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Closing the Gap: Use of the Instructional At-Home Plan (IAHP)[®] by African American Parents and the Impact on Literacy Achievement among their Kindergarten Children

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DePaul University
College of Education

**Closing the Gap: Use of the Instructional At-Home Plan (IAHP)® by African
American Parents and the Impact on Literacy Achievement among their
Kindergarten Children**

A Dissertation in Education
with a Concentration in Educational Leadership

by

Tanya Foster-DeMers

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for the Degree of

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APPROVAL OF THE DISSERTATION

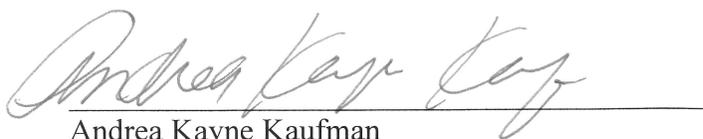
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Abstract

The purpose of this ex post facto study was to investigate the use of the Instructional At-Home Plan (IAHP)® by African American parents and its impact on kindergarten literacy achievement among their children. The study used DIBELS data from students who attended a Chicago Public School with a population that averaged 98.6% black and 96.75% low-income status. Parents of students who attended classes for the 2009-10 and 2010-11 school years utilized the Instructional At-Home Plan. The achievement of their children was analyzed and compared to those students who attended kindergarten for the 2007-08 and 2008-09 school years: students whose parents did not utilize the IAHP. The overall findings reveal statistically significant improvements at the middle and end of the year when the IAHP was used. The percent of students categorized as green, a score at grade level and above, at the end of the year rose by more than 50%. The percent of students categorized as yellow, a score below grade level and requiring strategic intervention, dropped by almost two-thirds. The percent of students categorized as red, a score below grade level and requiring intensive intervention, dropped by more than 50%. The study suggests that African American parents are willing and able to become successfully involved in their children's education through the use of a specific parent involvement tool, the Instructional At-Home Plan. It is expected that future studies will confirm even more strongly IAHP's ability to integrate early childhood knowledge with parent involvement as a means to reduce achievement gaps.

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my mother, Thyra Ann Foster. Our beginnings were extremely rough and I often asked “why”. Your road was far from easy and it was very hard for me to comprehend at the time. It was only when I looked into the eyes of other mothers whom I had the pleasure of working with, who were doing their best and giving all they had, that I could understand our “how and why”. You have taught me the most important things there are to know about parental involvement, and the lesson took many years to complete. Your experiences as a parent provided the motivation, and they shape how and what I do to convey the importance and significance of involving parents from different walks of life in the education of their children. Our life and story together have equipped me to recognize the strength, beauty, and value of parents who may not themselves realize their potential. Thank you and I Love You.

“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning”.

Holy Bible KJV

James 1:17

I. Introduction

Our country's educational system is believed by many to be the foundation for its economic viability and a weapon against poverty and social inequality (Tienken 154; Lee and Bowen 193). Raising American student achievement is now a high priority for policymakers at the federal, state and local levels (Moorman, Pomerantz, and Litwack 373; Desimone 25). Teachers and educational administrators share this belief. They are charged with the responsibility to ensure student achievement (Darling-Hammond 14; Kennedy 384; Tienken 152). This is necessary since students in the United States perform in the lowest half of the top forty countries in both math and science (Darling-Hammond 14). Although the reading performance of United States students is competitive with other nations, there is a drop when compared to the performance of ten years earlier (Darling-Hammond 14). In addition to experiencing this decline in student achievement, a growing disparity in academic performance exists between racial groups and among economic levels. This disproportionate pattern of achievement is further demonstrated with additional differences existing within the racial and economic subgroups (Murphy 8; Teale, Paciga, and Hoffman 344; Desimone 11).

African American children in particular perform worse academically than their white counterparts (Teale, Paciga, and Hoffman 344; Ntiri 231; Trotman 275). Cole-Henderson writes, "low-income, urban American children of color attending high-poverty schools presently rank at the bottom of almost every measure of academic achievement; almost two-thirds score below basic proficiency levels on national standardized tests" (77). This disparity is referred to as the achievement gap. Researchers agree that the achievement gap results in many consequences for both the

nation and the individual (Murphy 12; Darling-Hammond 14). Musti-Rao and Cartledge connect academic difficulty in the elementary years to the long-term consequences of lower self-confidence and reduced motivation to learn (15).

National data for assessments of students reveal that the reading achievement gap between White and Black students in 2009 for 4th graders is 26 points (Aud et al. 46). The mathematics gap between White and Black 4th grade students for the same assessment year is 26 points (Aud et al. 50). The achievement gap for students attending urban schools is even more pronounced when compared to the overall population (Teale, Paciaga, and Hoffman 344). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 contains components to address our nation's educational achievement gap, and the enactment of this law is a signal to society that there are disparities in education (Jacobi, Wittreich, and Hogue 11; Domina 233).

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, however, is not the solution to the gap problem. This is because school reform laws like it possess an innate weakness; they only deal with the issues once children enroll in school. It is now believed that the foundation for the academic achievement gap begins long before a child enrolls into formal schooling of kindergarten or grade one (Doggett and Wat 8). For many children, their first experience in a preschool or kindergarten program is only confirmation that they are already at-risk for academic difficulty. There is evidence of gaps in children's development prior to the age of five (Mcwayne et al. 363; Doggett and Wat 8).

The early onset of these gaps explains why many students never reach "benchmark" status while in school. Benchmark status is one of the terms used to refer to students who are performing at the acceptable level of proficiency for their age and/or

grade level. Many students who complete their kindergarten year are placed in the category of at-risk for failure. While the next year of school should be when intervention solves the problem, research indicates that the deficiencies often prove to be insurmountable (Allington, “What At-Risk” 44). By the beginning of third grade, a young learner would be two years older and still behind his or her grade level peers.

This is only part of why policymakers at all levels are beginning to show a sense of urgency and a renewed interest in early childhood education as an antidote to the achievement gap in the United States. From an economic perspective, the benefits of investing in early childhood education are now viewed as very high relative to later adult education. Economist James Heckman writes, “investment in early education for disadvantaged children from birth to age 5 helps reduce the achievement gap, reduce the need for special education, increase the likelihood of healthier lifestyles, lower the crime rate, and reduce overall social cost” (32). Resnick and Zurawsky share Heckman’s beliefs regarding early childhood education’s ability to shrink achievement gaps in young children that exist prior to entering kindergarten and its ability to produce a return of societal benefits (2). This research, though limited, is consistent with the fact that significant achievement gaps exist as early as in pre-kindergarten (Wang 30).

Another area of research that stresses the early years of a child’s life as the most critical time for developing essential skills for school success is literacy research (MacDonald and Figueredo 417; Coyne and Harn 33). The research stresses that it is important for students to perform academically at their grade level from early on and to maintain this status (Doggett and Wat 8). This means that the kindergarten through 3rd grade years are critical to impact the state and/or national assessments made at the end of

3rd grade (Good, Simmons, and Kame'enui 258). The 3rd grade assessments are compared nationwide. Much of today's school reforms are developed in response to this data generated in grades three and above. These reform initiatives range from adoptions of new curriculums, changes of school leadership and teaching staffs, initiatives to improve teacher quality, and recently the push for more parent involvement. What is an important question for research is whether or not the initiatives have over-emphasized later, rather than early, education.

Positive correlations between parental involvement and a child's educational performance create an increased interest in parental involvement as a possible strategy for reducing the achievement gap (Coleman and McNeese 460; Lee and Bowen 194). The abundance of research affirming parental involvement benefits has led to the creation of laws, educational bills, and school reform that seek to involve parents (Moorman, Pomerantz, and Litwack 373). Parental involvement is a vast topic that researchers have explored for many years. Yet research confirms that parental involvement is still a viable area of school reform that remains underdeveloped and/or not utilized to its highest potential (Desimone 11-13; Lazar et al. 5-10).

Elements of this belief are revealed in the 1980s by researchers Becker and Epstein. "Some educators believe that widespread parent interest in the academic progress of their children constitutes an immensely underutilized teaching resource, requiring only general guidance and modest effort to bring results in many cases" (Becker and Epstein 86). Past and present research indicates that there are very few who will argue against parental involvement in education and its benefits (Flowers 426; Turner 37). What is unknown are the most effective ways to encourage parental

involvement. This ambiguity leaves us at a disadvantage. It also creates an opportunity to experiment in ways to involve parents of young children in order to promote academic achievement. This is why the integration of parental involvement and early childhood education is of immense interest at this time.

A. Background of the study

Prominent among the large amount of research surrounding parental involvement that emerges in the 1980s is the groundbreaking work of Joyce Epstein. She created a theoretical framework for understanding parental involvement. Even though the theory has been developed, there appears to be a disconnection between theory and practice (Turner 37). Scott Stein and Thorkildsen write that while, “most educators say parent involvement is a good idea, there appears to be a discrepancy between attitudes and practice” (13). They attribute this gap to a lack of knowledge and inadequate teacher training on the subject of parental involvement (13). Becker and Epstein experience similar findings from teachers they surveyed. A 1980 survey of about 3,700 public Maryland elementary teachers reveals that they believe parental involvement activities are beneficial, but are challenged to initiate such practices (Becker and Epstein 86). The work of researchers Mattingly et al. confirm that the issues and challenges identified in the 1980s are still prevalent in the 2000s (549-76).

Scott Stein and Thorkildsen state that, “teachers, administrators, and other school personnel can make significant contributions to changes in the educational system only if they have the resources to do so” (1). One of the first steps in utilizing resources is to recognize what constitutes a resource. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 is an attempt by the federal government to revisit the public process of identifying resources

and educational priorities with a renewed emphasis regarding parent involvement.

Section 1118 of the No Child Left Behind Act is dedicated to parent involvement.

Parents have not always had, and still often lack, the recognition for being a valuable resource in the educational lives of their children. This law requires local educational agencies to develop written parent involvement policies.

Research is clear, parent involvement practices and patterns are inconsistent across America. Many of the same patterns of educational disparities between races and income levels are observed among parent involvement practices across America. African American parents are cited as being less involved in their children's education than their counterparts (Brandon 116; McKay et al. 107-08). Socioeconomic status is also correlated with parental involvement levels. Low-income parents are associated with lower levels of parental involvement in comparison to middle to upper income parents (Scott Stein and Thorkildsen 30). Race and socioeconomic levels are often connected in parent involvement research, with many African American parents having to contend with the issues of low income and/or poverty. These elements of parent involvement are often understudied, and are an essential element of successful school reform (H.Giles 1-10). Desimone writes, "it is therefore imperative that we increase our understanding of how parent involvement best can be employed for all children, especially for those at risk of educational failure. The kinds of parent involvement that work best for low-income and at-risk students have yet to be determined empirically or considered by policy makers" (12). Dissection of African American parental involvement is critical to solving issues of educational disparities involving African American students (Murphy 11; Teale,

Paciga, and Hoffman 344). These factors are the motivation for this study and they direct this body of research.

B. Statement of the problem

Parents are frequently identified in literature as stakeholders in local schools. The majority of teachers agree that parents should be involved in the school life of their children (Scott Stein and Thorkildsen 44). Teachers have also connected the performance of students to parental involvement and/or the lack thereof. The research suggests that there is a disconnection between parental involvement research and practice (Scott Stein and Thorkildsen 13, 45; Turner 37). This disconnection might imply that a lack of shared understanding by educators and parents results in the inability to involve parents in the education of their children (Scott Stein and Thorkildsen 6; DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, and Duchane 361). This can and does lead to frustration on the part of the educators, school leaders, and the parent community.

Although past and present research make positive connections between parental involvement and educational outcomes, the many inconsistencies which range from definitions to effective implementation create a need for additional inquiry. What are often needed are concrete examples based on quantitative research of how to effectively involve parents (Scott Stein and Thorkildsen 49; Kennedy 386). Other researchers have identified parent involvement as a possible strategy for addressing and reducing the achievement gap (Lee and Bowen 194).

The motivation for this paper is the combination of the achievement gap that exists between African American and White students and instances of lower African American parent involvement. This supports the need for additional investigation

regarding the effect of parents on achievement outcomes, with an emphasis on the effect of greater African American parent involvement (Scott Stein and Thorkildsen 14). For while school reform has included changes to curriculum, changes to school leadership and /or staff, after and before school programs, and other measures, “the research suggests that public schools have not made the most of the assets of engaging African American parents as partners to address the needs of their children” (Koonce and Harper, Jr. 56). Strategically involving parents with a specific tool is the form of parental involvement that this research will investigate.

C. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the use of the Instructional At-Home Plan by African American parents and its impact on kindergarten literacy achievement among their children. This research study seeks to better understand parental involvement patterns and practices and their possible effects on the academic achievement of kindergarten students. The parents involved in this study resided in Chicago, Illinois. Their children were enrolled in a Chicago Public School kindergarten program for the 2007-08, 2008-09, 2009-10 and the 2010-11 school years. In the 2009-10 and 2010-11 years, the participants utilized a process called the Instructional At-Home Plan to increase parent involvement. This research study seeks to fill a gap in the field of educational studies by providing quantitative data regarding the effects of a specific manifestation of parental involvement on student achievement.

D. Research question

Does the use of the Instructional At-Home Plan by African American parents have a positive impact on kindergarten student literacy achievement as measured by DIBELS when compared to previous years in which IAHP was not used?

E. Significance of the study

This study of parental involvement is unique and timely for several reasons. Above all, the study seeks to determine the impact of the use of the Instructional At-Home Plan by parents and its effect on literacy achievement. The examination of student data that represents the parents' use of the IAHP in comparison to groups of students whose parents did not have the IAHP allows one to determine the actual impact. The research contributes to the educational field in a number of ways. First, this study explores the practices of African American parents. The literature clearly identifies this as a need due to the disparity in parental involvement practices. Second, since the parent participants in this study are primarily low income, the study is an opportunity to explore further the connections research has found between parent involvement practices and socioeconomic levels. This research allows one to examine both the practices of parents who are low income and the achievement outcomes for their children. Third, any new research that contributes to the reduction of the achievement gap is timely. This study uses data from kindergarteners, and this is a powerful starting point in the elimination of the achievement gap that exists throughout the United States.

The final element of this study examines the Instructional At-Home Plan. Specific at-home parental activities and processes that can be connected to student achievement outcomes are of extreme importance for this time. The literature agrees that

we must understand how specific forms of parental involvement can impact student achievement. Both educators and researchers concur on the need of identifying ways to encourage greater parent involvement in actions that most impact achievement. The potential of this research paper is in the unique combination of a specific form of parent involvement and the connection to early childhood academic achievement.

II. Literature Review

A. Introduction

The discussion of parental involvement is not a new topic. There is an abundance of literature regarding parental involvement. The amount of research attention given to parental involvement in educational studies would suggest its level of importance and/or its levels of complexity. Despite years of research and interest, America still has a problem with parent involvement in the school life of its children. This problem appears to be more prevalent within minority racial groups, including African Americans. While parental involvement in the general sense will be examined in this paper, it will give special attention to the African American parental involvement practices and patterns.

This review of literature will include an introduction on the need to explore parental involvement, historical perspective of parent involvement, a framework for discussing parent involvement, parent subgroups, parent involvement and schools, and the achievement gap and the role of early childhood education.

Significance and evidence of the need to explore parental involvement

Although there is an abundance of literature regarding parental involvement, there remain important gaps in the literature that justify further research. National and local student achievement data continue to illustrate the academic gap that is present between groups of students. The presence of gaps has made the need for parent involvement more relevant than ever. Henderson and Berla's review of 66 studies, reviews, reports, analysis, and books conducted over a 30-year period is widely cited to demonstrate the need for parent involvement. They state, "the evidence is now beyond dispute when schools work together with families to support learning, children tend to succeed not just

in school, but throughout life” (1). Henderson and Berla find value in parents who create a home environment that encourages learning and promotes high expectations for their children's academic achievements. They identify this as parents who are involved in the education of their children at school and in the community. They find that these characteristics are accurate predictors of a student's achievement. Henderson and Berla's in-depth examination reveals that when schools support families and families are able to support children, the children do measurably better in school. The specific benefits to the students include higher grades and test scores, better attendance and homework patterns, reduced placement into special education, increased graduation rates, and greater enrollment in postsecondary education (Henderson and Berla 1).

Five years later, Scott Stein and Thorkildsen produced a comprehensive review of more than 200 studies. Selected studies examined attitudes toward parental involvement, parental involvement practices, and parental involvement's effect on student achievement. Their findings reveal that educators, parents, and children feel that parent involvement is important. Additional research findings lead them to conclude that there is a moderately positive relationship between parent involvement and student achievement (Scott Stein and Thorkildsen 34). They also find a positive role of parent expectations in relation to children's academic achievement. And not unimportantly, they find that, even though other variables might have a stronger positive relationship, parent involvement is more economical. It can be increased significantly without high expenditures of time or money (Scott Stein and Thorkildsen 34). This literature provides a consensus that parental involvement in some form or fashion does shape and affect student learning and academic performance (Campbell and Verna 501). Although this body of research does

not reveal which specific forms of parental involvement are most valuable, it agrees with the work of Henderson and Berla that there is a need for additional exploration of the potential benefits of parental involvement.

Researcher McGee Banks also finds that parent involvement is beneficial for students. She adds that although there is uncertainty regarding exactly why students show improvements when their parents are involved in their education, there is no question that it benefits children. She also emphasizes that parent involvement acknowledges the importance of parents in the lives of children. This involvement increases the amount of time the child is involved in learning activities, time spent to reinforce their skills, and to provide the child an environment with consistent learning expectations and standards (Banks and McGee Banks 425).

Darling and Westberg find that parental involvement positively affects the reading acquisition of K-12 children. Their meta-analysis defines parental involvement as parent-child activities that focus on reading, and they identify three types of parent involvement behaviors: to listen to a child read, to be trained to listen, and to be trained to teach. They find that when parents are provided with very specific reading instructional strategies that it is more effective than just allowing the parent to work with the child (774-75).

Other studies that associate parental involvement with having a positive effect include the work of Rebecca Marcon. An important contribution of Macon's work to the body of parent involvement research is the finding that active parent involvement is more valuable than passive parent involvement (395-412). Her three-year study utilized a total of 62 classrooms with three cohorts of predominantly low-income, urban four-year-olds

who were attending a public pre-kindergarten or Head Start Program (Marcon 395-412). Marcon's work addressed the issue of evaluating the outcomes of parental involvement in regards to children's school performance. The study focused on two of Epstein's six types of involvement: communicating with families and volunteering at the school. Teacher ratings based on the Vinelane Adaptive Behavior Scales and the Early Childhood Progress Report were tools used to communicate the academic and developmental progress of the students. The research addressed two questions: "would the number of distinct parent involvement activities be associated with different child outcomes? Would more passive activities be associated with different child outcomes?" (Marcon 398).

Marcon's research findings are, "for preschoolers in this study, increased parent school involvement and more active types of parent involvement were both associated with more positive development in all domains and greater mastery of early basic school skills in all subject areas" (405). Her work considers and identifies the varying definitions of parental involvement as being a challenge. She cites Epstein's six major ways of involving parents and communities and warns that these can vary in degree and intensity. Marcon identifies the study's inclusion of participants who attend preschool programs that have a required parental involvement commitment as being a limitation to her research. She discusses how this variable could be a limitation to an effective study on parental involvement that utilizes the volunteering component. Additionally she adds that a great deal of research and evaluation of parental involvement has been gathered through the use of teacher ratings, self-report questionnaires, interviews of parents and students. Additional quantitative measures included actual records such as login sheets

and case management files (395-412). Marcon's findings and discussion highlight the need for additional research that clarifies how quantity of interactions and quantity of types of parent involvement impact social and academic outcomes for children. This is another example of the need for quantifiable studies that demonstrate the benefits of parent involvement.

As stated before, the belief that parental involvement can influence educational outcomes and learning competencies is noted in recent federal educational legislation (Desimone 12). Section 1118 Parental Involvement of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 contains policy regarding schools who receive Title I federal funding. It demands that each local educational agency develop written parent involvement policies that involve parents in the planning and implementation of programs, activities, and procedures. These policies must contain: plans for various meetings, building capacity for strong parental involvement, coordination of parent involvement strategies in programs such as Head Start, administration of annual evaluations regarding content and effectiveness of the policies, parental input regarding funding for parental involvement activities, notification of parents regarding the policies, provision of timely information to parents regarding curriculum, promotion of communication between teachers and parents, strategies for parental monitoring of a child's progress and working with the educators to improve the achievement, resources for materials and training to help parents work with their children, and other requirements. The stated goal of this law is to ensure that parents are involved in their child's education to increase student academic achievement and school performance (Jacobi, Wittreich, and Hogue 11).

B. Historical perspective of parent involvement

American parent involvement

The history of parent involvement in the United States began with the early notion of the family being solely responsible for the education of the child. This was the case until the 1850s (Scott Stein and Thorkildsen 2; Banks and McGee Banks 426). When formal education emerged in the late 1800s and early 1900s, parents continued to influence their child's education and schools were viewed as an extension of the home (Epstein, *School, Family, and Community* 24; Scott Stein and Thorkildsen 2). The 1870s and 1890s marked the increase of kindergartens and parent education (Berger, "Parent Involvement" 212). During this time, the connection between home, church, and school supported the same goals for learning that included the integration of the student into the adult community (Epstein, *School, Family, and Community* 24).

A later byproduct of the professionalization of teaching was the separation of the parent from the education process. This led to what Epstein termed separate spheres of influence. Because of the distinct and separate functions of home and school, there emerged a belief in education as being solely the school's responsibility (Scott Stein and Thorkildsen 2). Parental concerns regarding the separation and estrangement between parent and school led in 1897 to the formation of the National Congress of Mothers. This organization later became known as the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) (Scott Stein and Thorkildsen 3; Berger, "Parent Involvement" 212).

In the 1900s, professional organizations and federal programs became very much interested in the study of children. By the end of the 1920s, they began to create study groups with middle class parents. The major movement then from the 1930s included the

government's consideration of organizing parent education as a part of the public education system. Parent education continued in the 1940s. However, World War II produced the need for mothers to work and have childcare services provided. The baby boom era of the 1950s was a period of great parental interest in child rearing and development (Berger, "Parent Involvement" 212-14).

Issues of school location and travel reduced parental involvement in schools during the 1950s. The 1950s also marked the legal end of racial segregation of schools with the 1954 *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. The realization of the importance of early childhood education marked the 1960s. It was during this period that the government began the federal Head Start program for low-income preschool children. This program also included components of parent education. The 1960s was also the beginning of the War on Poverty (Scott Stein and Thorkildsen 3; Berger, "Parent Involvement" 215). The War on Poverty acknowledged that the United States offered a life of prosperity for some. There were also many minorities, people with disabilities, and the economically disadvantaged experiencing poverty and unemployment. In an effort to address this, the War on Poverty included government programs that targeted poor people and their children. It was an effort to break the cycle of poverty (Berger, *Parents as Partners* 117).

Parent involvement and inclusion from the 1960s flourished in the 1970s. The 1970s was a time of federally funded parent involvement programs and parent, community and school impact were given special focus. Special education legislation required a certain measure of parent involvement in their child's education (Scott Stein and Thorkildsen 3; Berger, "Parent Involvement" 215). The 1980s was a period of

formal government acknowledgement of the need for parent involvement. It included the creation of the Department of Education in 1979 with its operation beginning in 1980. Both individual schools and researchers developed models for the collaboration of home and school throughout the 1980s (Berger, "Parent Involvement" 216). By the 1990s, parent involvement was acknowledged and widely accepted as beneficial. The emphasis shifted from parent involvement to include family involvement. Better and more accountable schools were a demand for both the 1980s and 1990s (Scott Stein and Thorkildsen 3; Epstein, *School, Family, and Community* 24; Berger, *Parents as Partners* 121). The 2000s continued to focus on education and the importance of family involvement. The creation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 mandated annual testing for all students in grades three through eight. It also required all states to provide annual report cards on school performance and statewide results. Parents were entitled not just to receive information on their child's school performance; the parents of children in designated failing schools received the option to transfer their children to other schools. Their options included both traditional and charter schools (Berger, *Parents as Partners* 122).

Although the history of American parental involvement has been somewhat inclusive, race and socioeconomic status were important factors. The exploration of the history of American education allows one to develop a better understanding of the parents' role in education over time. There is a general history of American education. However, there also are specific events in history that are exclusive to various ethnic groups, such as African Americans. It is important that we examine these events.

African American parent involvement

Research on African American history often discusses the effects of the early experiences of slavery and racism (Fields-Smith 130; Berger, *Parents as Partners* 96). The same research identifies family separation and a lack of family development as an inherent aspect of life as a slave. Some researchers argue that the African American family structure and roles were not able to develop until the abolition of slavery with the 13th amendment to the constitution (Berger, *Parents as Partners* 96). Researchers cite the loss of human rights and other early experiences of the African American family in America as complex and ongoing factors that have affected their social and economic history (Berger, *Parents as Partners* 96). The 1896 U.S. Supreme Court *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision legalized racial segregation in schools and in every aspect of public life (Smith and Tutwiler 2). The following fifty-eight years included racially segregated schools. These schools were not always equal as promised. Instead, they were part of a life of many restrictions in a prejudiced society (Berger, *Parents as Partners* 101).

Researcher Fields-Smith's interest in the issues of African American parent involvement and the effects of racial segregation provide her motivation to unearth the myths of teachers who work with African American students. Fields-Smith states, "in fact, teachers often perceive African American parents as uninvolved and disinterested in their children's education"(129). These negative perceptions are not accurate historical portraits of African American parents. She examined parental involvement before and after the United States Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education*. This historic case effectively made segregation of schools unlawful and Fields-Smith provides clear before and after examples of African American parent involvement.

Fields-Smith used historical research to demonstrate the value that African Americans placed on education during the era of slavery. Her discussion of how African American slave parents were willing to face severe punishments and risk their lives to learn to read is part of her evidence of parent involvement and commitment towards education. The period immediately following the emancipation of the slaves was violent. Education was still difficult to obtain and risky. The former slaves donated lumber, their time, and labor to build schools. They served as advocates for their children's education (Fields-Smith 130). Segregated schools paradoxically united communities of African Americans with a common cause and the identifiable villain of racial segregation (132). During this time of segregation, African American parents performed tasks that indeed benefited the schools and their children. The African American response to segregation produced a notable closeness between the school and the parent, while desegregation created another response. Researchers, such as Fields-Smith, connect the desegregation of schools with the distancing of schools from the African American parent. According to Fields-Smith, it was the inception of the idea that the school was solely responsible for the education of the African American child that led to this distancing.

The unintended effects of the desegregation of African American education are further illustrated with Fields-Smith's use of personal accounts from accomplished researcher James Comer and educator Patricia Edwards. These accounts describe the value that African Americans ascribed to education prior to the 1940s. The conclusions from these personal accounts are, "African American parents were deeply interested in their children's education," and "They trusted and relied on their children's teachers and principals for guidance regarding their children's schooling"(132). These experiences

included both direct and indirect parental involvement. They provide evidence of a strong commitment and support for education. Cooper also confirms that African American parents have a strong legacy of educational involvement. This involvement included activism against racism, such as that which led to the desegregation of schools. Cooper criticizes educators and scholars for their lack of acknowledgment of the efforts of African American parents (382).

The high level of involvement of African American parents prior to desegregation in schools and their activism against segregation and racism, as well as their trust of their well-trained teachers and administrators, raises the question of whether the benefits of school desegregation outweigh the costs (Fields-Smith 132-33; Smith and Tutwiler 2). For the implementation of desegregation produces a new set of challenges for the African American parent (Fields-Smith 132-33; Smith and Tutwiler 2). Fields-Smith identifies these challenges as language barriers, issues of socio-cultural incongruence between home and school, teachers' low expectation of students, and loss of African American school administration as a direct result of the desegregation of schools (133).

Historical research of parent involvement in the United States is able to trace how the function of schools changed over time and how this directly and indirectly influences how parents interact with schools. This body of research indicates that when schools gradually assume more of the responsibilities from parents, it contributes to a decrease in parent involvement (Trotman 276; Koonce and Harper, Jr. 56). We can now build on this understanding of the history of parent involvement to consider formally how parent involvement is defined and conceptualized.

C. A framework for discussing parental involvement

Definitions, concepts, and theories

Joyce Epstein's research in parent involvement still shapes discussions of parental involvement throughout the United States. As an example, the National Parent Teacher Association uses Epstein's model (Fishel and Ramirez 373; Mattingly et al. 551; Price-Mitchell 12). Parent involvement is a broad concept and much of the present day research utilizes at least some element of Epstein's model (Taylor, Hinton, and Wilson 295; Henderson and Mapp 21). Epstein's model for parental involvement generally involves one or more of the following six components: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, collaborating with the community (Epstein et al. 25).

1. Parenting refers to the home conditions that support children as students at various ages and grade levels. This includes the in-home actions of a parent, which normally involve child-rearing practices, provisions of housing, health, nutrition, clothing, and safety.
2. Communicating involves the interaction between families and schools regarding school programs and student progress. Communicating would include any type of interaction between the parent and the school, such as notes, emails, phone calls, in-person conferences, etc. Effective communications are two-way in nature, school-to-home, and home-to-school.
3. Volunteering requires parents and families to spend time at school and in other locations to support students and school programs. Volunteering may manifest itself in a variety of ways. Some examples are: helping to prepare materials for

in-class projects at home, participating in fund raising, serving as mentors, coaches, monitors, chaperones, tutors, lecturers, and other tasks that include working either directly in school with groups of children or on various school based projects.

4. Learning at home refers to the educational activities that occur at a child's home and are an extension of school and curriculum related activities and decisions. Learning at home is in place when parents help their children with homework, and make school-to-home curriculum connections for the student.
5. Decision-making includes a parent or family's participation in school decisions, governance, and advocacy. This would include membership on school councils, boards of education, action teams, and parent organizations.
6. Collaborating with the community includes the relationships between school, students, families, and community groups. Partners for collaboration can include business partners, cultural and recreational groups, faith-based organizations, government and other groups, and programs that benefit the school or have a relationship with the school (Epstein et al. 165-71).

Epstein's theoretical model for understanding family and school relations is called overlapping spheres of influence. This is a marked departure from her earlier three pre-existing perspectives. She describes the first perspective as separate responsibilities of families and school. "This perspective assumes that school bureaucracies and family organizations are directed, respectively, by educators and parents whose different goals, roles, and responsibilities are best fulfilled independently" (Epstein, *School, Family, and Community* 22). The second perspective is shared responsibilities of families and

schools. It states that there is a feeling of shared responsibilities for the socialization and education of the child, with common goals and opportunities for both parent and teacher to work together (Epstein, *School, Family, and Community* 22). The third perspective is the sequential responsibilities of families and schools. This emphasizes the importance of the early years of a child's life as the critical foundation for later success. It gives the parent a heavy emphasis and involvement with the child from birth until they enter formal schooling at age five or six. Then, upon entry into school, the parent transfers the responsibility for the education of the child to the teacher (Epstein, *School, Family, and Community* 22-23).

In contrast to the three above perspectives, Epstein's more recent work recognizes the influence of changes in family structure. She notes the distancing between school and family in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and the later public demand of more accountable education in the 1980s and 1990s (Epstein, *School, Family, and Community* 24). These changes are foundational in Epstein's formation of an integrated theory of family and school relations. The notion of overlapping spheres between family, community, and school is useful to understand the dynamics of parent and community involvement with schools (Scott Stein and Thorkildsen 3). The model applies across racial, social, and economic lines. Epstein's model recognizes that teachers of students in grades one and below utilize parents and involve them in their children's education, while teachers of older children ignore or discourage parental involvement (Epstein, *School, Family, and Community* 34-35).

Epstein's three groups—family, community, and school—may or may not overlap based on three factors or forces. The factors or forces are time, experience in families,

and experience in schools. Parents or teachers are able to impact or increase the degree of overlap (Epstein, *School, Family, and Community* 27). A greater degree of overlap occurs when the teacher and/or the school take deliberate actions to make parents their partners in the teaching practice. To maximize the degree of overlap and to receive the greatest benefits, there should be frequent cooperative efforts and clear, close communication between parents and teachers (Epstein, *School, Family, and Community* 29). Situations where there is a high overlap result in parents who report that they receive more information from the school on how to help their child at home. The same teachers with a high overlap report better interpersonal and teaching skills and higher test gains than their counterparts (Epstein, *School, Family, and Community* 35).

Some view Epstein's framework for understanding parent involvement as a composite and extension of the work of researchers who preceded her (Bauch 58). As an example, Ira Gordon's work from the 1970s includes the development of a parent impact model that focuses on parent education and a school impact model whose purpose is to make schools responsive to parents and families, and a community impact model that encourages exchanges between individuals and the institution. Gordon's model provides parents with six roles: teaching their own child, being a decision-maker, being a classroom volunteer, being a para-professional, being an adult educator, and being an adult learner (Bauch 54). Alternatively, Berger uses six roles to define parent involvement. Parents are teachers of their own children, spectators, employed resources, temporary volunteers, volunteer resources, and policymakers. This is how Berger categorized the role of parents in the early 1990s (Bauch 55).

Cervone and O'Leary's work also precedes the work of Epstein. Cervone and O'Leary's conceptual framework for parent involvement views parent involvement as activities that follow a continuum. The activities range from parents as passive participants who receive information about the school to parents as committed partners who may serve as parent leaders, teachers in the classroom, and other related tasks. The middle of their continuum classifies parent involvement as attending special events and facilitating parent education courses (Cervone and O'Leary 48-49).

The predecessors of Epstein (Gordon, Berger, Cervone, and O'Leary) all classify parent involvement as actions and/or activities that parents do. For example, Gordon and Berger both have models that contain six role categories, each focusing on activities where parents interact with their child's school. Each of these roles has multiple impacts on the school/parent relationship (Bauch 53-55). The above makes it clear that Epstein's six typologies of parent involvement possess elements of her predecessors' work. For example, Epstein's involvement in decision-making governance and advocacy typology is similar to Gordon's decision maker category and Berger's policymaker category (Bauch 53-59).

Despite the fact that Epstein's framework for understanding parental involvement is widely used, there remains room to grow in our understanding of parent involvement as it relates to various ethnicities and social groups. Ingram, Wolfe, and Lieberman utilized a survey of parents to investigate Epstein's six parental involvement typologies in three Chicago Public Schools that served largely minority, low-income students. This study examined the types of parent involvement that led to improved academic achievement (Ingram, Wolfe, and Lieberman 489). Each of the schools had a history of

scoring in the top third of the Illinois State Achievement Tests. Their research findings reveal that only two of Epstein's six typologies, parenting and learning at home, are in use and apparent. Communicating, volunteering, decision-making, and collaborating with the community are not in operation or linked to the students' academic success (Ingram, Wolfe, and Lieberman 489). The researchers conclude, "Although Epstein's framework for understanding parent involvement in children's education has merit, it does not seem to explain the aspects and impact of parent involvement in the at-risk, high-achieving schools that participated in this study" (Ingram, Wolfe, and Lieberman 489).

Souto-Manning and Swick illuminate Ingram, Wolfe, and Lieberman's findings with their critique of traditional parent involvement paradigms such as Epstein's typologies. Souto-Manning and Swick's work exposes the danger of having parent involvement definitions that may exclude children and families with diverse and complex sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds (190). They list exclusionary parent involvement definitions and models as a contributor to discrimination in schools. Another possible explanation for Ingram, Wolfe, and Lieberman's findings is in the role that a parent's interest and support of the child plays. Research confirms that a parent's involvement can counteract the effects of low-socioeconomic levels (Berger, *Parents as Partners* 153). Berger writes, "socioeconomic status is not the primary causal factor in school success or lack of success; it is parent interest and support of the child" (*Parents as Partners* 153).

This suggests that research should emphasize parent involvement as part of a more comprehensive program. An example of research that does this is the work of James Comer. His work emerged in the 1980s as an exploration of the ecology of

schools. It contributes to the body of knowledge regarding parental involvement.

Comer's School Development Program does not address parental involvement in isolation. It is one of several critical ingredients for school success (Comer and Haynes 271-72). He views schools as ecological systems that require an integrated approach to improvement based on child development and relationship building (Comer and Haynes 277). Parents in this model have a defined role in the governance of schools that allows them to sit and work with other stakeholders on all school matters.

The School Development Program's parent program identifies three levels of involvement with distinct roles and responsibilities. Level 3 is the most critical level. Parents contribute to the guidance of the school by sitting on the School Planning and Management Team, where they help to develop activities that support the comprehensive school plan and urge other parents to become involved in the school. Level 2 parent involvement allows parents to contribute to the daily operations of the school as volunteers. Level 1 parent involvement occurs when parents attend teacher-parent conferences, monitor homework, assist with fund raisers, and attend special events such as student performances or holiday programs (Comer and Haynes 273-77; Comer 41). The School Development Program has been implemented in more than 1,000 schools, the majority of which have high-minority, low-income elementary populations (Comer 39).

Research and perspectives specific to urban parents include the Ecologies of Parental Engagement (EPE) Framework. This work is based on Bourdieu's definition of capital. According to Bourdieu, capital is a person's human, social, and material resources. The Ecologies of Parental Engagement framework is born out of a criticism of traditional parent involvement research and a desire to understand the interconnections

between the how and why of parent engagement as opposed to just listing what parents do to engage in their children's schooling (Barton et al. 3-5). Traditional research on parent involvement fails to recognize the non-traditional ways in which high-poverty urban parents interact with schools, neglecting to view parental engagement as a social practice. This research agrees with previous researchers that there is a lack of agreement on how to define parent involvement. The Ecologies of Parental Engagement framework focuses on the parent in relation to their urban environment. It recognizes the existence of embedded cultural values that schools and communities possess (Barton et al. 4). Parent engagement is a mediation that parents make between space and capital in connection with others in a school setting (Barton et al. 5). This research suggests that parents in high-poverty urban schools benefit from environments that understand and support their non-traditional ways to activate resources and the relationships that allow them to have a place in the organization (Barton et al. 11).

A similar approach is that of Lee and Bowen. They explored the relationship between parent involvement and cultural capital as a means to understand the potential benefits to academic achievement. Their study required 3rd through 5th grade students to complete a profile that they designed to indicate patterns of parent involvement and the role of cultural capital (193). The findings reveal that differences between races/ethnicities are present in parent involvement patterns and levels of involvement. In addition, they confirm the positive relationship between parent involvement and student achievement. This research instructed schools to understand the effect of cultural capital on family-school relationships. The finding and recommendations from this research are very similar to that of the Ecologies of Parental Engagement Framework (Lee and Bowen

193-218; Barton et al. 3-11). Both perspectives advocate for an understanding and validation of the parents' cultural capital and its beneficial nature to schools.

This survey of parent involvement frameworks and concepts is a sample of the great amount of research that exists. Other noteworthy frameworks and concepts are not covered in this review. Parent involvement is a subject of interest for the majority of formal American educational history (Berger, “Parent Involvement” 209). Many attempts have been made and continue to emerge that seek to better define and understand the subject. These attempts to understand and define parental involvement add to the body of knowledge. They also reveal the many obstacles to parental involvement.

Obstacles to parental involvement and contrary evidence regarding the benefits

Obstacles are present for both researchers and practitioners who attempt to implement parent involvement strategies. The multitude of definitions and attributes of parent involvement are a major challenge for them (Marcon 395; Baker and Soden 2). The variety of definitions of parent involvement is particularly vexing for practitioners who must implement parent involvement programs and initiatives (Lightfoot 91). Lightfoot’s critical analysis of the use of the term parent involvement identifies additional concerns. A key concern is the insistence on parent involvement without a clear understanding of what parent involvement means and what is required to increase parent involvement. This is especially problematic for the parents of low-income, minority, urban, and/or at-risk children (Lightfoot 92). Price-Mitchell finds that the wide array of definitions and contexts contribute strongly to a lack of theory that can be applied. Additionally, the variance in definitions hinders research from being able to connect

specific forms of parent involvement to academic achievement. This prevents the replication of programs throughout schools (12).

Another obstacle to parent involvement are parents' lives and conflicting commitments of time (Raffaele and Knoff 448-66; Haynes 92; Trotman 280). For example, there are parents who must maintain work schedules that conflict with school activities, thereby preventing their attendance. These parents and their actions are often misunderstood and viewed as being either uninvolved or uncaring regarding their children's education (Cooper 380; Lee and Bowen 198).

Another barrier that researchers identify are the parents' own educational experience and negative feelings toward school. Memories of their own experience of educational failure as students form in some parents strong feelings of apprehension and mistrust. These feelings stymie their own involvement with schools (Raffaele and Knoff 448-66; Haynes 92; Allen and Butler 1). Lee and Bowen are in agreement with DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, and Duchane that parents' educational experience and level of education impact their involvement practices, with higher levels of education associated with increased parent involvement (Lee and Bowen 198; DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, and Duchane 362; Trotman 280).

Perceptions that they are different or not accepted in the school community are an obstacle to parent involvement. Research indicates that parents who interact with schools where their culture is not dominant and /or respected are less likely to engage with the school due to feelings of inadequacy, fear of rejection, and being misunderstood (Raffaele and Knoff 448-66; Haynes 92; Turner 37; Dunlap and Alva 123-33). This relates to Lee and Bowen's work that acknowledges the role of cultural capital and

admonishes practitioners to embrace the cultural variations of parents (214). The research makes it clear that a school can discourage parent involvement if its actions deliberately or inadvertently alienate parents (Allen and Butler 1; Trotman 279). Examples of two actions that can alienate parents are an unwillingness to share power and their exclusion from school decision making. These actions are just as harmful as a failure to support teacher efforts to increase parent involvement (Lazar and Slostad 207; Epstein and Becker 106; Trotman 276).

However, research has also made it clear that it does not help to sort out and to decide whether teachers or parents are to blame regarding successful parent involvement. This is because attempts to account for who is to blame limits the effectiveness of communication between the parties (Scott Stein and Thorkildsen 64; DeCastro-Ambrosetti and Cho 44). Studies indicate that many minority parents feel uncomfortable in the school setting, and that blaming them for the academic weakness of the child is a major obstacle to the improvement of parent involvement (Scott Stein and Thorkildsen 14; DeCastro-Ambrosetti and Cho 44). Nichols-Solomon and Lazar and Slostad agree that to blame the parents of low-income and/or minority students has a negative impact on parent involvement. The manifestation of educators' preconceived notions can lead to an adversarial relationship between the parent, teacher, and school (Nichols-Solomon 36; Lazar and Slostad 207; Fields –Smith 130-32; Scott Stein and Thorkildsen 10; Mattingly et al. 552). Many teachers fear being observed, judged, criticized, or monitored by parents. This discourages them from parent involvement (Haynes 92). In addition, teachers report that uncertainty about how to implement parent involvement stands in the way of its application (Scott Stein and Thorkildsen 6). The lack of administrator and

teacher training on how to seek parent involvement is an obstacle to parental involvement (Turner 37; Allen and Butler 1; DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, and Duchane 362; Benson and Martin 187-89). Another obstacle for administrators and teachers is the limited amount of evidence based on parent involvement programs (Fishel and Ramirez 397). One obvious cause of the limited amount of research on uninvolved parents is the fact that their lack of involvement makes it difficult to obtain data on them (Anderson and Minke 321).

Apart from the variety of definitions of parent involvement, their inconsistent use in the measurement of parent involvement make effective evaluation and research difficult (Baker and Soden 4; Marcon 395-412; C. Giles 258). Researchers find common ground on the need for scientific rigor in the collection of evidence in parent involvement research (Baker and Soden 2; Darling and Westberg 774-76; Fishel and Ramirez 398). There is a need to remedy methodological limitations or flaws such as: the use of non-experimental design, the inability to isolate and distinguish parent involvement's impact from other influences, varying meanings and degrees of parent involvement, and the existence of non-objective descriptive measures of parent involvement (Baker and Soden 3; Fishel and Ramirez 375). Baker and Soden also describe how early research findings are treated as definitively in favor of the benefit of parent involvement, in spite of severe data collection problems (2). Fishel and Ramirez reviewed 24 studies of parental involvement and draw similar conclusions. They find that most researchers and reviewers of parental involvement literature overlook methodological weaknesses when their results find significant achievement gains from parent involvement (375). It is when the results do not support or are inconclusive on the benefits of parent involvement that

researchers tend to emphasize their study's methodological limitations and flaws. The limitations and flaws are cited as the major reason for the failure to find conclusive evidence of the benefits from parent involvement. In many cases, the researcher agrees that there likely are benefits of parent involvement, and therefore additional studies are needed to overcome prior research limitations and flaws. This does not invalidate the literature. It calls for a premium on new studies with more careful data collection.

One issue significantly impacted by the research methodological limitations and flaws is the accurate measurement of the benefit from parent involvement. The problems with the measurement of parent involvement and other methodological flaws are connected with disagreement on the relative importance of parent involvement's benefit (Baker and Soden 2-10). An example of such research is that of Domina who examined the effectiveness of parental involvement in the elementary school setting. Domina's research does not support parent involvement as an independent factor for the improvement of student learning. It does support that certain parent involvement activities, such as homework help and volunteering at school, are able to prevent student behavioral problems. However, it suggests in agreement with other research that certain types of parent involvement may actually harm children. For example, homework help is negatively associated with academic achievement in this research (Domina 240, 245).

Another example of such research is that of Coleman and McNeese. They, like Domina, do not find support for parent involvement as a means to improve student achievement in elementary school children. Coleman and McNeese's interest in the relationship between parent involvement, student motivation, and academic achievement of fifth grade students reveals contrary findings to the common view about the benefits of

parental involvement. Their research findings demonstrate a negative correlation between parent involvement and student motivation, so that as parent involvement (decreases) increases, student motivation (increases) decreases (459). This inverse relationship between parent involvement, student motivation, and academic achievement was unexpected. However, their research results lead them to look at the relationship between age of the child, puberty, and parent involvement as a possible explanation for their findings. The positive correlation between parent involvement and student motivation in earlier ages may become a negative correlation for older students.

Mattingly et al.'s review of 41 studies that evaluate parent involvement programs also does not support the widespread belief in parental involvement's effectiveness as a strategy to promote student achievement (549). While the researchers' review does not declare parent involvement as ineffective, their findings reveal major research design, methodological, and analytical problems that prevent an accurate evaluation of the programs (Mattingly et al. 549).

Fishel and Ramirez's review of 24 studies is very similar to the work of Mattingly et al. Fishel and Ramirez distinguished their study from Mattingly et al. by the limitation of the definition of parent involvement. They excluded studies from their review if they did not have identifiable parent involvement components with measurable child outcomes (375). In spite of this limitation, methodological weaknesses also prevented this group of researchers from the establishment of parent involvement as an effective means for the improvement of academic outcomes. Fishel and Ramirez did conclude that programs that implement in-home parent tutoring for specific reading or math skills yield the strongest evidence in support of parental involvement (371).

This fits with the need for empirical data that determines which specific parent involvement practices lead to students' academic achievement (Finn 20). Another area of needed improvement is research that goes beyond trying to find correlations between parent involvement and socioeconomic status, race, immigration status, and family structure. Rather, the existing body of research has a need for more research into parent involvement programs for various family groupings and characteristics (Mattingly et al. 571).

D. Parent subgroups

African American parents

Researchers agree that we do not fully know the present day effects of segregation on African American parents and their children. Research is also clear regarding how parent involvement practices and patterns vary based on ethnicity. While African American parents are often cited as being uninvolved, disinterested, or demonstrating lower levels of education involvement compared to their counterparts, it is important to dig deeper (Mckay et al. 108; Huang and Mason 20; Fields-Smith 129). For research also shows that personal, cultural, and structural barriers can alienate African American parents from the educational system (Brandon 116).

Barriers to parent involvement in the general sense are also applicable to African American parents, and there is research that shows there are some specific, challenging obstacles for African American parents. The literature gives great attention to teachers' perceptions and attitudes of their interactions with African American parents. Fields-Smith draws attention to the idea that the majority of negative views of African Americans in schools are biased in favor of white, middle-class families (129). Cooper

also discusses how white, middle-class parents are more likely to be perceived as caring and involved in their children's education.

Fields-Smith and Cooper's concern about biased norms is not a new concern. Ira Gordon expressed the same concerns in the late sixties and early seventies. He writes,

In addition we face the question of whether the criteria, which reflect the middle class tradition so heavily, are really the correct ones for overcoming education deprivation. These standards certainly overlook whatever may be the already developed survival techniques and strengths of the poverty family as well as some of the realities of low income (25).

The literature confirms that inappropriate and ill-informed views of African Americans continue to exist and remain problematic.

Negative views of African American parents include the perception of them as apathetic, adversarial, or a challenge to deal with (Hulsebosch and Logan 32; Cooper 381; Koonce and Harper, Jr. 59). African American parents who advocate for their children are often classified as aggressive and difficult to deal with. Additionally, these parents may have a history of limited, frustrated involvement in schools. These negative views are based on interactions that are often mainly with African American females. This is due to their role, in many cases, as the sole caregiver of the child. These negative views exacerbate the educators' treatment of African American parents (Koonce and Harper, Jr. 59; Cooper 381). The lack of teacher respect towards African American parents who may exhibit different parenting styles is the result of a lack of education and experiences (Brandon 118). When teacher interactions with African American parents are limited to when issues of student discipline or misconduct arise, it is a barrier to

African American parent involvement and communication (Trotman 276-77; DeCastro-Ambrosetti and Cho 44).

According to Huang and Mason, a cause of low African American parent involvement is that parents do not understand the requirements and expectations of the school (20). Parents' misunderstanding and/or differences in expectations can lead to contentious, tenuous, and unproductive relations (Risko and Walker-Dalhouse 442). The resultant lack of parent involvement contributes to lower academic achievement, lower reading skills, high dropout rates, higher rates of student suspensions, lower student motivation, and high rates of placement into special education for African American students (Huang and Mason 20; Brandon 118; Flowers 424).

Reviews of the African American parent involvement literature reveal a shortage of empirical studies conducted with inner-city African American parents and problems with the research methodology used in past studies (Abdul-Adil and Farmer Jr. 3). For despite the abundance of literature that cites lower levels of African American parental involvement, there is contradictory research. Other studies find that the majority of African American parents want their children to achieve academically and respond positively to schools that invite them (Abdul-Adil and Farmer Jr. 1; Brandon 118; Huang and Mason 24). Urban schools that are successful with their African American students share the common element of substantial African American parent involvement (Cole-Henderson 88). There are additional studies that reveal that African American parents desire to be involved (Overstreet et al. 109).

These findings from African American parent involvement research provide recommendations for improvement. A prominent recommendation is for schools to be

proactive with engagement and to invite parents to become involved (Mckay et al. 111; Brandon 118; Huang and Mason 20). Huang and Mason recommend an analysis and understanding of parent's motivations, offerings of workshops and activities that meet the parent's needs, and the deliberate recruiting of parents (20). Abdul-Adil and Farmer Jr. also recommend that schools provide programs and offerings that focus on themes of empowerment, outreach, and indigenous resources (8). Empowerment includes the exposure of parents to training or skills that prepare them for involvement in their child's education. Outreach brings needed services to the parents in a setting that meets them where they are. Utilization of indigenous resources involves the use of existing supports within the family or community setting (Abdul-Adil and Farmer 5).

Flowers agrees with Abdul-Adil and Farmer Jr. that African American parents desire to be involved in the school life of their children, but may lack the necessary skills (426; 5). Flowers makes recommendations for future research. First, researchers need to examine African American perceptions of parent involvement. Secondly, he asks researchers to examine which specific skills and knowledge parents must possess in order to be involved in the academic life of their children (Flowers 426). Thirdly, Flowers advocates for research on the development of curricula or instructional modules for parents who need certain skills before they can help their child through purposeful interactions with their child and his or her school environment (426). The literature also recommends programs that help parents to help each other (Vandrick 249-53). Additionally, the literature encourages schools to recognize the contributions of the parent, to include parents as active partners, to encourage and to compliment parents in their efforts to encourage their children to achieve (Berger, *Parents as Partners* 78-79).

This positive, constructive approach makes a difference. For, while a great deal of research on African American parents cites low-socioeconomic status or poverty as a negative influence on parent involvement practices, an even greater detriment to parent involvement are teachers or school personnel who have adverse perceptions of parents based on low socioeconomic status (Trotman 279). Chittooran and Chittooran acknowledge the challenge of improvement of parent involvement in urban, high poverty schools. For, although the benefit of parent involvement is high, “getting parents in urban, high-poverty schools involved may be one of the greatest challenges facing educators. The situation may be exacerbated in the case of parents who are culturally diverse [and] lack education” (Chittooran and Chittooran 33).

Low-Income parents

Poverty is a serious problem for schools, students, and their parents (Szente 260; Armstrong 49). The parents of these children must deal with the effects of poverty, and their experiences directly affect their children. The effects of poverty and their direct relationship to the parent is an element that many schools overlook or underestimate when attempting to engage parents. The Condition of Education 2010 report defines high-poverty schools as being those where 76-100% of students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch (3). Twenty percent of public elementary schools and 9% of public secondary schools met that standard at the time of the report (Aud et al.3).

Unemployment, inadequate housing and medical care, low birth weight, infant mortality, growth stunting, poor nutrition, and community violence are some of the circumstances that are more likely to be present in the lives of those who live in poverty (Cuthrell, Stapleton, and Ledford 105; Chittooran and Chittooran 32). Schools that serve children

who live in poverty or in low-income families must also contend with higher rates of school truancy, mobility, lead poisoning, asthma, and untreated or undiagnosed physical ailments. These conditions are well documented to adversely affect school achievement (Rouse and Fantuzzo 342; Armstrong 49).

In most cases, the school's focus is limited as it deals with the child who lives in poverty or in a low-income family, and not the parent. The lack of parent involvement exacerbates the difficulties due to poverty, but this does not mean that poverty inevitably leads to a lack of parent involvement. For while there is a correlation between the socioeconomic level of the parent and parent involvement, as shown in numerous studies, and both affect student achievement, the correlation does not imply a causation (Scott Stein and Thorkildsen 18; Drummond and Stipek 198; Berger, *Parents as Partners* 153). Instead, research on low-income parents reveal that parents are concerned and want to assume an active role in the educational process. They are willing to help at home, desire to know what their children learn, and believe that they should facilitate their children's success in school (Drummond and Stipek 206; Raffaele and Knoff 448-66). Drummond and Stipek's study included participants from three states, 103 schools, from both rural and urban communities, which make its results more likely to generalize to other low-income parents. This study's findings are confirmed by Fantuzzo et al. (478).

What often prevents low-income parents from becoming involved are the actions and attitudes of the school and teachers. Hulsebosch and Logan write, "This is especially true in the inner city and in schools with economically poor students who are African American or recent immigrants. School personnel assume that parents will be apathetic, adversarial, or challenging to deal with" (32). As noted before, although low-income

negatively affects school achievement, it is equally damaging when educators and researchers view low-income families and/ or minorities as deficient and disadvantaged (Barnyak and McNelly 49). In addition, sometimes school personnel interact with parents because of their needs and desires. They do not take an interest in the parents' needs (Hulsebosch and Logan 32). The stereotypes and biases of educators are major barriers to parental involvement (Armstrong 51; Epstein and Dauber 30). Both Epstein and Dauber, and Hulsebosch and Logan, warn that this practice is not conducive to the formation of a true partnership between the parent and school (301; 32). Moreover, experience has shown that the effects of poverty are surmountable obstacles to parental involvement. Benson and Martin write, “when teachers take clear, deliberate action to involve parents the socioeconomic status and education level of the parents disappear as a factor in the willingness of parents to be involved” (187).

Poverty and its effects do require school personnel to be sensitive and aware of the challenges that both the students and their parents face. Schools must develop new approaches to engage the parents (Szente 260; Van Velsor and Orozco 17-24).

Researchers recommend that they develop strategies that respect the parent's community, culture, and their ability to contribute to their child's education (Van Velsor and Orozco 17-24). Other recommendations for how to engage parents with low-income levels are: to learn about the families in the school, to utilize the parents' cultural capital, to provide flexibility in scheduling meetings, to provide opportunities for family involvement, and to explicitly request parent involvement with specific teacher suggestions (Van Velsor and Orozco 17-24; Weiss et al. 896; Drummond and Stipek 209). Related research recommends that schools train their teachers on the effects of poverty if they are going to

work with children from low-income families (Cuthrell, Stapleton, and Ledford 107). The Chicago Public School's 2009 report of teacher mobility provides confirmation of the need for teacher preparation that specifically trains them to work in areas of low income and high poverty (Allensworth, Ponisciak, and Mazzeo 20). Chicago teacher mobility rates are the highest in very low performing schools, with predominantly low-income African American students. However, teacher mobility is reduced in school environments where teachers experience trusting relationships with parents (Allensworth, Ponisciak, and Mazzeo 27). Stable, consistent teachers are an essential component for schools that desire to be successful when serving low-income families.

Several studies confirm the relationship between parental involvement and high achievement students who live in situations of poverty or whose families have low income levels. Izumi's exploration of eight high performing elementary schools that served low-income students in California concludes that there are many common characteristics of the schools and the educational leaders. A strong emphasis on the facilitation of parental involvement is a common action of each school principal (49). Ingram, Wolfe, and Lieberman's study of high achievement, minority elementary students who lived in high poverty Chicago families also finds that the school's leadership emphasizes and cultivates parent involvement (492). There are other examples of the role of parent involvement and its ability to overcome the negative effects of poverty and low income. Darling's research finds that parent involvement has a positive impact on children's reading acquisition, regardless of their families' socioeconomic status (246).

While the consensus of the literature acknowledges the challenge of poverty for educators and schools, there is also complete agreement on the benefits of increasing low-income parent involvement in the educational lives of their children. This is especially important since students who live in poverty are often most at risk for academic failure and perhaps have the most to gain from high levels of parent involvement. Haberman's work identifies characteristics of star principals and teachers who work with children living in poverty and challenges educators to examine their own perceptions of parents. Essential to success as a teacher in areas of low income and poverty is the ability of the school leader to demonstrate respect, maintain a positive view of parents, and to regard them as partners (88-90). "He or she must build on this positive perception by demonstrating a sincere respect for parents and caregivers. The first obstacle the principal must overcome, therefore, is any perception that he or she leads from an elevated educational or social position" (Haberman 89).

E. Parent involvement and schools

School leadership

Other researchers recognize what Haberman describes as a hierarchy that can exist in schools (Price-Mitchell 13; Barge and Loges 158; Haberman 89). The principal occupies the top level and the parents remain at the bottom. When educators view themselves as elevated experts and not equals with parents, it creates a barrier (Haberman 89; Price-Mitchell 13). These barriers to parent involvement are overcome through deliberate, intentional actions. Richardson's view is that the principal has a lot of potential ability to foster parent involvement in the school and is crucial to the successful development of any parent involvement program (3). The principal's promotion of

parent involvement is to provide support, allocate funding, coordinate and manage efforts, and recognize teacher-led parent involvement actions (Richardson 3). This is consistent with how other researchers articulate a need for school leaders to have practices and policies that encourage parent involvement and trust (Machen, Wilson, and Notar 16).

Furthermore, research on school leadership and parent involvement is limited. There is a shortage of empirical studies on the practices of school leadership and their relationship to parent involvement within the literature (C.Giles 258). Limited research and the lack of useful, organized information contribute to the inability of school leaders to execute successful programs (Epstein, “Parent Involvement” 120). Auerbach connects the limited amount of research to school leaders “talking the talk” without real efforts to foster parent involvement (10). Analysis of school leadership practices indicate that there is a tendency to manage parents in conventional ways that promote only the school’s agenda (Auerbach 10). Parent involvement that only considers the school’s needs is school centered. It fails to consider the needs of the parents and does not contribute to the family’s needs (Scott Stein and Thorkildsen 38). Consequently, research validates that despite the consensus on the benefit of parent involvement for education outcomes, many schools do not have strong parent involvement programs in place (Scott Stein and Thorkildsen 37).

Reasons for why school leaders do not facilitate parent involvement within their schools are abundant. Haberman suggests a root cause is that their personal beliefs and attitudes about parent involvement are not conducive to this practice (Richardson 2; Haberman 89). Another possible cause is that there is inadequate training of

administrators in the area of parent involvement. Auerbach's investigation of administrator training finds that only 20% of college of education deans consider their program graduates well prepared to work with families and to engage them (10).

The need for highly skilled and trained principals in the area of parent involvement becomes even more relevant in times of critical decision-making. School principals make decisions and determine priorities daily, such as budget, time management, allocation of resources, and identification of school foci. A challenge for educational leaders is to identify the most beneficial types of parent involvement (Epstein, "Parent Involvement" 120). This responsibility becomes less of an impediment with proper principal training.

Snipes, Blendinger, and Jones recognize a need to help principals decipher the types of parent involvement that will be most beneficial (2-22). Their research compared Mississippi elementary school principal perceptions from both high and low academically achieving schools (4). Principals from both high and low performing schools reported that teachers sent home samples of student work, they communicated through notes and letters, held parent-teacher conferences, conducted back-to-school and open house events, and other special activities (12). All principals in this study viewed their teachers as trying to involve parents in the education of their children. Each principal felt responsible to provide a leadership role while working with the teachers to promote parent involvement (Snipes, Blendinger, and Jones 15-20). Yet principals of the higher achieving schools reported more active Parent Teacher Associations and greater levels of school-to-home communications (Snipes, Blendinger, and Jones 20). This piece of research illustrates the power of the school principal as the catalyst and the role of the

teacher as the facilitator for parental involvement. Some school administrators leave the selection and implementation of parent involvement practices to the teachers; many are very directly involved (Epstein, "Parent Involvement" 120).

Teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and roles

Just as principals' perceptions of parent involvement are essential to a better understanding from the leadership perspective, teachers' perceptions are equally important and deserving of exploration. Teachers influence heavily the parents' first impressions and attitudes toward the school. How teachers view themselves and their role as facilitators of parent involvement is therefore also of extreme importance. Self-efficacy of teachers influences their confidence levels and what type of interactions they are likely to have with parents (Keyes 111; Murry, Curran, and Zellers 102). Researchers agree that teachers are the most important agents and are central to parent involvement. Parents' perception of teacher outreach is a significant predictor of parent involvement for both in-school and at-home parent involvement. Regardless of race or income level, research finds that parents are more likely to participate in school activities and functions when encouraged by teachers (Patrikakou and Weissberg 116-17). Furthermore, teachers are in the most advantageous position for reaching out to parents (Scott Stein and Thorkildsen 49; Berger, *Parents as Partners* 136). Parent involvement in most schools depends greatly on teacher initiative and experience (Lazar et al. 5-10). The majority of teachers in the research agree upon parent involvement as being beneficial in education, and they express positive attitudes, but school programs and classroom practices demonstrate the well established disconnect between what teachers say and what they do (Epstein and Dauber 304; Barnyak and McNelly 54; Scott Stein and Thorkildsen 45).

Many teachers are from middle class families, and they possess values and perceptions that are heavily influenced by their own experiences (Grossman 24-27). Teachers' current and past contextual cultural elements, combined with their own childhood experiences, affect their views of parents. Allensworth, Ponisciak, and Mazzeo report of the challenge new teachers face when there are cultural and ethnic differences between the teacher and the parent community (31). Their research leads them to conclude, "Schools cannot choose the parents they serve, but they can design their outreach to parents in ways that encourage productive collaboration with teachers, rather than anger and resentment" (31). Negative and/or stereotypical attitudes, which teachers may possess, derive from limited cultural experiences and inhibit successful teacher and parent collaboration; they reflect beliefs that are formed before a teacher enters the profession (Joshi, Eberly, and Konzal 12).

Acquired prejudices and biases continue to develop once a teacher is practicing, and influence their beliefs about parents and families (Souto-Manning and Swick 187; Grossman 24-27). Grossman discusses the potential danger of teachers and parents blaming each other when teachers' expectations, based on their own experiences, collide with the reality of school communities that do not have active parental involvement (24-27). A second influential factor of teacher perceptions is the school culture and its attitude towards parents (Ferrara, "Broadening the Myopic" 125; Souto-Manning and Swick 187). A third influential factor that affects teacher perceptions of parent involvement is poor or distorted training (Souto-Manning and Swick 187).

A teacher's pre-service experience plays a vital role in whether they are prepared to engage parents. There is a long history of research that documents the lack of

preparation of educators to work with students' families and that document teachers who admit to this limitation (Epstein and Sanders 82; Ferrara and Ferrara 77; Murray, Curran, and Zellers 87). Margaret Ferrara writes, "Pre-service teachers must know why parent involvement in schools is vital to their learning before they enter the teaching force". A criticism that she has of pre-service programs is how their focus on parent involvement is limited to the preparation of teachers to deal with the challenges of parent involvement, like how to handle the difficult parent. She also warns of how this limited focus does not share with the pre-service teacher about the value and benefits of parent involvement (Ferrara, "Increasing Parent Involvement" 268). This shortcoming is echoed by a survey of graduates from a teacher preparation program that reveals that participants report low levels of preparation to work with parents (Ferrara, "Increasing Parent Involvement" 269).

Margaret Ferrara insists that classroom readings on parent involvement by pre-service teachers be complemented with actual interactions with families. This is what will allow them to fully realize the worth and value of parents as partners (Ferrara, "Increasing Parent Involvement" 273). Additional recommendations for pre-service teachers and programs are to engage in practices that examine negative attitudes and to produce strategies to overcome them (Grossman 24-27; Souto-Manning and Swick 189).

Experienced teachers are also the products of teacher preparation programs that may have failed to prepare them fully for the involvement and engagement of parents. Research also challenges experienced teachers to review their attitudes and perspectives on parents and families, and to reflect continually on their practices (Grossman 24-27; Souto-Manning and Swick 189). The literature identifies many clear recommendations

for teachers who desire successful parental involvement. These recommendations include to plan for and to initiate parent involvement, to make parent involvement part of their regular teaching practice, to show respect for parents and families, to establish open two-way communication, and to acknowledge and to empower parents. All of these practices enable parent involvement to thrive (Scott Stein and Thorkildsen 49; Epstein and Dauber 289; Flanigan 102; Joshi, Eberly, and Konzal 11; Souto-Manning and Swick 190).

To summarize this section, teachers are of extreme importance as facilitators, interpreters, resource developers, counselors, communicators, and friends to parents (Berger, *Parents as Partners* 136). Research clearly indicates that parent involvement is a valuable, underutilized resource for the school community (Lazar et al. 5-10). This finding leads legislators to make parent involvement a national priority. It indicates their belief in its ability to impact student achievement (Fishel and Ramirez 372; Kennedy 384; Mattingly et al. 549; Fields-Smith 129; Abul-Adil and Farmer Jr. 8; Pomerantz, Moorman, and Litwack 373; Flanigan 89). However, while teachers continually state that they support and believe that parent involvement to be beneficial for student achievement, they often do not encourage parent involvement and admit to the uncertainty of how to get parents involved at home and in the classroom (Levine 10). Yet, despite the common disconnection in teacher beliefs and practices, research indicates that if teachers receive concrete training, steps, and strategies, they will be more prepared and willing to involve parents.

F. The achievement gap and the role of early childhood education

Disparities between racial and between social economic status groups in student academic achievement are referred to as the achievement gap. This has become a major concern in the United States of America (Kams 9). A recent national example of this disparity is the following analysis of 4th grade reading achievement: “In 2009, about 45 percent of 4th graders from high poverty schools performed at or above Basic, compared with 83 percent of 4th graders from low poverty schools” (Aud et al. 14). Researchers note that the gap between minority-majority achievements has narrowed over the past thirty years, but the achievement differences are still substantial by the end of middle school (Allington, *What Really Matters* 7). African Americans score lower and are disproportionately represented among students who experience academic failure (Flowers 424; Ntiri 232; Taylor, Hinton, and Wilson 293). Musti-Rao and Cartledge state, “63% of the nation’s African American fourth graders are reading below basic level” (15).

The reasons for the achievement gap among American students are complicated and varied. Possible reasons may include differences in the quality of school experiences and teachers, curriculum, standardized testing, effects of poverty, and parent influence (Darling 245-46; Rothstein 32-37; Murphy 12; Flowers 424-25). Some researchers trace the beginnings of the achievement gap almost back to the birth of a child. The first five years of life is a time of rapid brain growth and a period in which individuals are extremely receptive to developmental stimulation. It also is a time for early intervention that can prevent or reverse the many developmental problems that children experience (Mahoney and Wiggers 7). Rouse and Fantuzzo write, “Unfortunately, young children exposed to risk factors associated with poverty and urban environments are less likely to

develop early literacy skills and more likely to evidence reading difficulties throughout elementary and secondary school” (341-42). Middle class parents are often able to provide experiences such as visits to museums, libraries, and travel that stimulate their young children and promote learning. Low-income parents frequently are unable to provide these same experiences for their children. Therefore, the experiences provided by a middle class parent to their young child are considered advantageous compared to the experiences provided by a low-income parent to their child. This has motivated attempts to minimize the effects of poverty and low-income status.

One early attempt at such is the creation in the mid 1960s of the federal Head Start program for children ages three-five (Rose 222; Duch 23). In the Head Start program, children receive education, health, and social services (Rose 222). Limited program capacity now makes it so that Head Start addresses the needs of only half of the children that meet its eligibility requirements (Doggett and Wat 9). Yet, Head Start continues to be one of the major interventions for poor young children who are at risk for academic failure. For this study, it is relevant that “Head Start was initially conceptualized as a program for children *and their families*” [italics added] (Duch 23). The parent involvement component, which refers specifically to time spent in the schools by the parent, begins as a major focus of Head Start (Duch 23-24). However, the program has experienced recently a significant decrease in parental involvement (Duch 23). This decline in parent involvement in Head Start may be reversed given how early childhood education interventions, including attempts to improve early literacy, have become a major focus in the goal to eliminate the United States achievement gap (Frede and Barnett 9).

Early literacy and reading

Early literacy involves the composition of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that a young child acquires in the period that precedes learning to read and write in the primary grades (kindergarten through third). These skills encompass phonological, print awareness, alphabetic knowledge, oral language, text comprehension, listening comprehension, and emergent writing (Roskos, Christie, and Richgels 52-60). Emergent or early literacy skills are an important academic prerequisite, but many low-income children enter kindergarten with limited skills. Ming and Powell report that the results of such a deficit could delay literacy skill development as much as two years behind their peers (127).

Allington identifies the ability to read at a desirable level as a problem for students in the United States. The fact that roughly one-third of U.S. students read at/or above the proficient level, one-third read at the basic level, and one-third read below the basic level is clear evidence of the nation's literacy issue (Allington, "What At Risk" 40). Allington and Walmsley write, "it is distressing to think that our schools are so ineffectual with children who begin school with few literacy experiences that we can predict with horrifying accuracy what lifestyles different six-year-olds will attain when they reach adulthood" (2).

Two-thirds of all students who enter U.S. kindergarten classrooms know the letters in the alphabet. The remaining one-third of students is considered more likely to develop into the one-third of fourth graders who will read below the basic level (Allington, "What at Risk" 41). Sixty percent of low-income students enter kindergarten without knowing their alphabet (Doggett and Wat 8). The lack of alphabet knowledge at

the beginning of kindergarten is an indication of students who are at risk of struggling with reading (Allington, "What at Risk" 41). The kindergarten school year is critical for children. It clearly reveals a student's need for interventions (MacDonald and Figueredo 417). MacDonald and Figueredo state, "Students' second-grade reading achievement can be predicted by the middle of kindergarten" (417).

Parent involvement and early learning

The conclusions of existing research that document the benefits of parent involvement have led to many recent interventions that include a parent involvement component. Musti-Rao and Cartledge's work emphasizes the benefits of a collaborative relationship between parents and teachers in the prevention of reading difficulties in children (15). Findings from this research demonstrate how communication that involves the sharing of information is foundational to an effective home-school relationship (Musti-Rao and Cartledge 16). Other researchers provide evidence that frequent, positive, two-way communication between the parent and teacher benefits the student (Scott Stein and Thorkildsen 49; Barge and Loges 161; Joshi, Eberly, and Konzal 11).

Studies in the acquisition of reading ability conclude that parents should read to the child, provide the child with interesting reading materials, and discuss the importance of reading (Elish-Piper and Piper 56-60). Recommendations for the improvement of reading comprehension include that a parent read to the child for fifteen minutes, discuss the readings, assist the child in the identification of story elements such as main character, setting, story plot, to have the child answer questions, and allow the child to make predictions about the story (Elish-Piper 49-52).

Homework is one of the most acknowledged forms of home-based parental involvement. Battle-Bailey's development of the Interactive Reading Homework process attempts to increase parent involvement and student achievement for second grade students (36). The process has five steps that include the need for parents to listen to their child read, to discuss vocabulary with them, to ask questions or to engage in discussions with the child, to complete a parental checklist, and to design various reading projects for their child (Battle-Bailey 36). Classroom teachers facilitate this interactive homework and serve as the liaisons between home and school. The design phase of this program requires teachers to be aware of the child's and the parent's background in the creation of their assignments (Battle-Bailey 36). Although the quantitative benefits of the program are not clear, the researcher believes the observed advantages include having meaningful conversations between parents and their children, development of reasoning skills, improved student attitudes regarding homework, and improved reading achievement (Battle-Bailey 36-40).

Another component that researchers recommend to improve early learning is adaptation to the context. Trevett and McMillan write, "successful programs are not carbon copies of efforts in other cities or states; they each contain unique features that incorporate the advantages of their community and address the areas of need" (9). They identify planning, training, communication, and administrative support as being the major characteristics of successful school parent involvement programs (9). Their work also emphasizes that the majority of parents want to be involved (Trevett and McMillan 10). Williams and Chavkin also provide recommendations to improve early learning. They advocate the use of written policies, having a partnership approach, networking, and

evaluation (18-20). These practices also contribute to the adaptation of teacher interventions to encourage parent involvement.

At-home learning

Learning at home is one of the six types of parent involvement that Epstein identifies. There is research that provides clear evidence of at-home parent involvement having a more significant impact on children's achievement than other forms of involvement (Jones 38). This has led to a number of research projects that seek to help us learn more about how to improve at-home learning.

An example of this is the research of Dever and Burts. They explored the relationship between adults reading to children and the child's acquisition of reading skills (359). They used research that says that children who are read to from birth have an advantage over children who live in homes where reading is done less (360). Their Family Literacy Bags project is designed as a learning at-home activity that engages the parent, develops a love for reading in young children, increases the numbers of books read, and increases time spent reading by children and their families (Dever and Burts 361). The 2,340 participants for their study were kindergarten students and their parents from both city and rural school settings. The participants received literacy bags that contained storybooks, related extension activities, and parent surveys. Kindergarten teachers were trained on the implementation of the program and the data collection procedures (Dever and Burts 362). Research results from both kindergarten teachers and parents indicates an overall enjoyment of the program by both parents and teachers but pre- and post-questionnaires completed by parents indicate no statistically significant increase in the time spent reading, number of books read, or time spent engaged in book

related discussions and activities. The researchers conclude that the families were already reading to their children three to four books per week and spending thirty minutes to one hour per week reading prior to the study. The researchers did conclude that the project encouraged the continued reading at home (Dever and Burts 364).

Another research project is by Darling and Westberg. They conducted a meta-analysis of parent involvement in the literacy acquisition of children in grades kindergarten through three. Their study observed twenty interventions and 1,583 families. It concludes that parent involvement has a positive effect on children from kindergarten to grade three. This research reveals, "Training parents to teach their children reading with specific exercises produces greater results than having parents listen to their child read with or without training. In addition, training parents to listen to their child read was two times more effective than having parents listen to their child read without training" (Darling and Westberg 774-76). The socioeconomic status of the participating families had no effect on the results of the interventions.

This research is not a direct contradiction to the work of Elish-Piper and Piper and the numerous studies that encourage parents to read to their children, however it does state that reading to children and utilizing specific strategies are more beneficial than reading alone (56). Many of the studies that encourage reading to a child in the general sense make comparisons between children who are read to and those who are not. Darling and Westberg's research adds to the existing research on reading and provides a comparison of specific at-home reading interventions, demonstrating that certain specific at-home reading activities are more academically beneficial than others. This study is just one of the many that confirm the benefits of at-home parent involvement.

Other groups of researchers positively connect parent home tutoring with improved academic performance and academic functioning among elementary school children (Fishel and Ramirez 396; Pomerantz, Moorman, and Litwack 378). The student academic success discussed in the study of Ingram, Wolfe, and Lieberman lists learning at home as a contributing factor (491). The evidence in favor of at-home learning leads some researchers to encourage the development of at-home learning rituals. These rituals work even if the parent only has limited amounts of time; for if they are used consistently, they can prove extremely beneficial (Souto-Manning and Swick 188; Barnyak and McNelly 37).

Fantuzzo et al.'s work reveals that at-home family involvement is the strongest predictor of child outcome (467). Izzo et al. notes that in addition to being a predictor of student academic achievement, at-home educational activities predict the widest range of performance variables (835). Douville makes the same conclusion as Fantuzzo et al. and Izzo et al. regarding the predictive nature of at-home based parent literacy experiences (3). Baker and Soden also provide support for at-home parent functions as being critical to the academic success of the school. They list reading and writing with the child, going on educational outings, monitoring television viewing, and overseeing homework as at-home parent activities (2-3).

In addition to research confirming the benefits, parents convey support for at-home learning and a willingness to participate in at-home activities. Scott Stein and Thorkildsen's extensive review of parent involvement research leads them to write, "most parents feel teachers could involve them more extensively in at-home learning activities" (52). Raffaele and Knoff's survey of parents reveals that more than 90% were interested

in participating in at-home learning activities (448-66). One of the possible reasons for the parent support for home-based involvement is that it allows the parent to have flexibility in their schedule, and it allows the parent and child to spend time together in a relaxed setting (Levine 5).

G. Summary

The literature communicates well that parent involvement is a vehicle for the enhancement of student achievement. These findings lead its encouragement to become a local and national priority. This is why educational policies, such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, contain provisions for parent involvement. Perspective on our current situation is provided by the history of American parent involvement that provides insight into how the role of the parent in education and parental relationships with the school has evolved over time. An important part of this history is the history of African American parental involvement. It contains periods with experiences that were damaging to African American families and may contribute to current practices. For, while we cannot know fully the effects of slavery, racism, and segregation on African American parent involvement, research indicates that harmful effects may exist.

Fortunately, there is a substantial literature on parent involvement. The majority of the existing parent involvement literature references Epstein's six types of parent and community involvement. The vast majority of the literature subscribes to at least some elements of Epstein's model within their parent involvement framework. This body of work is critical to understand references regarding the types of parental involvement. For instance, a parent can choose to work at home with a child, never visit the school, and still be extremely involved in their child's education. Parent involvement is often the

behind closed door actions that teachers do not see. A child who comes to school every day fed, clothed, and ready for engagement is valuable evidence of parental involvement and parental well-being.

Although Epstein's typologies are the most referenced parent involvement models, similarities in elements of the earlier work of Gordon, Cevone, and O'Leary and Berger are evident. Research indicates that Epstein's typologies are a synthesis and an extension of the work of her predecessors.

Researchers continue the quest to understand parent involvement. Social changes provoke researchers to advocate for definitions of parent involvement that are inclusive of non-traditional families and forms of parent involvement. In this process, new variations of definitions of what is parent involvement continue to emerge. The multitude of parent involvement definitions, concepts, and models create an obstacle for both researchers and practitioners. The lack of a universally accepted rubric to define parent involvement creates an abundance of challenges. The absence of agreement on how to define parent involvement contributes to a lack of a solid picture on how to adequately assess, measure, and demonstrate parental involvement (Baker and Soden 2-5). The variety of definitions is also challenging to practitioners who are responsible for the implementation and facilitation of parent involvement. Due in part to the varying definitions, they are unsure of what constitutes parent involvement and how to ensure it. The lack of clear-cut working definitions contributes to the paradox of how: even though there is widespread agreement that parent involvement is important, many educators are uncertain about how to promote parent involvement.

The uncertainty that educators face is evident when reviewing the practices and patterns of African American and/or low-income parents. Both groups of parents demonstrate lower levels of visible in-school involvement when compared to other groups. The research highlights the strong need for schools to improve the involvement of low-income and African American parents. The literature demonstrates that there are significantly larger amounts of low-income parents, often African Americans, who are cited as not engaged or involved in their children's school life. This creates the need to identify and explore the barriers that prevent African American and/or low-income parents from more active involvement in their children's education.

Once the barriers to parent involvement are identified, the research can seek to provide suggestions and solutions as to how specifically to invite and engage these parents. Among the issues is the need to identify and address barriers to parent involvement specific to particular groups, like low-income African-Americans, and to create practical solutions that can be implemented by school districts. Parental motivations, empowerment, teacher biases, and perceptions of themselves are also areas of exploration that could help to eliminate obstacles to parent involvement.

The literature is clear on the role of school leaders and teachers in the encouragement of parent involvement. The school leader's commitment to parent involvement is crucial and must be communicated. Teachers are in most cases the first (and at times the only) point of contact for parents and family members. Teachers can be more instrumental in the engagement of parents who have historically been estranged from the school process. There is considerable research that indicates teachers' perceptions of parents affect parent involvement. This mandates that future programs

focus on the implementation of recommendations in the literature. This will require improved training of future teachers and the continued professional development of teachers who are at the forefront of how to influence parent involvement beneficially.

For the literature reveals that parent involvement is not a cut-and-dried issue. If parents are not involved, the change must begin with the educational institution. Local schools have the responsibility to attempt to involve and engage parents. School principals and teachers should be the initiators of parent involvement. Several researchers conclude that the vast majority of parents desire for their children to be successful in school. Many of them lack the knowledge as to how to do this (Hill and Craft 74).

The majority of researchers agree that parent involvement is a positive component of education and benefits students. However, there is no clear measurable indicator of the effects and benefits of it. The ability to reliably measure parent involvement and its effectiveness is an on-going challenge that many researchers believe is the prevalent research limitation and continues to limit the advancement of what can be known about the effects of parental involvement (Baker and Soden 2-7). Concrete evidence of the impact of parental involvement is one way to make the case of its value. Researchers who dissent from the parent involvement literature, question the relative importance of parent involvement, and often discuss research problems and the lack of supporting empirical evidence.

There is complete agreement in the literature surrounding the reduction of the achievement gap in America and that it is a high priority among policymakers, educators, and researchers (Kams 9). An emphasis is now on the role of early childhood education

and its potential as a means to eliminate the achievement gap. The research reveals that early childhood outcomes are predictive of later academic achievement, and the early detection and prevention of academic difficulties is a function of early childhood education. Research also confirms that parent involvement can affect a student's academic achievement. Regardless of methodological controversies, all of the variables that relate to the widespread improvement of student achievement must be explored.

This includes a form of parent support called at-home parent involvement. Quantitative research provides overwhelming support for at-home parent involvement and its positive effect on student achievement. At-home parent involvement provides parents with specific training that addresses targeted student skills. Parents, regardless of ethnicity and socioeconomic level, communicate a willingness and desire to increase their at-home parent involvement.

III. Methodology

A. Research design

The purpose of this causal/comparative ex post facto study is to investigate the impact of parent involvement on literacy achievement of kindergarten students through the use of the Instructional At-Home Plan by African American parents. This research study seeks to better understand parental involvement patterns, practices, and effects on the academic achievement of kindergarten students. The events being investigated in this research are a natural occurrence and non-experimental in nature, and this is the reason for the use of causal/comparative ex post facto design (Ary, Jacobs, and Sorensen 331-48).

B. Sample and site

The study utilized participant data on students who attended full-day Chicago Public School kindergarten classes for the 2009-10 and 2010-11 school years and on their parents' use of the Instructional At-Home Plan. Both the 2009-10 and 2010-11 school years involved a non-random sample population that consisted of students from three kindergarten classrooms within the same school who completed the beginning, middle, and end of year DIBELS literacy assessment.

Four years of comparative kindergarten DIBELS data were used. The first two school years of data were from 2007-08 and 2008-09. The pooled results from these two years were compared with results from data from the 2009-10 and 2010-11 school years. The source of the data for each school year consisted of three classrooms within the same school. The demographic information was comparable for each of the years being examined. This study utilized aggregate DIBELS results that were administered three

times per each academic year. The data were from one school, and the school's leadership was consistent from 2007-08 through 2010-11. Table 1 provides the number of students assessed for each year and period of DIBELS assessment.

Table 1

Number of Students for Each Year and Period of DIBELS Assessment

School Year	Beginning of Year	Middle of Year	End of Year
2007-08	85	95	87
2008-09	73	76	77
2009-10	91	76	74
2010-11	86	82	81

The 2008 Illinois School Report Card reported the schools' total enrollment as 878 students, with 98.7% of the students being black and 97.4% of the student population being low income. The Illinois School Report Card defines low-income as students who come from families receiving public aid; live in institutions for neglected or delinquent children; are supported in foster homes with public funds; or are eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch. The schools' mobility rate was 44.5%, and the attendance rate was 91.6%. The average kindergarten class size for the 2007-08 years was 26.0 students, as of the first school day in May. For all of the grades tested (three through eight), the school's composite was 48.4% of students met or exceeded the standards on the Illinois School Achievement Test (ISAT) for the 2007-08 school year. For the third grade, 30.2% of students met or exceeded state standards in reading for the 2007-08 school year.

The 2009 Illinois School Report Card reported the school's total enrollment as being 902 students, with 99.0% of the students being black, and 93.3% of the student

population being low-income. The schools' mobility rate was 28.3% and the attendance rate was 91.2%. The average kindergarten class size for the 2008-09 year was 26.0 students, as of the first school day in May. For all of the grades tested (three through eight), the school's composite was 51.6% of students who met or exceeded the standards on the Illinois School Achievement Test (ISAT) for the 2008-09 school year. For the third grade, 33.6% of students met or exceeded state standards in reading for the 2008-09 school year.

Data obtained from the 2010 Illinois School Report Card reported the school's total enrollment being 858 students, with 98.7% of the students being black and 97.7% low-income. The school's mobility rate was 25.5%, and the attendance rate was 91.8%. The average kindergarten class size for the 2009-10 year was 25.0 students as of the first school day in May. For all of the grades tested (three through eight), the school's composite was 57.7% of students who met or exceeded the standards on the Illinois School Achievement Test (ISAT) for the 2009-10 school year. For the third grade, 38.3% of students met or exceeded state standards in reading for the 2009-10 school year.

The 2011 Illinois School Report Card reported the schools' total enrollment being 791 students, with 98.0% of the students being black and 98.6% of the student population being low income. The schools' mobility rate was 29.8%, and the attendance rate was 92.1%. The average kindergarten class size for the 2010-11 years was 27.0 students as of the first school day in May. For all of the grades tested (three through eight), the school's composite was 61.9% of students met or exceeded the standards on the Illinois School Achievement Test (ISAT) for the 2010-11 school year. For the third grade, 41.7% of students met or exceeded state standards in reading for the 2010-11 school year.

The school's student ethnic population for all four years of this study averaged 98.6% Black, and 96.75% of the student body was low-income status. Table 2 displays the school's ethnic make-up of the participants and their economic levels.

Table 2

Student Demographic Data

Year	Percent Black	Percent Low-Income
2008	98.7	97.4
2009	99.0	93.3
2010	98.7	97.7
2011	98.0	98.6

Each student's parent or adult representative completed an Instructional At-Home Plan conference, which was conducted by the child's teacher at the school. The three kindergarten teachers who presented the Instructional At-Home Plan to the parents for the 2009-10 year were within their first year of teaching at the school, and two of the three teachers were in their first year of teaching overall. The teachers for the 2010-11 school year included two who had used the Instructional At-Home Plan for the previous year and an experienced teacher who had however never taught kindergarten students before.

The author was a participant teacher. She was a teacher/user of the Kindergarten Instructional At-Home Plan for both the 2009-10 and the 2010-11 school years. The 2010-11 school year completed her seventeenth year of teaching.

The exact demographics are not known for the teachers who taught kindergarten for the 2007-08 and 2008-09 school years. They were a combination of experienced and new teachers. Since the development of the Instructional At-Home Plan occurred at the

beginning of the 2009-10 school year, it was not available for the teachers who taught for the 2007-08 and 2008-09 school years. Additionally, for this group of earlier teachers, there were no at-home parental involvement strategies or interventions on record.

C. Measures

DIBELS, Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, is prevention based and one of the most widely used early literacy assessments in the United States of America (Hall 1). “As of the 2004-2005 school year, more than 2,200 school districts from 49 states and Canada had adopted the DIBELS as a screening tool ” (Rouse and Fantuzzo 343). It is primarily used with students in grades K through three, with the capacity of assessment of students through grade six. DIBELS is not designed to assess every element of literacy development. The DIBELS assessments are designed to address what is known as the big ideas of beginning reading. These big ideas are phonological awareness, which is the ability to hear and manipulate sounds, development of the alphabetic principle, which involves recognition of letter names and their sounds, and accuracy and fluency of connected text (Good III et al. 7).

The function and purpose of DIBELS are based on its’ creators’ belief that the ability to evaluate a young child’s academic weakness and foretell their future is the same ability that should be used to intervene and redirect. Good III, Simmons, and Kame'enui advocate for a reliable, prevention-oriented, school-based assessment and intervention system to prevent early reading difficulty from forecasting enduring and progressively debilitating reading failure (260).

The process of utilizing early literacy assessment, providing strong reading instruction, and using differentiated instruction combined with small group instruction for

struggling readers is known as the preventative approach. “Early literacy assessment instruments have played a significant role in preventing problems because they enable schools to screen all students for signs of delay as part of the Preventive approach” (Hall 1). Consistently, research has supported the belief that the early diagnosis and prevention of reading difficulties is both cost effective in the long and short term (Hall 1; Good III, Simmons, and Kame’enui 258).

DIBELS assessments are one to three minutes in length, and there are ten assessment areas that are administered at various ages in a student’s development (Rouse and Fantuzzo 343). DIBELS uses seven indicators to measure early reading skills or big ideas. DIBELS has three unique functions. Firstly, screenings inform of a student being on track at various assessment periods. Secondly, progress in the monitoring of skill attainment in the non-assessment period allows for the early identification of a student's difficulty in a timely fashion that allows one to intervene. Progress monitoring tracks and provides the user with information regarding the effectiveness of instructional interventions. The third function of DIBELS is to indicate reading instruction effectiveness (Hall 31,37). The ultimate predictive role of DIBELS is manifested when students reach grade three and takes their first high-stakes standardized achievement test (Good III et al. 9).

DIBELS results for each assessment period are categorized into three levels. The first is green, which represents a student being at benchmark or where they should be in their literacy growth. Benchmark is also referred to as grade level. The second or yellow instructional category is “strategic”, which is interpreted as a student not being at the level they should be and requiring specific instruction to enable the learner to acquire the

needed skills. The third or red category, and the most concerning, is referred to as “intensive”. A student who is identified as red requires intensive instruction. The authors of DIBELS outline the required time allocated to instruction for a red/intensive student as being “benchmark instruction, plus twenty minutes four times per week in small groups, plus home practice and support. Extra sessions as needed” (Good III et al. 14).

The administration of DIBELS assessment probes can be repeated for certain allowable circumstances. One reason for the reassessment of a probe is when there are problems with the administration of a measure. Problems and interruptions can include the malfunction of the electronic device, or for example, a student’s abrupt need for a toileting break. The second allowable reason involves a child performing lower than previous experiences demonstrate. For example, a child who has previously demonstrated a certain level of proficiency but takes the measure on a day that they are sick may perform lower than their known ability. Based on the teachers’ knowledge of the student’s ability and their past performance, the teacher or assessor has the authority to invalidate the assessment result and reassess.

Although DIBELS is utilized by various school districts throughout the U.S., the results and percentile rankings are only compared to the norms of the local district. A student is considered at risk for difficulty achieving early literacy benchmark goals if their performance is in the range of the lowest 20% in the district. That is, below the 20th percentile using local district norms. Students are considered at some risk if they perform between the 20th and 40th percentile using local norms. Students who have a low risk for

academic difficulty perform above the 40th percentile using local norms (Good III et al. 8).

Each teacher who administers DIBELS receives training sponsored and/or provided by the school district. The DIBELS measures are administered to a child and the child's responses are immediately entered into a hand held electronic device that records, maintains, and processes the data. The hand held device is often referred to as "the palm", and its software allows the student's data to be immediately uploaded into the electronic data storage and transferred to an online management system. The student's data is always stored in two places: "the palm" and the online system.

Research on DIBELS began in the late 1980s. Burke et al.'s validity study of DIBELS utilized 218 kindergarteners who attended a rural primary school in northern Georgia. Demographic data was limited. Yet, of the participants who had data, 42.8% were eligible for free or reduced price lunch. Concurrent validity coefficients for DIBELS' Letter Name Fluency (LNF) ranged from .46 to .67 when compared to DIBELS' Initial Sound Fluency (ISF), Phoneme Segmentation Fluency (PSF), and Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF) measures. Concurrent validity coefficients for DIBELS' Initial Sound Fluency was .51 when compared to DIBELS' Phoneme Segmentation Fluency and Nonsense Word Fluency measures. Concurrent validity coefficient for DIBELS' Phoneme Segmentation Fluency was .59 when compared to DIBELS' Nonsense Word Fluency measure. Predictive validity coefficients for DIBELS' Letter Naming Fluency ranged from .51 to .71 when compared to middle of first grade DIBELS' Oral Reading Fluency (ORF), middle of first grade TOWRE-Sight Word

Efficiency, middle of second grade DIBELS' Oral Reading Fluency, and middle of second grade WRMT-R (Passage Comprehension) measures (Burke et al. 209-26).

Hintze, Ryan, and Stoner's validity study of DIBELS utilized 86 participants who were kindergarten students from three elementary schools located in Massachusetts. The district reported 39% of its students as being qualified for free or reduced lunch.

Alternate form reliability coefficients for DIBELS' Initial Sound Fluency were .86, Letter Naming Fluency was .94, and Phoneme Segmentation Fluency was .97. When DIBELS' Initial Sound Fluency and Phoneme Segmentation Fluency were compared with the CTOPP Phonological Awareness Composite, CTOPP Phonological Memory Composite, and the CTOPP Rapid Naming Composite, the concurrent validity coefficients ranged from .39 to .60. When DIBELS' Initial Sound Fluency and Phoneme Segmentation Fluency measures were compared to the CTOPP Rapid Naming measure, the discriminant validity coefficients ranged from .09 to .20 (Hintze, Ryan, and Stoner 541-56).

Although early validity studies of DIBELS are available, they are not generalizable to urban students. To address this research need, Rouse and Fantuzzo's validity study utilized a random sample of 330 urban kindergarten children, 55% of which were African American, with 31% being qualified for free or reduced price lunch. When DIBELS' Letter Naming Fluency, Nonsense Word Fluency, and Phoneme Segmentation Fluency were compared to the DRA Instructional Reading, TERA Reading Quotient, TERA Alphabet, TERA Conventions, and TERA Meaning, the concurrent validity coefficients ranged from .32 to .62 ($p < .001$). Similarly when the DIBELS' Letter Naming Fluency, Nonsense Word Fluency, and Phoneme Segmentation Fluency

were compared to Spring of first grade DRA Instructional Reading, Spring of first grade TerraNova Reading, Spring of first grade TerraNova Vocabulary, and Spring of first grade TerraNova Language measures the predictive validity coefficients ranged from .48 to .67 ($p < .001$) (Rouse and Fantuzzo 341-55).

Rouse and Fantuzzo's findings provide support for the use of DIBELS as a screening tool for multiple populations. Rouse and Fantuzzo conclude, "Teachers could use DIBELS to identify children who are not on target for meeting national mandates and adapt curricular efforts to target specific early literacy skills with which children are having the most difficulty" (353). Validity studies for DIBELS are abundant and present for grades one through three, utilizing a variety of sample populations. These studies are also able to confirm the consistency and continuity of the instrument throughout the primary grades of kindergarten through third.

DIBELS is the literacy assessment that was administered to all kindergarten students involved in this study three times per academic year. The aggregate student DIBELS data for school years 2007-08, 2008-09, 2009-10, and 2010-11 were utilized. The beginning of year DIBELS measures were Letter Naming Fluency and Initial Sound Fluency. The middle of year DIBELS measures were Letter Naming Fluency, Initial Sound Fluency, Phoneme Segmentation Fluency, and Nonsense Word Fluency. The end of year DIBELS measures were Letter Naming Fluency, Phoneme Segmentation Fluency, and Nonsense Word Fluency.

Initial Sound Fluency measures a student's ability to recognize and produce initial sounds in words (Coyne and Harn 34). An adult shows a child a single page with four pictures; the adult names the pictures for the child and then asks the child to identify by

pointing to the picture that begins with the specific sound (Good III et al. 7-8). Letter Naming Fluency requires that student to look at a single page that has assorted letters, including both uppercase and lower case letters. The child has one minute to identify as many letters as they can. Phoneme Segmentation Fluency is also a one-minute measure in which the child has to segment three-and four-phoneme words into their individual sounds. The Nonsense Word Fluency measure assesses the child's ability to make letter-sound correspondence. This measure also assesses the child's ability to blend letters into words (Good III et al. 7-8).

D. Procedure

The Instructional At-Home Plan was developed by the author in October 2009. Its creation was not for research purposes. The creation of the IAHP was a direct attempt to utilize specific, targeted parental involvement to positively influence the academic achievement of the kindergarten students. The IAHP was designed to inform the parent of the required skills, the goals for mastery, and the time each child would have to perform various tasks. A second feature of the IAHP was specific simulations that allowed the parent to practice the desired skill with the child in the home. The IAHP contained a signed commitment component for the parent and the child's teacher. One copy of the IAHP remained with the parent, and a second was retained for the teacher's record. The kindergarten IAHP used in the 2009-10 and 2010-11 school years addressed required literacy skills and goals, concepts of print skills, and math skills. This research focused on the literacy component of the IAHP that was measured by DIBELS at the beginning, middle, and end of year.

Each kindergarten teacher received IAHP implementation training from the researcher-developer prior to its use. Trainings were roughly one hour in length and included role-playing between the teachers. Teacher trainings included the importance of sharing the student's most recent DIBELS data with the parent to ensure that the parent fully understood the data and its relationship to the IAHP. Initially at the beginning of the 2009-10 school year, there were only two kindergarten teachers with class sizes of 39-40 each. By November 2009, a third kindergarten teacher joined the kindergarten grade band and completed the IAHP conferences for her classroom.

The IAHP fall conferences were conducted between the months of October and November 2009. Teachers held conferences before and after school based on the needs and availability of the parents. Conferences were held individually with parents or in small groups of two or three, depending upon the teacher's preference. Conference times averaged fifteen minutes each. The beginning of the conference included a brief explanation of the purpose and objectives of the IAHP. Parents then received a copy of their student's DIBELS data and the explanation of the achievement categories. The student data discussed in the fall IAHP conference included the beginning of year DIBELS skills of Letter Naming Fluency and Initial Sound Fluency. The fall IAHP covered the middle of year DIBELS skills of Letter Naming Fluency, Initial Sound Fluency, Phoneme Segmentation Fluency, and Nonsense Word Fluency. Parents viewed demonstrations that modeled how to use the IAHP simulations effectively with their children in the home. Teachers also discussed the requirement of the child taking a timed assessment, and the need for familiarity and at home practice with the parent. Conferences included time for parents to ask questions and share information regarding

their children. Additionally, parents received the assessment window schedule for the middle of year testing, which began January 2010, and subsequent testing that occurred in May through June 2010.

The initial IAHP conference informed parents of subsequent conferences or contacts that would follow regarding the student's academic progress. Lastly, parents were informed that young children develop at various rates, and the skill development of the child would be gradual. Special precautions were taken by each teacher to inform parents on the importance of developmentally appropriate practices in school and at home. Parents were encouraged to share strategies and challenges that they would encounter in the months to come. The November 2009 report card pick-up was a check-in point for the parents and teachers. This allowed both teacher and parent to discuss the student's overall performance and the parental use of the IAHP.

The Spring IAHP followed the same format as the fall; it covered skills and assessment goals that would be measured at the end of the 2009-10 school year. The Spring IAHP was distributed in a whole group parent-student assembly. The Spring Fling Assembly included student performances, covered attendance issues, and reported on student achievement gains. There also was a brief review of the IAHP format, goals, and use. Parents who were not present for the assembly met with the teacher at another time and received their Spring IAHP. The DIBELS end of year assessment skills included Letter Naming Fluency, Phoneme Segmentation Fluency, and Nonsense Word Fluency. Throughout the school year, parents received approximately four to five written communications regarding the student's progress. The written communications were used to keep the parent informed and to provide acknowledgement and encouragement.

The implementation of the Instructional At-Home Plan for the 2010-11 school year followed the same process as in the previous year. However, due to a change in the school schedule, the Fall conferences were conducted from late August through September. The spring edition of the IAHP was introduced in a learning fair school assembly, which was held in February 2011.

In addition, the Chicago Public School's Office of Performance granted permission for use of the aggregate student DIBELS data for secondary analysis.

E. Analysis plan

The data analysis for this study utilized Excel software. The data analysis compared the DIBELS instructional recommendation results (percent green, yellow, red) for kindergarten students at the beginning of the year, middle of the year, and the end of year between the years 2007-09 and the years 09-11. The data was pooled between the school years 2007-08 and 2008-09, and the school years 2009-10 and 2010-11. The school years 2007-08 and 2008-09 represent when there was no Instructional At-Home Plan. The school years 2009-10 and 2010-11 represent when there was the parental use of the Kindergarten Fall IAHP and Spring IAHP.

Unfortunately, individual assessment probe data were not available for this study. It analyzed data at the aggregate levels of the percentages of students whose recommendations were green, yellow, and red. The independent samples z-test procedure was employed to compare the proportions in each category for the beginning, middle, and end of year DIBELS between the 2007-09 and 2009-11 school years. This is the appropriate test since it fits the data, and a z-test is more appropriate than a t-test for the comparison of proportions. By contrast, a t-test for dependent means would require

that we have data on a single group that is then observed under two different conditions (Salkind 180, 161).

IV. Results

The purpose of the study is to investigate the impact of parent involvement on literacy achievement of kindergarten students through the use of the Instructional At-Home Plan by African American parents. The IAHP is a specific tool for parental use in the home. The study compared the DIBELS results for a four-year period that included two years of IAHP use and two years of non-use. The study determined if there was a difference in the percent categorized in a given category at the beginning, middle, and end of the year between use and non-use of the IAHP.

A. Beginning of year results

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for DIBELS Beginning of Year Assessment Periods

School Year	Green	Yellow	Red
2007-09 without IAHP	26.6%	51.9%	21.5%
2009-11 with IAHP	39.6%	41.8%	18.6%

There are some differences between the two periods for the student categories.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for DIBELS Green Beginning of Year Assessment Periods

School Year	Green	<i>n</i>
2007-09 without IAHP	26.6%	158
2009-11 with IAHP	39.6%	177

The students of 2007-09 have a percent green at the beginning of the year, 26.6%, $n(158)$, that is lower than the percent green at the beginning of the year of the students of 2009-2011, 39.6%, $n(177)$. The pooled percent green in the four years is 33.4%, based on a sample of 335 students. The difference is statistically significant, $z(2.50)$, $p = .012$.

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics for DIBELS Yellow Beginning of Year Assessment Periods

School Year	Yellow	<i>n</i>
2007-09 without IAHP	51.9%	158
2009-11 with IAHP	41.8%	177

The students of 2007-09 have a percent yellow at the beginning of the year, 51.9%, $n(158)$, that is higher than the percent yellow at the beginning of the year of the students of 2009-2011, 41.8%, $n(177)$. The pooled percent yellow in the four years is 46.6%. The difference is not statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level, $z(-1.85)$, $p = .064$.

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics for DIBELS Red Beginning of Year Assessment Periods

School Year	Red	<i>n</i>
2007-09 without IAHP	21.5%	158
2009-11 with IAHP	18.6%	177

The students of 2007-09 have a percent red at the beginning of the year, 21.5%, $n(158)$, that is higher than the percent red at the beginning of the year of the students of

2009-2011, 18.6%, n(177). The pooled percent red in the four years is 20.0%. The difference is not statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level, $z(-.66)$, $p = .507$.

B. Middle of year results

Table 7

Descriptive Statistics for DIBELS Middle of Year Assessment Periods

School Year	Green	Yellow	Red
2007-09 without IAHP	36.8%	42.7%	20.5%
2009-11 with IAHP	63.9%	26.0%	10.1%

Table 8

Descriptive Statistics for DIBELS Green Middle of Year Assessment Periods

School Year	Green	<i>n</i>
2007-09 without IAHP	36.8%	171
2009-11 with IAHP	63.9%	158

The students of 2007-09 have a percent green at the middle of the year, 36.8%, n(171), that is lower than the percent green at the middle of the year of the students of 2009-2011, 63.9%, n(158). The pooled percent green in the four years is 49.8%, based on a sample of 329 students. The difference is statistically significant, $z(4.91)$, $p < .001$.

Table 9

Descriptive Statistics for DIBELS Yellow Middle of Year Assessment Periods

School Year	Yellow	<i>n</i>
2007-09 without IAHP	42.7%	171
2009-11 with IAHP	26.0%	158

The students of 2007-09 have a percent yellow at the middle of the year, 42.7%, $n(171)$, that is higher than the percent yellow at the middle of the year of the students of 2009-2011, 26.0%, $n(158)$. The pooled percent yellow in the four years is 34.6%, based on a sample of 329 students. The difference is statistically significant, $z(-3.20)$, $p = .001$.

Table 10

Descriptive Statistics for DIBELS Red Middle of Year Assessment Periods

School Year	Red	<i>n</i>
2007-09 without IAHP	20.5%	171
2009-11 with IAHP	10.1%	158

The students of 2007-09 have a percent red at the middle of the year, 20.5%, $n(171)$, that is higher than the percent red at the middle of the year of the students of 2009-2011, 10.1%, $n(158)$. The pooled percent red in the four years is 15.5%, based on a sample of 329 students. The difference is statistically significant, $z(-2.60)$, $p = .009$.

C. End of year results

Table 11

Descriptive Statistics for DIBELS End of Year Assessment Periods

School Year	Green	Yellow	Red
2007-09 without IAHP	51.8%	22.0%	26.2%
2009-11 with IAHP	79.4%	7.7%	12.9%

Table 12

Descriptive Statistics for DIBELS Green End of Year Assessment Periods

School Year	Green	<i>n</i>
2007-09 without IAHP	51.8%	164
2009-11 with IAHP	79.4%	155

The students of 2007-09 have a percent green at the end of the year, 51.8%, $n(164)$, that is lower than the percent green at the middle of the year of the students of 2009-2011, 79.4%, $n(155)$. The pooled percent green in the four years is 65.2%, based on a sample of 319 students. The difference is statistically significant, $z(5.17)$, $p < .001$.

Table 13

Descriptive Statistics for DIBELS Yellow End of Year Assessment Periods

School Year	Yellow	<i>n</i>
2007-09 without IAHP	22.0%	164
2009-11 with IAHP	7.7%	155

The students of 2007-09 have a percent yellow at the end of the year, 22.0%, $n(164)$, that is higher than the percent yellow at the end of the year of the students of 2009-2011, 7.7%, $n(155)$. The pooled percent yellow in the four years is 15.1%, based on a sample of 319 students. The difference is statistically significant, $z(-3.57)$, $p < .001$.

Table 14

Descriptive Statistics for DIBELS Red End of Year Assessment Periods

School Year	Red	<i>n</i>
2007-09 without IAHP	26.2%	164
2009-11 with IAHP	12.9%	155

The students of 2007-09 have a percent red at the end of the year, 26.2%, $n(164)$, that is higher than the percent red at the end of the year of the students of 2009-2011, 12.9%, $n(155)$. The pooled percent red in the four years is 19.7%, based on a sample of 319 students. The difference is statistically significant, $z(-2.98)$, $p = .003$.

D. Summary of results

At the .05 significance level, there are significant differences in the percent in the green, yellow, and red categories for the two groups of students at the middle and the end of the year. This is not true at the beginning of the year. Instead, the difference in the two groups is only significant at the .05 level for the green category. When the standard for statistical significance is raised to the .01 level, then there are no statistically significant differences in any of the categories at the beginning of the year. This indicates that essentially both groups started each school year at similar academic levels. By contrast, all of the differences at the middle and the end of the year remain significant

at the .01 level. By the end of the year, the percent of students categorized green went up by more than 50%. The percent of students categorized as yellow is almost two-thirds lower, and the percent of red fell by more than 50%.

V. Discussion

A. Findings and implications

This chapter interprets the findings, places the implications of the findings in context with the literature, and considers the limitations of this study and provides recommendations for future directions for further research.

This study sought to examine the use of the Instructional At-Home Plan by African American parents and the impact on literacy achievement among their kindergarten children. This study and review of literature began with an acknowledgement of the sense of urgency that exists within the United States to involve parents in the academic lives of their children. This study also recognizes that the nation's policymakers and leaders are now looking at early childhood as a pivotal point for addressing and reducing the achievement gap. The findings from this study provide insight into both of these critical areas.

The vast majority of the participants in this study were African American with a four-year average of 98.6%. Prior research that cites African American parents as being uninvolved and/or exhibiting lower levels of involvement when compared to other ethnic groups often discusses the need for additional studies that examine African American practices and patterns of parental involvement. The findings from this research demonstrate African American parents' willingness to be involved in the academic lives of their children. Parents in this study met with their child's teacher to engage in the Instructional At-Home Plan conference. The rise in the proportion of students classified as green, based on their achievement on DIBELS, is significantly higher than what occurred in the two years prior to the implementation of the IAHP. This indicates that

once the parents attended the conferences and interacted with their children using the IAHP, students were strongly more likely to perform academically at their recommended grade level.

The sample's student population contended with the effects of poverty that are often discussed in literature. The four-year average of students who are from low-income families was 96.75%. This research provides evidence of the parents' ability to utilize a specific parental involvement strategy to impact their child's achievement. Their practices and the impact of their involvement on the academic lives of their children confirm earlier research that state that a parent's involvement can overcome the effects of low income and poverty as it relates to student achievement.

The need for more studies that provide quantifiable evidence of parental involvement's ability to influence student achievement had been noted previously. Previous research described the inability and/or challenge of being able to quantify the effects of parental involvement as a gap in the body of research on parental involvement. This research demonstrates that parents' use of the IAHP does dramatically influence student achievement. When the classifications are compared at the middle of the year, we see evidence of improvement in the percent of students classified as green, yellow, and red. The observed trend is for the IAHP to cause green to rise and for yellow and red to fall. This improvement in results is apparent at both the middle and end of the year. Over the course of the year, there is a more than 50% increase of students categorized as green, there is almost a two-thirds decrease of students categorized as yellow, and there is a 50% decrease of students categorized as red between the two periods. This suggests

that in 2009-11 the results are considerably better than the earlier years when IAHP was not used.

Previous research also revealed the need for studies that examine specific types of parental involvement and the impact on student achievement. Learning at home is the parental involvement type that was found in previous reviewed literature to have the strongest connection to achievement outcomes for students. The findings from this study confirm and contribute to the body of existing knowledge regarding this specific type of parental involvement. These findings also indicate that when parents are provided with clear and executable plans, they are willing to participate, resulting in improved and measurable student achievement. The overwhelming majority of parents in this study demonstrate not only a willingness to meet and partner with their child's teacher but they also show a resolve to engage in a long-term commitment to work at home with their child on specific academic skills for the entire school year.

The Instructional At-Home Plan's design takes into consideration the diverse needs of parents and their abilities. Instructional At-Home Plan conferences review all aspects of the plan and allow for the exchange of information between the parent and the teacher. The implementation process of the IAHP seeks to allow the teacher to meet the parent in a setting that is nonthreatening, comfortable, and inviting. Parents who are provided with a safe and secure environment are willing to share vital information regarding their children. They are willing to share how they perceive their child's style of learning and other related information. Additionally, parents and teachers are able to develop and review common measurable goals for the children. By design, the IAHP conference initiates a partnership and covenant relationship that exists between the parent

and the teacher. Both the parent and the teacher sign the IAHP, and both parties maintain a copy for the duration of the school year. Utilization of the IAHP strategy is an investment made by the teacher that is both proactive and preventative by design. The time invested at the beginning of the school year establishes an upward trajectory that yields positive student achievement throughout the year.

The role of early childhood education as a means toward the reduction of the achievement gap is now a priority for both policymakers and educational practitioners. Parents involved in this study utilized the Instructional At-Home Plan for two separate years, and the positive results are consistent. The findings from this study provide evidence that the role of intervention at the early childhood level is a powerful tool. This study demonstrates how parents can participate and have a clear role and connection with early childhood learning. This study confirms that it is possible for the reduction of the achievement gap to occur by the end of the kindergarten school year for low-income African American kindergarten students. The findings from this study also illustrate the capacity of the parents of young children to function as facilitators as a means to reducing achievement gaps. The Instructional At-Home Plan integrates early childhood foundational skills and parent involvement into an instrument that is easy to use and that is able to positively influence student achievement and thereby reduce achievement gaps.

B. Study limitations

The study utilized a convenience sample that was not the preferred type of sample, but the one that was available (Ary, Jacobs, and Sorensen 155). Furthermore, the study is based on one school. It is based on kindergartners and cannot be generalized to other grade levels. The study is also limited by the use of one measuring instrument. Another

limitation is that the same kindergarten teachers were not present for each of the four years. As such, there are possibly other sources of differences in the quality of teaching between the two periods. The classroom teacher or the school's designee performed DIBELS assessments, and the degree of testing accuracy is limited by the training and expertise of the individual tester. The instructional delivery of the individual teachers and its effect on the achievement results of the students make the failure to use the same teachers over all four years a limitation of the study. Final limitations are the inability to examine individual assessment results and the failure to limit the sample to students who were present at the beginning, middle, and end of the year. These limitations simply suggest that future studies will be even more informative than this one when better data and controls are used.

C. Future directions

This study examines the parental use of the Instructional At-Home Plan and the impact on their kindergarten students. Future studies should follow and track the students whose data is utilized in the study and examine their academic progress throughout their primary years. A future study utilizing the same data that were examined in this study should analyze the migration of students between DIBELS categories of green, yellow, and red. Additional studies should attempt to maintain teacher consistency and teacher demographics.

The Instructional At-Home Plan utilized in this study is issued at three different times within the school year: fall, spring, and summer. The parents throughout the summer that preceded their child's first grade school year used the final summer edition. A future study would also examine any summer academic gains and/or losses that the

students may have experienced during school summer breaks and whether there is any impact of the IAHP on reducing summer academic loss.

The Instructional At-Home Plan is currently in use with parents of students who are in grades pre-kindergarten through grade three. Future studies should examine the IAHP's impact on student achievement for the additional grade levels. Although this study focuses on the impact of parental involvement on the literacy achievement of students, the IAHP also addresses math skills. Future studies should examine the impact of the parental use of the IAHP and its impact on math achievement for students in grades pre-kindergarten through third.

The DIBELS measure is the assessment instrument utilized in this study due to this being an event of natural occurrence. Numerous studies of DIBELS provide validity of its use. As stated earlier, the makers of DIBELS explicitly recommend home practice and support for at-risk students. The skills assessed by DIBELS are some of the foundational skills that literacy experts agree on. The researcher-developer of the Instructional At-Home Plan believes that the parental use of the IAHP prepares a student not only for the DIBELS measure but also for other age appropriate measures that assess foundational literacy skills. Future research should utilize additional literacy assessment instruments to examine the impact of the IAHP.

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