents to make them more responsive towards their children's take-home folders.

In response to Victoria's idea of technology use, Queen reinforced the idea of continual communication with families, using technology to suggest parents could do certain activities at home as well as providing them with clear directions on how to do. She also shared that in one of the districts she served, teachers were going out to visit parents in their homes to help parents

understand the goals they were working on. Becky also shared that she constantly communicates with parents by sending a lot of emails home because she needs to be available for her students from 8:25 to 3:00— during that time she cannot talk to parents.

My discussion with Victoria regarding the concept of having constant communication with parents helped me understand that teachers need to know about every individual family to communicate with them effectively. Victoria indicated that she needs to talk to one family in one way, and then while talking to yet another family, she may need to be a little more concise and clear in her directions. To know each family individually, Victoria shared that,

We did a “get to know my family” right at the beginning of the year, for which the kids had to go home and interview their family and ask Mom and Dad, ‘Where did you go to high school, where did you go to college, where do you work, what kinds of things do you like to do?’ All these questions will give me an idea of who am I working with or what level of understanding might this parent have so that when I am communicating with them I am not insulting them. Before school started, we have a come to school, bring your supplies, meet your teacher day which is really a cool way for me to feel out the families. They all came, they all brought their kids and I got to meet the people one-on-one before school even started, so I got an idea of their communication with their children. How do they communicate with their kiddos and how do they communicate with me?

The finding from Victoria’s interview shows the effectiveness of knowing individual families to build a positive communication between home and school. Based on my understanding from the review of literature, I believe such communication can also help teachers and parents coordinate their activities, so that teachers have more opportunities to take advantage of parents’ knowledge and parents have easy access to teachers’ expertise. Such relationships can ultimately result in enhancing students’ motivation and receptiveness towards literacy-related tasks (Feiler et al., 2008). Therefore, knowledge of the general strategies used to communicate and build relationships with parents led to exploration of how these relationships are used in developing children’s literacy skills. Participants’ approaches for developing children’s reading and writing

skills revealed a variety of strategies, including what programs are arranged for parents by schools and what strategies are used for engaging parents in the development of their children's literacy skills at home. Regarding inviting parents to schools, Kathy reported,

They have guest readers in the classroom, it could be a grandma, it could be a mom, it could be whoever, but that really excites students. I have seen them be so excited and say, 'Guess who's coming today to be our guest reader?' 'Oh, my mom.' 'Oh, my grandma.' That's a small little piece, but then at home, you have the shared reading time for sure.

Victoria added,

We had reading nights at the school and this was a whole school event, so four times a year we had literacy reading nights where the teachers and students were involved in planning the events. It's kind of like stations, so this section of the building the children read to the parents and then this section of the building the parents read to the children and this section of the building they play language games. So, they would move three different times to three sections of the building and that was for children and families, and it was well attended.

She further shared that her school had a music program before the holiday break, and parents were invited to come to school to hear their kids' music. She also reported that at the end of the year they had a graduation ceremony in which children were awarded spelling and reading awards. She indicated that some of the children also received presidential reading awards, and parents were involved in helping their children meet the reading criteria. Another participant, Virginia, shared that inviting parents to read voluntarily to the class is beneficial because children love hearing their parents read to the whole class. She also shared that her school has had literacy and portfolio nights. She said that she liked portfolio nights because teachers can help students create their own portfolio and invite parents to come and see their children's portfolios. She noted that even parents who are not well-educated can come on portfolio nights to appreciate their children's efforts.

Queen shared that her school had family reading nights four times a year, and parents were invited to come with their children. Teachers set up different centers for parents to work on

different reading activities with their children. For instance, parents could “create a game using parts of speech or whatever” and take it home to practice with their children. Parents could even read aloud with their children, and the teacher’s job is going around group to group to assist parents in their activities. She said that this strategy really worked well in building relationships with parents; however, she noted that teachers had to do a lot of work to set that all up. She reported that,

One time we created a parent’s library in the school. We of course had grant funds, so we could buy the books and buy games and create a place. That was really nice to have a parent center where they could come, and keep them working all through the summer . . . if they have books, then we would have a time like once a month or once a week, where the parent and child would bring the book and get a different book. So, they kept exchanging books, because then everybody only should have one book and then keep bringing that book back and changing it, and then they thought that was fun to do that and that’s not expensive to do, but it’s just to keep coming up with more ideas.

Based on my discussion with the participants, I noted that in most of the cases, literacy-related activities at school were extended, so that parents would be able to work on them with their children at home. During our interview, Queen said, “It’s not parents’ jobs to teach the child new skills, the teacher teaches the new skills, the parents are backing it up, like reinforcing it.” Therefore, I further deepened the discussion to identify other strategies teachers used to engage parents to reinforce their children’s literacy skills at home. In our discussion, Queen emphasized the strategy of children reading with adults and shared the idea of sending books home. She shared that when she was teaching, she had “surprise bags” for her students that were all by topic, so students had a choice to pick the books that interested them to take home and read with parents during the week. She further shared that she tried to select books for surprise bags that were interesting to parents too, and children really loved those books because there were “a lot of pictures and cool information.” Providing a twist on this strategy, Victoria shared that at the end of the year her students selected books from their home cultures and brought them to

class to read. Then, the whole class worked on one book for one week, studying vocabulary from those books and talking about the details. As an example, she shared that,

One girl chose Ann Frank, a very short synopsis of Ann Frank. So, we talked about what was the Holocaust and who all was involved in that, because it wasn't just Jewish people. So, it really kind of, at a 5th grade level, opened their eyes a little bit about something they heard about they really didn't understand. So, taking different cultures absolutely is important. Especially if there are different cultures within your classroom. So, this little girl who chose the Ann Frank book is a German, of German decent, but is Jewish. So, her ancestors were involved in this thing, but she didn't quite understand what it meant. So, at a 5th grade level, we talked about how people were gathered and then they were killed just because they were of a certain faith.

She reported further:

One of the things that I do with my children and my families is we have a weekly reading log, and my students are required by the end of the week to have read at least a hundred minutes with a family member...It should be an adult, they read to the adult and then I have given the parents' questions, general questions, that they can ask about any story that the child is reading. So, they are higher level thinking questions, like who is the main character, more of a "how do you think that person feels?" or "why do you think that person feels that way?" So, the children are thinking, and parents are getting that language from their children.

While talking to participants about their strategies, I realized that emphasis was placed on reading with parents. Although participants did not mention the benefits of shared reading, it seems that engaging parents with their children to read and talk about the content increases comprehension and vocabulary. Moreover, this approach helps children share their thoughts more fluently. Victoria introduced yet another strategy saying that when she started working on story reading with a group of six students, she used a strategy called "front loading," in which she introduced vocabulary items from selected stories very shallowly in the classroom. Later she designed vocabulary sheets for parents to use at home. Children were supposed to read the story to parents at night, and parents were expected to help children in understanding given vocabulary items by assisting their children to use them in sentences from the stories. She said that using this strategy made children more excited about reading and let parents experience more success at

home in helping children to acquire language. During a similar discussion with Virginia, she shared a strategy her older son's teacher was using to involve her as a parent in developing her sons' writing skills that she really liked:

My son was in fifth grade and my other son was in fourth grade... We had a journal that was wonderful, and we used to write, they would write to me, and I would write to them, and it went back and forth every week... then teacher could also write in their journals as well, and so we were communicating back and forth and that was so important. [Additionally,] the teacher could look at how they were writing, not really looking at their grammar/punctuation, but how are their thoughts going, just writing, writing, writing, without even correcting their grammar punctuation, I feel it just helps in the long run as open writing.

Kathy reported a similar experience with journaling,

Lots of teachers journal back and forth with their students. The teacher will write a note in the journal, and the student writes back, but if you have that mom/son or dad/son journaling back and forth, that is awesome... And it, oh my gosh, it really really increases... well, the relationship. And so, then if you have that relationship, you can move from there. And so then if you start out in the parent-child journal with... easy questions that anybody can answer, great. But then as you work through the semester, you could say "Write down the three things that you learned this week" or "Tell your mom about three things that you learned this week" or something like that... Now you're engaging the parents in what's happening in the classroom.

Of all the shared strategies, only Kathy and Virginia talked about writing, which is another important productive skill to develop literacy. Findings from Kathy's and Virginia's interviews demonstrated the effectiveness of journaling in terms of increasing children's writing fluency to give them a path for thinking and expressing their feelings and thoughts. In this writing process, students are excited by their parents' responsiveness because it encourages them to write more. After learning about strategies participants were using to involve parents in developing their students' literacy skills, I examined challenges they faced while involving parents and some strategies that could be used to overcome those challenges.

Challenges Faced by Teachers' While Engaging Parents and Strategies Used to Overcome Them

As stated in Chapter 2, a diverse range of factors may hinder the creation of links between home and school. To learn about my participants' experiences with their students' families, they were asked questions, and their answers showed variation in their views based on their personal experiences. Victoria, shared that "For me, it has never been a challenge" to involve parents because she always welcomed parents and they were allowed to come to her room at any time during the school day. She said it is a challenge for some teachers "because of the way they view themselves, they do have problems with the parents because they make the parents feel like the teacher is higher than the parents." She further shared that,

Some of my colleagues did have difficulty with families, and I think one of the main difficulties a lot of them had was that they didn't want the parents to have their email or their cell phone numbers, so you are cutting off a main way that people are communicating today, especially younger parents...The other thing is that they were very rigid in after school activities. Like if they wanted the parents to come and visit, they would only stay until 4:30. Well parents are working till 5:00...You have to invest your time. And like I said, the time I invest with parents is paid back when I need them.

Findings from Victoria's interview suggested that involving parents with their children's schooling is not a challenge at all if a teacher is more open and welcoming in his or her ways to involve parents. I think it is interesting that her interview also suggests that teachers' attitudes towards their own work, not just towards parents, influences the level of parental involvement they can secure. If they view their work as a "career" and are willing to be flexible with their schedules, they are more likely to build positive and purposeful relationships with parents.

However, contrary to Victoria's views, Kathy reported that,

My experience is that when there is a lack of involvement, it's primarily because the parents don't realize the value of the involvement. So, either, not that they don't want to, but they see it as 'That's the teacher in the school's job, my job is to stay home and provide. Let's don't confuse the two.' That's an attitude. Another is they just have too many plates juggling in the air, so they have to work, ... maybe they're going to school, maybe they're single parent homes, maybe it's zero parent homes, you know if this child is in foster care or living with an extended family situation, there's no parent in the child's life, so there can't possibly be parental involvement in the school. And a lot of times there's surrogate

involvement in those cases, meaning perhaps Grandma comes in or maybe a court-appointed guardian, it's just not the same. There's not that vested interest. Not that they don't have a strong desire for that student to succeed, but it's just more of a job. In my experience, I never see it as an administrative issue. In the districts that I have experience with, they have all had really strong desires to foster that link and have programs in place and strategies and place to do that to support that connection.

Findings from Victoria's and Kathy's interviews portray completely opposite pictures regarding the lack of parental involvement, almost two extremes. However, these findings show that challenges exist for both parents and teachers that hinder the creation of home-school connections. In Queen's view,

Most of the time, it is a problem. The younger grades that you teach, it's easier to get parents involved. The older the kids are, the harder it is to get parents involved. Many times, when you're working in a school where the parents have struggled themselves in school, they're very fearful of a school, and they didn't do well in school, they never felt comfortable in school. So, they really love their children, they want their children to succeed, but they really don't know how to teach them at home.

She also shared that it is hard to involve parents who have "busy schedules," parents who are divorced, and parents with different cultures. She stated,

There is a big difference in what the culture expects is the teachers' job and the parents' job. It differs, and there was a school and the parents were Latino. Most of them were from Mexico, and they did not have any understanding of what their child should know in school totally. And so, we had many parent nights, and they would bring in the whole family, which they have many people that live together in that culture. So, the cultural differences can be a really big barrier. And then, often, it's only one of the parents that speaks English, too. And usually it's the one that's working, so usually it's the dad that speaks English, and he's working. It's hard, it's hard.

Becky also indicated that it is hard to involve parents who speak a language other than English.

She said,

Most of the parents, if they don't speak English, it's very hard for them to come in and help in the classroom, because when you're dealing with five-year old's, you can't really read with them and do a word workstation with them if you can't understand what they're saying. So as much as parents would want to help in the classroom, they really can't. They could come in and watch and just observe.

Discussion with Kathy further reinforced Becky's view that language is the biggest barrier. She stated,

With literacy, specifically, I think the biggest barrier is language. So many of our parents don't speak the same language in the home as their students are learning. So, they almost feel like their 3rd grader has better knowledge than they do, so they don't want to participate in that literacy piece. They may be all about coming to the school, but that part of it, they are hands-off because they don't feel comfortable. So, I would say language is the number one barrier to literacy. And especially the academic language.

In a similar discussion, Virginia reported that, in her experience, full-time working parents are hard to involve; however, parents with less socioeconomic resources "are going to be the hardest to reach out to."

Based on the findings generated from Kathy's interview, parents' lack of English proficiency makes them feel uncomfortable when getting involved in literacy-related tasks. However, based on the views of other participants, it is also difficult for teachers to involve parents in supporting children's reading and writing growth. If parents speak another language, they may belong to a different culture that teachers need to understand before involving them. School personnel may need to offer some extra support, for example arranging for interpreters or scheduling school events, which might not be possible for every school district. In addition, teachers may need to spend some extra hours to develop cultural understanding, which some of the teachers may do not want to do as indicated by Victoria. Thus, this barrier may remain unattended, and these parents might not find opportunities to be involved and play their potential roles.

The differing views among participants about challenges they faced while involving parents inspired me to learn more about the ways participants tried to overcome challenges over the years. Becky shared that although teachers do a good job in reaching out to parents, "they can't force them to want to be involved." Kathy advised, "Meet parents where they're at, validate

their thoughts, value their ideas, and then talk about yours and hope that you can pull a piece of theirs and use that as a growth piece.” Virginia also supported Kathy’s views, saying “Trying to reach out to the parents as much as you can, and letting the parents know that you care and even calling them in for meetings, ‘Hey, here is how we can help you, I can help you help your child,’ that would be the best thing to involve parents.” Building upon these ideas, almost all the five participants agreed on the idea of educating parents to realize that their involvement matters. Virginia said, “Educate them [parents], so that they know that they need to have a team, so it’s the parents, the student, and the educator. It’s like a triangle, you have to work together. And even if it’s kindergarten, even if it’s a little preschool, it’s a whole team working together.”

Queen shared,

It’s a night and day difference if the parents are involved, and I think then that is the job of the teacher to get the parent to understand that, that many parents feel like, ‘OK so you send your child to school and then it’s the school’s job, it’s the teacher’s job to educate that child,’ and so that’s a very important fact to get across to the parent, that the child, your child, is going to be successful if we work together.

Becky said,

When we were kids, things were taught completely different. Now that it’s 2016, we have all these new programs and fun ways of doing things, and so the parents have to be taught, re-taught, so that they understand the thinking behind why we’re teaching, what we are teaching, and how we are teaching. So, I think if we educate the parents, that’s so much better for the kids. And if you don’t, then they can’t help. Then they’re really just teaching their kids how they learned it, and that’s not necessarily what’s best for them now in 2016.

Participants’ emphasis on educating parents raised my interest in knowing how parents can be educated, and I wondered whether there were programs initiated by school leaders to educate parents or if teachers’ personal efforts educated parents on how they can help their children in developing literacy skills. Through participants’ responses, I learned that it is both. Becky shared,

Every reading strategy that I have ever used with kids in the classroom, I sent home a packet of information, 'Here's this strategy, here's what it means, here's how you can practice it,' and we would do examples in the classroom. And when parents would come, to curriculum night, which was in September, like one night, the parents would all come and I would do a power point and, I would show them exactly how to teach your child to read, what are some things you can work on, and I gave them explicit examples of what they could do...But a lot of it was online things, it was, 'Here's this website, go on with your child, read this, answer some questions together, talk about what you're reading about.' I think that was the most important thing, was just giving them the information and showing them examples of what to do, and making it fun, sending home little games and little websites that they could go on together. That always made it fun.

Queen supported Becky's ideas, saying,

Whatever you want the parents to work on, you as a teacher, provide the supplies if it's books, papers, whatever, because you just can't jump to the conclusion that they have it, and you have to really explain and model for them what you want them to do because if you just say, 'Well, can you read with your child and ask them questions,' well, I have found that the parents might ask them a question like 'So, what was the dog's name?' in-depth, no kind of comprehension, so I think that you have to model that for them.

Queen added.

I just send one thing, instead of a big amount, to start with, because for some parents that's enough just to start thinking about reading with their children and supporting the school, where it's not too much, but... This one time we did this that I sent this home, and then it can be any kind of animal, anything, but kids like dragons, and so then you send it home and then the kids get to color in one of the scales every time they read with their parent for 15 minutes. And then, when all the scales are colored in, and you know they would cover all of it, but then they bring it back and then you give them a little sticker or reward and hang this up in the classroom, and so they can feel proud, because the parents know that there is a reward for their child, they'll work harder... because they don't want their child to be the one that doesn't have this hanging up, and so it's a visual to remind them to read.

Queen also suggested, "Send home books that aren't too hard for the kids to make sure that it's at their reading level, or even a little lower, so that at home, they're successful. Otherwise, it's a fail, it's too hard, takes too much time."

In their interviews, Becky and Queen discussed their personal efforts to educate parents.

The three most effective strategies they provide were giving parents detailed information about the task, modelling the assigned task, and sending home age-appropriate and short reading

materials. These strategies are a great help for parents who have language barriers because their understanding of the literacy-related task may increase parents' comfort level and motivate them to become more involved.

Based on a detailed discussion with participants, I found that language is the number one barrier related to literacy, so I asked participants about what role school personnel were playing in helping parents overcome this language barrier. In her response, Kathy described services provided by a local school district. She reported that in that district, all materials that went home are written in both English and Spanish and additional professional staff are employed by the school who conduct home liaisons in which parents are encouraged, and their culture is respected and valued. She shared that to help parents learn the language, they send audio books home to be played "out loud" to overcome the language barrier.

Victoria said,

I know we have one school here, where all the international children go to school, and they do a lot of very nice activities with the families, cultural night where families bring in different foods and different activities, dances, art projects. They provide interpreters for the parents in the language that they speak, so that when they meet with the teachers, there is clear communication... So don't be sending notes home to parents who can't read, that's ridiculous. That's when you need to send home an audio note, it's easy to do. Our school had a lot of these kind of tape recorders that we can send back and forth with parents who can hear and understand better than reading.

Becky also mentioned that interpreters can be valuable at a schoolwide literacy night. She felt that the ability for parents to ask teachers questions in their first language was useful, and the interpreters also gave teachers a chance to communicate strategies to parents. After teachers explained their challenges with parental involvement and suggested solutions, I investigated what role professional development opportunities can play in promoting teachers' knowledge of building home-school connections.

Existence of Professional Development Opportunities to Promote Teachers' Knowledge of Working with Parents

In my experience, one of the main reasons for limited parental involvement in Pakistan's public schools is teachers' lack of information about the positive potential of parental involvement. One of the researchers (i.e., Simkins et al., 1998) presented in Chapter 1 also reported a lack of information about the benefits of parental involvement in Pakistan that is available to head teachers, teachers, and parents. Therefore, I was eager to know what professional development opportunities were offered to elementary teachers in the United States that are helpful in promoting their knowledge of working with parents. During a discussion regarding this concept, Virginia said, "I have never been in a training [about parental involvement] that I can remember"; however, she did say,

I think any kind of education would help. I would say if you're a good teacher, you want more education, and I think teachers would appreciate getting ideas... one of the professional development days before school begins, that would be really beneficial. Having the parents help you help the child is so important... I think a good educator would want the training.

Becky saw financial and logistic reasons for a lack of professional development opportunities specifically related to engaging parents:

We have so much professional development during the year on curriculum, our curriculum's changing all the time...and they would have to spend money on getting us subs [substitute teachers], so that would be hard. I mean, I think we probably all would love to do it, but we work... we're tired. The nine months, ten months that we work, it's jam packed... So I'm not saying that people wouldn't, I think they would, but it would probably have to be summer professional development, I'm guessing.

Virginia reported in her interview that she had also received no special training related to parental involvement during her tenure; however, she suggested that teachers would appreciate getting ideas, and she believes that if teachers were to be offered any professional development opportunity before school begins, it would be a great help for them to work with parents.

Similarly, Becky indicated that in her current district, most professional development opportunities offered were related to curriculum; however, her suggestion was that if trainings on parental involvement were offered during the summer, teachers would be more responsive towards them. Queen said she had been to some “workshops and conferences,” but that she hadn’t been given specific training in college or when she first started teaching. She did say that she tries to pass on what she knows to other teachers, however. Kathy offered her perspective on what sort of trainings, specifically, might be helpful to teachers:

And I will tell you that the ESL [English as a Second Language] endorsement that we have here...is not mandatory in our teacher training program, but I... think we're headed in that direction. But if it were, it would be wonderful, because what those types of courses do is they teach teachers a) how these students are learning, and b) how to support them in their development. And some of these strategies are as simple as picture supports as you're talking...if our teachers are trained to support language development everywhere, that's going to support all the children's literacy for sure, right? If we get those kinds of methods embedded in all our programming, all our teacher training, it would only help.

Findings from the interviews cited above indicate that there were no specific professional development opportunities available to participants that could be helpful in working with parents. However, Victoria had a slightly different experience as a teacher-in-training of deaf and hard of hearing students:

I had a ton of opportunities. I went here for my elementary and deaf ed degree, and when I was working on my deaf Ed degree, I lived in the residence hall on a floor with 42 deaf students. So, I saw lots of deaf culture activities going on...to be accepted by the deaf community, you have to understand their culture, and they can tell right away if a person understands their culture or not. So, when you have a parent who is deaf, I don't have problems with parents who are deaf. Because I don't try to talk down to them. I just talk to them like I am talking to you. And sometimes people who have no exposure to deaf adults think they must talk to them like they are children. So, that goes back to understanding cultures, so when you choose to work in a school that has 52 different cultures going on, you better understand those cultures. Even if it is reading articles about that culture or getting to know some of the families, going to culture night activities, there's tons of that stuff going on in this town. You just have to make time to do it. So, I think if you are choosing to work with a specific population of children, you must know

them, and so then you put yourself into those workshops or you put yourself into that development. As a student, it would be the job of the professor or the department to make sure that those types of activities are available for the students.

From Victoria's perspective, I identified that it is more of the job of professors to ensure the availability of activities that can help student teachers in their teaching career. However, she also reported concerns about the way future teachers are taught as students, expressing that many professors did not take time to explain how parents might be involved in future lessons.

Because Victoria was providing her services as a trainer of elementary teachers at the time of our interview, I asked if she was teaching specific strategies to her students during training. She shared that whenever she did projects in reading and language arts courses, she "Would add a little part about how you get the parents involved or the guardian or whoever is raising that child." She shared the following views about how teachers should be trained:

I think practical [application] is better than an article. That's how, I learn and that's what I do when I am doing teacher training here. Anytime we did an activity, I saw the retention was higher than when I will give them something to read and then talk about it. So I think workshops is a great way to go. And even peer mentoring, like if you have a great skill, this is what we do a lot with other teachers of the deaf. One girl was superb in dealing with how to reward children without letting them know that you are rewarding them. So she would work with us on that. We had a teacher who was great with behavior strategies. And so we each had skills and we would share them with each other after school, that's another way, as you become a professional. Sometimes the schools can't afford to constantly do workshops, so we did our own little workshops just with the five of us teachers.

Her views regarding training teachers were more focused on giving them practical exposure to working with children, as she indicated that teachers can learn from each other to bring improvement in their teaching skills. Extending her thoughts on how she was giving practical exposure to her students along with teaching method courses, she stated,

Each semester, along with the methods courses that we were teaching, they had a clinical experience where they could try the different activities that we were teaching them in methods courses. They went into classrooms and worked with real children, so they didn't have to work with each other...I have a lot of friends who say "I will never take one of those students in my room." But I'm like, "But how did YOU learn?" How do we expect to

raise new teachers? So, I always take whoever wants to come to my room, I don't care where are they from, they can come and work in my room with my kids. My kids love it; they love when new faces come in and work with them. So yes, the pre-service teachers must try things out. We were even lucky sometimes to get a group of parents to come and meet with our students and answer questions, what will work at their home and what wouldn't work at their home. So, then the students were getting the ideas of 'Oh I need to talk to all my parents not just what worked at my house when I was a kid.' So, people must get past that.

Findings show that teachers view parental involvement as a crucial element in children's overall academic success, as well as in developing their literacy skills, specifically. However, the degree of parental engagement in school wide programs and at home is influenced by teacher's beliefs, personality, opportunities offered to parents at the district level, and parents' diversity. It is interesting to know that no professional development opportunities are offered to the teachers to work with parents; they are simply using a variety of strategies for promoting parental involvement that they have developed on their own and by sharing their knowledge with one another.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Discussion

Parents must be involved in the learning processes for the effective education of their children (Bitter et al., 2009; Dempsey et al., 1995; Powell, 2013; Tan et al., 2009). Results from several studies demonstrated the significant potential of parental involvement for improving children's academic and social achievements, including literacy skills (Fawcett et al., 2013; Powell, 2013; Roberts et al., 2005). It is believed that even students who struggle with reading or live in low socioeconomic communities benefit from consistent parental involvement during the primary grades (Crosby et al., 2015). In this study, a review of literature and findings from interviews with five elementary school teachers were used to make recommendations for other researchers and teachers to increase parental involvement for developing children's literacy skills in Pakistan and the U.S.

Value and Challenges of Involving Parents in Children's Literacy Development

Based on the review of literature, it stands to reason that teachers must do everything within their capacity to develop relationships with parents. Because parents are experts on their children, they not only facilitate teachers' classroom instructions by offering different volunteer roles but also contribute effectively in literacy-related tasks at home after benefiting from teachers' expertise. Subsequently, this bond will increase children's motivation and

receptiveness to absorb and respond to school and home-oriented literacy activities that could maximize their literacy development (Dearing et al., 2006; Feiler et al., 2008; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). Findings from participants' interviews also revealed their positive perceptions of developing connections with parents through constant, open, and honest communication. All the participants reached out to parents (e.g. creating websites containing the strategies and instructions) to unlock the parents' potential for promoting children's reading and writing skills. Paralleling August and Shanahan's (2010) finding that literacy is an essential life skill, Kathy also believes that literacy "is not just reading and writing. It's in all content areas." Per Boyd and Hirst (2016), social context promotes early literacy, and young children need encouragement and praise to explore writing and drawings available in their environments. Brown (2014) maintained that if children are to approach literacy as a social activity, they need to be engaged in reading and writing tasks with adults who create a social context for children. Findings from Kathy's interview further illuminated this idea of parents reading to their children and appreciating the experience. She thought it was necessary for creating an environment of reading and talking, which is helpful in developing literacy, asserting that "literacy cannot be achieved in isolation." Becky also believed that parents reading with their children allows "them to love books and love reading."

However, developing relationships with parents is not always an easy task for every teacher. For some teachers, like Victoria, involving parents may not be a challenge, but some others may experience several barriers while engaging parents. Based on the interviews, every participant wanted parents to be involved with their children and acknowledged that parents can contribute to the development of their children's literacy skills, because they are experts on their children. However, there are variations in the participants' views regarding the appropriate

amount of parental involvement in their classroom, as well as home-assigned literacy tasks. Researchers revealed that a common view of teachers and principals is that it is hard to reach parents (Lareau, 1989). Findings from interviews also supported this view, as in Kathy's view that if parents are not involved, it is primarily because parents do not value their involvement or are single parents and find it hard to be involved. Queen believed that it is not easy to reach out to parents who are divorced, have busy schedules, belong to a different culture, and may have struggled themselves while in school and, thus, are fearful of schools. For Becky, language is the biggest barrier to involving parents, which is also identified as the biggest barrier to literacy development based on Kathy's interview. In Virginia's experience, full-time working parents and parents with fewer socioeconomic resources are hardest to reach. Researchers also suggested that these barriers exist and create hindrances in creating home-school connections (Edwards, 2004; Harris et al., 2008; Hornby & Lafael, 2011).

Beyond these barriers, participants also discussed that geographical location and children's grade levels sometimes acted as barriers when they tried to engage parents. Contrary to Lareau, (1989), Harris and Goodal (2008) noted parents felt that teachers lack warmth while communicating with them and are not welcoming, which decreases parents' motivation to be involved with their children's schooling. This idea is reinforced by Victoria's claim that if there is a lack of parental involvement, it is because some teachers do not want to accept change and are reluctant to use their emails or cell phones to reach out to parents. They are not welcoming and show rigidity with their time and, thus, make parents feel that these teachers do not care about them. It seems that an increase or decrease in parental involvement is greatly influenced by the ways teachers and parents approach each other. Researchers also revealed that the partnership between the school and family is based on the beliefs of both parents and teachers. Parental

engagement increases when relationships between parents and teachers are characterized by trust, warmth, and communication (Jonson et al., 2009).

Strategies for Engaging Parents in their Children's Literacy Development

Regardless of the barriers, it is noteworthy that all the participants described effective strategies in overcoming challenges to help parents contribute to their children's literacy growth. The participants shared that they did not simply assume that parents can help their children in literacy-related tasks; rather, they attempted to assist parents in helping their children's literacy development. Becky believes that over the years, approaches to literacy have completely changed, so parents need to be "taught and re-taught" to understand their roles before helping their children. It is important to restate Queen's belief that teaching new skills to children is the teacher's responsibility while it is parents' responsibility to reinforce those skills. It is evident from participants' responses that when they engage parents in literacy-related tasks with their children, they are providing them supplies and resources. Teachers also offer parents detailed instructions on how they are expected to help. Teachers either develop websites containing detailed instructions, model those tasks for parents, or create PowerPoints to share with parents. Additionally, school personnel offer incentives to help parents in becoming more involved with use home liaisons to encourage and make parents understand the value of their roles, send audio books and tape-recorders home, and arrange family literacy nights to enable parents to better help their children in reading and writing tasks. The literature confirmed and illuminated these findings, suggesting that literacy intervention programs can help parents make a positive difference in children's literacy development (Morrow & Young, 1997; Huebner & Payne, 2010; Steiner, 2014).

Based on the evidence generated from interviews and research, parental involvement should not be limited to parents' participation in classroom activities only. Parents can be engaged with their children in literacy-related tasks at home (Fawcett et al., 2013). Because teaching and learning environments vary, teachers may not be able to invite and engage every parent in the classroom every day. As the participants described, they have school-wide literacy projects as well as home-oriented literacy tasks for engaging parents with their children's reading and writing skills. In regards to school-wide literacy projects, participants reported that they had literacy, portfolio, and family reading nights, parent libraries, and music programs to invite and engage parents in different reading tasks, as well as graduation ceremonies for awarding children with spelling and reading awards. Researchers gave credence to these findings, demonstrating that developing schoolwide literacy events like family reading and literacy nights foster a sense of community, help teachers improve their strategies, and enhance parents' information for helping their children's literacy growth (Fawcett et al., 2013; McGahey & Michelle, 2005; Morrow & Young 1997).

Moreover, during interviews all participants emphasized the idea of shared reading. They reported that they send literature home, use the strategy of weekly reading logs, and ask students to bring the books from their home cultures to read in the class. They shared that the focus of these strategies is on reading with adults, so that students may read and talk about their reading materials, which is effective because it excites students about reading with parents and helps parents feel more success at home. Researchers have also indicated that parents' engagement in conversation with children during shared, paired, or partner reading is one of the strongest predictors of children's literacy development (Barber, 1999; Dexter & Stacks, 2014; Fawcett et al. 2013; Powell, 2013; Roberts et al., 2005).

Surprisingly, findings from participants, except for Victoria, revealed that the teachers do not receive any training that could impart strategies useful for working with parents. However, they are making efforts on their own to learn those strategies. During a discussion regarding her exposure to strategies for promoting parental involvement, Virginia stated, “I have gotten different strategies from different experiences [that] I just think up on my own.” Contrary to other participants, discussion with Victoria revealed that there are many professional development opportunities available in her town; it just depends on teachers, that is, if they have time to participate and learn. It shows that if teachers are motivated to learn current strategies, they can make choices and learn to improve the quality of their teaching. Victoria shared that a lot of deaf culture activities were going on in her surroundings and that she took advantage of those opportunities and developed her understanding of working with deaf parents. She further shared that “sometimes the school can’t afford to constantly do workshops, so we did our own little workshops just with five of us teachers.”

Overview of the Discussion

Emerged from both interviews and the literature was the theme that parental involvement can make a difference in the development of children’s literacy skills. Therefore, every participant viewed parental involvement as an integral part of the teaching/learning process. Some participants believed that parents need to be involved in classroom activities, while others felt that parents can better help their children at home. Participants shared strategies they used for developing home-school connections to fully reap the benefits of parental involvement in general and specifically for developing children’s reading and writing skills. However, it is also noteworthy that the amount of parental involvement varies from teacher to teacher due to factors

that exist on both teachers' and parents' ends. It is also notable that in addition to teachers' individual efforts to increase parental involvement, school personnel are also offering parents certain incentives to fully participate in their children's education.

It is interesting to know that training opportunities to work with parents are not available to every teacher, and that teachers used other sources to learn strategies needed to work with parents. The idea of learning parental involvement strategies on their own led me to compare the attitude of elementary public school teachers in Pakistan with the elementary teachers in the United States. It helped me to understand that teachers in Pakistan are not making efforts on their own to enhance their knowledge because they may not have available empirical research written in their native language. Otherwise, even if the Pakistani school administrators cannot afford to offer workshops, teachers can still learn strategies if they are aware of the significance of parental involvement, as Victoria said about US teachers. Therefore, there is a need to create awareness among Pakistani public school teachers regarding the significant potential of parental involvement, so that they can further educate parents to contribute to their children's academic growth, as indicated in the following recommendations.

Recommendations

After analyzing findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered. Although the recommendations include teachers, administrators, and parents, the majority are focused on the teachers because they were the focus of this study and will be researcher's focused when she returns to Pakistan. Even though these recommendations are based on the findings, they can be used globally to increase parental involvement.

Recommendations for Teachers

To increase parental involvement in classroom as well as home literacy practices, it is recommended that teachers educate parents of their roles in developing children's literacy skills. In this regard, school personnel can arrange literacy intervention programs as suggested by researchers (Huebner & Payne, 2010; Morrow & Young, 1997; Steiner, 2014). Moreover, while involving parents in literacy-related activities with their children at home, teachers should provide parents with supplies, resources, and clear instructions, as indicated from the findings of this study. Teachers should also focus on variety while assigning any task to parents to work with their children because like children, parents need the variety, too. Additionally, reading materials provided to students to read at home should be grade-appropriate and time-efficient because most of the parents work, and they do not have a lot of time. Previous researchers also suggested that teachers can increase parental engagement by choosing easy-to-implement strategies that are time-efficient, learning-effective, and family-enjoyable (Fawcett, Padak, & Rasinski, 2013).

Additionally, it is also worthy to suggest that parents cannot be forced to be involved, but they can be motivated to contribute to their children's academic growth. To motivate parents, teachers should involve parents in a variety of roles (parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community) to increase their involvement, as suggested by Epstein et al. (2002). To involve parents in variety of roles these participants offered strategies (family reading nights, literacy nights) that other teachers might use to increase parental involvement.

Recommendations for Administrators

It is recommended that administrators they search for opportunities for the staff's professional development. Teachers need to be taught how to use parental involvement teaching strategies effectively. However, based on the evidence generated from these interviews, it is understandable that school administrators cannot afford to conduct workshops, so administrators can introduce mentoring to train teachers. Through mentoring, the teachers trained in parental involvement strategies can be paired with other teachers to help them learn through good role modelling. Furthermore, administrators should allow student teachers to work with full time teachers to promote new ideas for involving parents. Administrators should also encourage staff members to reflect on each other's teaching skills, so teachers can have opportunities to refine their skills. Administrators can help teachers to develop professional learning communities and apply for grants to offer training.

Recommendations for Parents

Parents should understand that their involvement matters for their children's academic growth. They should not believe that educating their children is the sole responsibility of the teachers. They should communicate with teachers to learn how they can contribute to their children's academic growth. Furthermore, they should try to benefit from their school district's incentives to educate themselves and to become more involved (Harris & Goodall, 2008).

Limitations

This study had several limitations. The sample size is very small; therefore, results may not be generalizable. Additionally, all the participants were women from same geographical location, which also prevents generalizability. The researcher worked independently to create the codes rather than co-creating them with an expert in the field. Establishing inter rater reliability with multiple raters would have increased the credibility of the current study. Findings may not be directly applicable to education in Pakistan due to cultural and contextual differences.

Future Studies

Future researchers may explore the significance of parental involvement and facilitate awareness among teachers and parents in Pakistan about the ways that parents can contribute to the growth of elementary students' literacy skills. These researchers can develop literacy intervention programs based on the suggestions from the current study.

Future researchers in the United States may also explore additional factors influencing parental involvement and the impact of parental involvement on student's literacy development, thereby adding to the rich body of research already available and enhancing current strategies employed by teachers to expand children's literacy development through parental involvement. This research could focus on increasing the amount of parents' involvement from minority groups (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR TEACHERS

Interview Questions:

1. Do you think it is difficult to create a link between parents and teachers? If yes, why? If not, why not?
2. What are your general beliefs about parental involvement in teaching learning process, and more specifically, what role do you believe parents play in improving children's literacy skills?
3. Could you share any strategies/resources that you have used to engage parents with their children's literacy development?
4. What strategies have you found to be successful in collaborating with parents on literacy-related programs?
5. In what ways have these strategies been effective to motivate parents to be more involved with their children's literacy development?
6. Have you used strategies that were less effective? What were some of the strategies that you found to be less effective and why?
7. What kind of challenges have you faced while engaging parents with their children's literacy achievements?
8. What kind of strategies did or do you use to overcome those challenges?
9. What professional development opportunities you have had to promote your knowledge about working with parents for improving children's literacy skills?
10. Do you have a kind of curriculum at public schools that allows increased parental participation for children's literacy development?

APPENDIX B

LETTER OF INTRODUCTION TO PRINCIPALS

May 1, 2016

To Whom It May Concern,

My name is Sadia Qamar, and I am an international graduate student at Northern Illinois University seeking my Master's in Early Childhood Education. I am writing to request your teachers' participation in my research project titled *What Are Teachers' Strategies for Involving Parents in their Children's Literacy Achievement?* I will be conducting this research in May and June 2016.

Although parental involvement is widely explored, very little is known about strategies teachers use for involving parents to support elementary student's literacy achievement and challenges faced by teachers while involving parents. Through this study I hope to learn strategies elementary teachers in public schools use to increase parental involvement while increasing children's literacy skills.

I would like to recruit teachers in your school/school district who have been involved in literacy programs that involved parents. If they agree to participate in the study, I will conduct a 30- to 45-minute in person interview. The interview will include questions about their beliefs about parent involvement for children's literacy achievement, strategies they have implemented, and challenges they have experienced. This study will not interrupt any school activities or schedules. With their permission, I will audiotape the interview and maintain all confidentiality. I will not include any information that makes it possible to identify the teacher, school, or school district.

I wonder if you would be willing to distribute the letter and consent form to teachers in your school/school district. If you have any questions about the study, please contact me via email or phone (815-793-1033 or z1783958@students.niu.edu), so we can discuss the details of the study. If you have any additional questions concerning this study, you may also contact, my research advisor Dr. Myoungwhon Jung at mjung@niu.edu or 815-753-9465.
Sincerely,

Sadia Qamar

Graduate student
Department of Special and Early Education
Northern Illinois University
Phone: 815-793-1033
Email: z1783958@students.niu.edu

APPENDIX C

LETTER OF INTRODUCTION TO TEACHERS

May 1, 2016

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Sadia Qamar, and I am an international graduate student at Northern Illinois University seeking my Master's in Early Childhood Education. I am writing to request your participation in my research project titled *What Are Teachers' Strategies for Involving Parents in their Children's Literacy Achievement?* I will be conducting this research in May and June 2016.

Although parental involvement is widely explored, very little is known about the strategies teachers use for involving parents to support elementary student's literacy achievement and challenges faced by teachers while involving parents. Through this study I hope to learn strategies elementary teachers in public schools use to increase parental involvement while increasing children's literacy skills.

If you agree to participate in the research, I will conduct a 30- to 45-minute in person interview at a time and/or place of my choosing. The interview will include questions about your beliefs about parent involvement for children's literacy achievement, strategies you have implemented, and challenges you have experienced. With your permission, I will audiotape the interview and maintain all confidentiality. I will not include any information that makes it possible to identify you, your school, or your school district. Your participation is completely voluntary, so you may withdraw at any time.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me via email or phone (815-793-1033 or z1783958@students.niu.edu) so we can discuss the details of the study. If you have any additional questions concerning this study, you may also contact, my research advisor Dr. Myoungwhon Jung at mjung@niu.edu or 815-753-9465.

Sincerely,

Sadia Qamar

Graduate student
Department of Special and Early Education
Northern Illinois University
Phone: 815-793-1033
Email: z1783958@students.niu.edu

APPENDIX D
INFORMED CONSENT

Teacher's Strategies to Involve Parents data consent (initial by each item, sign bottom)

-----I agree to participate in the research project titled *What Are Teachers' Strategies for Involving Parents in their Children's Literacy Achievement*, being conducted by Sadia Qamar, a graduate student at Northern Illinois University. I have been informed that the purpose of the study is to gain insight into the strategies elementary teachers in the U.S public schools use to engage parents to increase the literacy skills of elementary students. The findings of the study may be helpful for introducing strategies in Pakistan's public schools to increase parental involvement.

-----I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I will be asked to share the strategies of parental involvement for increasing children's literacy skills in response to interview questions. I am informed that my interview will last from 30-45 minutes at a time and/or place of researcher's choosing and the researcher will audiotape my interview for transcription and future analysis.

-----I have been informed that there are no potential risks or discomforts I could experience during this study. I understand that all information gathered through this interview will be kept confidential by storing the obtained data in a locked place, using a pseudonym in manuscripts, and by not sharing my identity with anybody except the researcher and his/her mentor. Future researchers may use the data from this study to explore parental involvement and challenges faced by teachers while involving parents.

-----I realize that Northern Illinois University does not provide compensation for, nor does the university carry insurance to cover injury incurred as a result of, participation in University Sponsored research project.

-----I understand that my consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress I might have as a result of my participation, and I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent.

-----I am aware that my participation is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time without penalty or prejudice and that if I have any questions concerning this study, I may contact: Sadia Qamar, Graduate Student at Northern Illinois University, Z1783958@students.niu.edu 1307 Lincoln Highway West, 5114, DeKalb IL 60115 or

-----For additional questions, contact Dr. Myoungwhon Jung, Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education in the Department of Special and Early Education at Northern Illinois University (mjung@niu.edu/815-753-9465)

----- Please contact the office of Research Compliance at Northern Illinois University at (815) 753-8588 if you have questions about your rights as a research participant.

Signature of Subject----- Date-----

-----I understand that my interview will be audiotaped for transcription and future analysis.

Signature of Subject_____ Date_____