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Perspectives on the Study Circles Program for Increasing Parental Involvement

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Walden University

College of Education

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Eugenia S. Dawson

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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University

2021

Abstract

Perspectives on the Study Circles Program for Increasing Parental Involvement

by

Eugenia S. Dawson

MM, Catholic University, 1996

BM, University of Maryland, 1986

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfilment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

October 2021

Abstract

Administrators were concerned over a lack of minority parental involvement and challenges in meeting the needs of a rapidly growing minority student population in a local school district. To enhance minority parental involvement, one local middle school implemented the Study Circles program that involved a series of interactive small group sessions in which parents and educators collaborate to build a culturally sensitive, inclusive community. The problem addressed in this study was grounded in the fact that the adequacy of this program's implementation to address the low minority parental involvement at the school was not fully understood. Guided by Epstein's model of parental involvement, the purpose of this basic qualitative study was to investigate the perceptions of teachers and administrators about benefits and challenges of implementing the Study Circles program. Semistructured interviews were conducted in person or by phone with two teachers, three administrators, one counselor, and one district coordinator familiar with the implementation of the Study Circles program. Findings derived from open coding of interviews suggested that the benefits of Study Circles implementation were the creation of cultural understanding, building of relationships, promotion of honest dialogue, and parent participation in their children's school, whereas challenges included parent recruitment, logistics, follow up, and communication with parents. A professional development training aimed at improving Study Circles program implementation at the local school was created. With improved program implementation, positive social change may occur as the barriers to minority parents' involvement in their children's education are surmounted over time.

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Dedication

This research study is dedicated to the people who supported my development as an administrator, coach, mentor, and teacher. I am grateful for the learning that has occurred from such an undertaking as a doctoral program. It has changed the way I seek information and the level of questioning I pursue. The power of inquiry and research has the ability to change society for the better.

I would like to specifically dedicate this work to my sister, Vivian Tessieri, who has given me the strength to continue in the face of adversity and the courage to follow my dreams. To my sister Kathy Dawson who was kind and shared my love of music. I would further like to dedicate this dissertation to the loving memory of my parents, Vivian and Clifford Dawson, to whom I owe the greatest learning of all. They taught me the power of integrity and commitment to others; to follow your passion in everything you do; to do what is necessary and right and not just what is required; to be kind; to always put family first; and to make every day in your life count in a positive way. Finally, to the person who provides me strength every day, and reminds me to live life to the fullest, Grace.

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I would like to thank all of the individuals and organizations that worked with me to establish connections to the people, schools, and districts that supported my research.

This dissertation could not have been possible without the rigorous guidance and continual support of my chair, Dr. Andrea Wilson; committee member, Dr. Joe Ann Hinrichs; and URR member, Dr. Dan Cernusca, from Walden University. Writing this dissertation has been a process of growth and commitment to the passionate belief that we can make a contribution to affect equitable outcomes for all students and shift assumptions and beliefs to implement social change.

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Section 1: The Problem

Introduction

For more than a decade, students, teachers, and staff have participated in dialogues to help find ways to address racial barriers to student achievement. The Study Circles program is a way to increase parent involvement at the middle school level and to remove cultural barriers to engagement (Everyday Democracy, 2018). Traditionally, acceptable parental involvement has included providing a student with a means for lunch, attending back-to-school nights, and visiting with teachers during the annual parent-teacher conference days (Epstein, 1995; Stefanski et al., 2016). The Study Circles program was introduced in one middle school (called from this point forward “Mid-Atlantic Middle School,” a fictional name) in a suburban mid-Atlantic state school district that served students from more than 157 countries speaking 150 languages. Even with the advances that this local school district had made with web-based technologies, school updates, new channels of communication, and parent access to student information and individual teachers, there remained a lack of parent involvement as student enrollment increased. The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of teachers and administrators pertaining to the benefits and challenges of implementing the Study Circles program for increasing parent involvement at Mid-Atlantic Middle School. In Section 1 of this research study, I describe the problem; explain the rationale for the evaluation, both on local and national levels; and indicate the significance of the problem. In addition, the guiding research questions used as a basis for the project are

established. A literature review follows the questions, along with implications based on the findings of the research study.

Problem Statement

The root problem investigated by this study was a lack of parent involvement in Mid-Atlantic Middle School. In an attempt to enhance parent involvement and to address this concern, Mid-Atlantic Middle School had implemented the Study Circles program. Administrators were concerned over the lack of parent involvement and the challenges facing the local school district in meeting the needs of the rapidly growing student population entering the public schools. According to the state department of education in 2020, the student population at the middle school level in the district increased by more than 23% (30,550 to 37,637) between 2011 and 2020. At the same time, parent involvement within the school district remained static, and student achievement gaps widened.

The Study Circles program began in 2003 as an opportunity to gather diverse members of the community together to address barriers to all parent involvement and student achievement with a focus on race and ethnicity. In 2006, the Study Circles program organized the program on the nationally recognized model of the Study Circle Resource Center, which incorporated a direct focus on building relationships and confronting racial and ethnic barriers (Wade, 2007). At Mid-Atlantic Middle School, the purpose of the Study Circles program was to increase parent involvement at the middle school level and to remove cultural barriers to engagement. The Study Circles program was implemented in Mid-Atlantic Middle School, which has a very diverse student body.

One study circle with 15 parents and school staff who represented the racial and ethnic diversity of the school was implemented and met biweekly for two 6-hour sessions. Creating the conditions for parents to seek involvement and encouraging the belief that they can contribute directly to the success of their children in school are critical to increasing student success (Harris et al., 2014; Wright et al., 2018).

The increase in parent involvement has not been proportional to the increase in student enrollment over the past 5 years with diverse populations, according to 2020 student enrollment numbers and district parent volunteer hours from the department of education in the state where the study site is located. This supported the focus of the problem, which was a lack of parent involvement in Mid-Atlantic Middle School and the attempt to address the concern with the implementation of the Study Circles program. Parents are key players in the school community; thus, barriers to their engagement must be discovered and minimized. Therefore, the local problem addressed in this study was grounded in the fact that the adequacy of the Study Circles program's implementation to address the low minority parental involvement at the school was not fully understood. To address the appropriateness of the Study Circles program, this basic qualitative study investigated the perceptions of teachers and administrators, including one district coordinator for the program, pertaining to the benefits and challenges of implementing the Study Circles program for increasing parent involvement at Mid-Atlantic Middle School.

Rationale

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of teachers and administrators pertaining to the benefits and challenges of implementing the Study Circles program for increasing parent involvement at Mid-Atlantic Middle School. Despite the need for greater parent involvement in schools, efforts to create a comprehensive approach to parent outreach in the mid-Atlantic state local school district have been limited as expressed by the district coordinator.

Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level

There was a lack of parent involvement at Mid-Atlantic Middle School. According to an interview with a district coordinator, the parent and community partnership program for the local school district reported that the Study Circles program for students held in the Spring of 2014 at the middle school level revealed that students did not feel entirely supported at school and that the lack of parent involvement was an issue. When the level of parent involvement was examined in public venues such as Parent–Teacher Association (PTA) meetings and through logs of parent volunteering hours for the 2015–2016 school year, low rates were reported at Mid-Atlantic Middle School, which continued in 2016–2017.

Mid-Atlantic Middle School is a diverse public school with a population of sixth grade, seventh grade, and eighth grade students from a low socioeconomic level. The school offered an English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) program to serve the large immigrant population. In 2016, the student population of 1,042 consisted of 28% White Americans, 38% Hispanic Americans, 24% African Americans, 5% Asian

Americans, 1% American Indians, and 4% multiple races. In 2016, approximately 42% of the 1,042 students were on the free and reduced meals services program (FARMS), a rate that moved slightly down to 40.2% in 2019. Table 1 shows the demographic data of Mid-Atlantic Middle School and the representation of diversity through race, gender, and service groups in 2019–2020.

Table 1

2019–2020 Mid-Atlantic Middle School Demographic Composition

Demographic group		All students		SWD		ESOL		FARMS	
		<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Gender	Female	567	49.2	53	30.4	89	47.2	239	51.5
	Male	586	50.8	121	69.5	99	52.7	225	48.5
Race/ Ethnicity	American Indian	*	≤ 5.0	*	≤ 5.0	*	≤ 5.0	*	≤ 5.0
	Asian	62	5.4	9	5.2	*	≤ 5.0	*	≤ 5.0
	Black	250	21.7	43	24.7	35	18.6	119	25.6
	Hispanic	492	42.7	84	48.3	146	77.7	315	67.9
	Pacific Islander	*	≤ 5.0	*	≤ 5.0	*	≤ 5.0	*	≤ 5.0
	White	294	25.5	30	17.2	*	≤ 5.0	*	≤ 5.0
	Two or more	*	≤ 5.0	*	≤ 5.0	*	≤ 5.0	*	≤ 5.0
	Total	1,153	100.0	174	100.0	188	100.0	464	100.0
Percent of all students		100.0		15.1		16.3		40.2	

Note. SWD = students with disabilities; ESOL = English for speakers of other languages;

FARMS = free and reduced meals services.

At Mid-Atlantic Middle School, low parent involvement emerged as a factor and was determined by the number of parent volunteer hours logged, attendance at events, and inconsistent attendance at meetings. In 2015, the PTA consisted of 16 members. While the student population continued to increase significantly each year, parent involvement did not. Due to low parent attendance numbers at PTA meetings and other events, school administrators as well as teachers believed that this level of parent involvement needed to be increased. In August 2015, the average attendance of parents at the monthly PTA meetings was 16–19 members; the same rate of participation continued in the 2016–2017 school year. By examining the Study Circles program implementation through the lens of teachers and administrators and one district coordinator for possible benefits and challenges, better ways to involve parents were explored.

Much research has focused on the positive impact that parent partnerships have on increasing student achievement and the level of parent involvement (Carlo et al., 2004; Fajoju et al., 2015; FitzGerald, 2013; Ule et al., 2015; Wilder, 2014; Wright et al., 2018). According to Rivera (2010), Latino parents who became involved with their child's learning at an early age had students who achieved greater success, graduated at a higher rate, and went on to higher education more often than those whose parents were not involved. Discovering effective avenues to engage parents through bidirectional communication, valuable collaboration, and shared decision making could increase parent involvement (Benner & Quirk, 2020; Epstein, 2001; FitzGerald, 2013).

The issue of perceptions regarding increasing parent involvement in schools was a concern for many other school districts within this mid-Atlantic state as well, according

to the state department of education’s PreK–12 family engagement framework published in 2016. The extent to which parents are encouraged to participate and are engaged by the school community is one factor that can influence academic achievement for all students (Lara & Saracostti, 2019). There has been a significant change in enrollment numbers and, in particular, an increase in diverse student enrollment over the last 10 years in the district. Table 2 demonstrates the enrollment increase over the last 4 years at the district middle school level between 2016 and 2019.

Table 2

2016–2019 District Middle School Demographic Composition

Demographic group		2016		2017		2018		2019	
		<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Gender	Female	16,678	48.9	17,129	49.0	17,571	48.8	17,734	48.6
	Male	17,429	51.1	17,828	51.0	18,435	51.2	18,755	51.4
Race/ Ethnicity	American Indian	*	≤ 5.0	*	≤ 5.0	*	≤ 5.0	*	≤ 5.0
	Asian	5,116	15.0	5,244	15.0	5,329	14.8	5,327	14.6
	Black	7,060	20.7	7,376	21.1	7,705	21.4	7,918	21.7
	Hispanic	9,277	27.2	9,718	27.8	10,514	29.2	11,056	30.3
	Pacific Islander	*	≤ 5.0	*	≤ 5.0	*	≤ 5.0	*	≤ 5.0
	White	10,982	32.2	10,907	31.2	10,730	29.8	10,363	28.4
	Two or more	*	≤ 5.0	*	≤ 5.0	*	≤ 5.0	*	≤ 5.0
Total		34,107		34,957		36,006		36,489	

This mid-Atlantic state local school district considered parent involvement an important factor in supporting students. According to the local school district planning study completed in 2017, the number of diverse students in the district increased by 69%.

This strengthened the need to ensure that the Study Circles program was designed to help diverse populations, especially at Mid-Atlantic Middle School. As of 2019, the enrollment of students from diverse backgrounds had continued to increase, and little had been done to increase parent involvement of this growing population. It is essential for parents to be partners in the journey and to believe that their input is welcome when working collaboratively with schools on matters of school policy and student achievement.

More initiatives could be developed to engage parents at the local level. According to Epstein (2011), parent involvement in the areas of decision making, communication, and collaboration with the community could potentially increase parent involvement. The Study Circles program could use action plans based on the perceptions of teachers and administrators in these areas. As school leaders define what effective schools look like for students in the 21st century, it is important to study schools that show increased parent involvement in order to identify the most effective systems and processes for removing barriers to engagement.

The issue was particularly relevant at the middle school level, a vital growth stage between elementary school and high school, and a 3-year span in which the most significant transformations from primary to higher level learning standards occur. The middle school period, which lasts for 3 years or just 540 days, has been largely overlooked by lawmakers. Compared to elementary and high school programs, middle school programs have received less support because there are fewer days to work with

students and families as well as fewer resources, due to funding cuts over the last decade on both the federal and state levels (Zuagar & Ushomirsky, 2015).

The leaders of this mid-Atlantic state local school system viewed low parent involvement as a critical issue, as evidenced by the district-level PTA data and their recruitment of parents, the efforts by local schools to increase parent involvement, and, on a national level, the research (FitzGerald, 2013; Jeynes, 2011; Lopez & Caspe, 2014; Quirk & Chumley, 2018) supporting initiatives for parent involvement for all students. The purpose of this research study was to investigate the perceptions of teachers and administrators pertaining to the benefits and challenges of implementing the Study Circles program for increasing parent involvement at Mid-Atlantic Middle School.

Evidence of the Problem From the Professional Literature

The concern over the lack of parent involvement and the challenges facing the local school district in meeting the needs of the increasing population entering the public schools were profound and a nationwide issue. While parent involvement has been considered a critical factor in increased educational achievement (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Jeynes, 2007, 2011; Martinez & Ulanoff, 2013), evidence of the appropriateness of school-based involvement remains inadequate. The focus of engaging parents as part of the accountability process has significant support within the literature (Evans & Radina, 2014; Yosai, 2017). Educational institutions can forge increasingly strong connections with their students and families through inclusive practices. Practices such as involving parents in school improvement planning and as decision-making partners within the

school can increase connections with underserved populations and remove barriers to involvement within the educational organization.

In 2010, the Study Circles program with an action grant through Everyday Democracy's Communities Creating Racial Equity initiative allowed the local Study Circles program to increase the percentage of staff participants from 18% to 65% (Wade, 2007). After receiving this grant, action steps such as making a space to listen to students' and parents' concerns and developing plans for addressing structural racism became more prevalent. The program provided the structures for effective dialogue and action so that schools, and the school district, could address practices and policies that limit their ability to close the racial achievement gap. Further, culture impacts perspective and levels of trust (Zak, 2017). By providing a psychologically safe environment for discussions regarding institutional barriers and race, diverse parent populations may be more inclined to participate actively in the school. Informed by the cultural perspective (Stitt & Brooks, 2014) that learning is rooted in social value systems and relationships that evolve through interpersonal discourse and collaborative action (D'Agostino, 2009), this study specifically focused on parental involvement at Mid-Atlantic Middle School in this mid-Atlantic state local school system.

Definition of Terms

Key terms used in this study include but are not limited to the following:

Collaboration with the community: Identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to improve school programs. Examples include information on community activities and services that link to learning skills and service integration

through partnerships with civic, cultural, and health agencies in the community (Epstein et al., 2002; Wilder, 2014).

Communication: A way of establishing effective two-way communication between parents and school officials in order to better monitor children's progress. Parent-teacher conferences, clear information on school policies and programs, and phone calls are examples of this kind of communication. Benefits of effective communication for children include self-awareness of progress, a deeper understanding of school policies, and improved communication skills (Epstein et al., 2002; Kim & Fong, 2013; Yotyodying & Wild, 2019).

Decision making: Calling on parents to serve as representatives and leaders on school committees. PTA/Parent, Teacher, Student Association (PTSA) organizations and networks that link all parents are examples of this type of decision making (Epstein et al., 2002; Núñez et al., 2015).

Study Circles: Circles of culture, dialogue circles, or groups created to discuss collaboration are effective in fostering collaboration within a school community and increasing the sense of accountability (Baker, 2011). Organized mainly on an issue of general concern to the community (Everyday Democracy, 2018).

Significance of the Study

Parent involvement was a concern for Mid-Atlantic Middle School. With increased student enrollment and no accompanying increase in parent involvement, a call for action to support families and meet student needs in a new way was needed. According to Ornstein (2010), by 2023, diverse students will comprise the majority of

enrolled students in the United States. Culturally, educators must develop more inclusive practices in culturally responsive instruction to address student needs (Jhang, 2019; Lopez & Caspe, 2014). The demographic shift to minority-majority enrollment has already occurred for this district. Although parent involvement is seen as a strategy that can effect change in a student's academic progress, research indicates that schools can make parent involvement more inclusive for families of color by creating broader frameworks for participation (Gonida & Vauras, 2014; Harris, 2016; Thomas et al., 2020; Vega, 2010; Walker, 2011). Moreover, Mid-Atlantic Middle School had to find a way to break down cultural barriers to student success and increase the engagement of families in the process.

By gaining an understanding of the benefits and challenges of the Study Circles program from the perspectives of teachers and administrators, including one district coordinator for the program, new knowledge about how to increase parent involvement was gained. According to Lodico et al. (2010), this specific programmatic insight may “attempt to capture the essence of the human experience” (p. 16). As described by Epstein et al. (2009), parent involvement is a vital component of student success, particularly as it relates to the areas of communicating, decision making, and collaborating in the community. Through the research study, the participants' perceptions did help inform the implementation of the Study Circles program within the entire school system regarding parental involvement.

Research Questions

The objective of the Study Circles program was to increase parental involvement at the middle school level and to remove cultural barriers to engagement. The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of teachers and administrators pertaining to the benefits and challenges of implementing the Study Circles program for increasing parent involvement at Mid-Atlantic Middle School. The use of the Study Circles program as a strategy can be formalized through action plans for school improvement, which, if implemented successfully, have the potential to increase parent involvement. The assessment of the benefits and challenges of the program at the local school were guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1. What are the perceptions of teachers who facilitate the Study Circles program at Mid-Atlantic Middle School regarding the program's benefits and challenges for increasing parental involvement?
- RQ2. How do the school administrators and the program coordinator responsible for the implementation of the Study Circles program at Mid-Atlantic Middle School perceive the benefits and challenges of the program as it relates to increasing parental involvement?

Review of the Literature

Search Strategy

The following search terms were used when completing the literature review: *parent involvement, parent involvement and academic achievement, parent involvement types, parent involvement strategies, parent involvement barriers, parent engagement,*

cultural capital, achievement gap, the achievement gap among elementary and secondary school children, achievement and homework behaviors related to parental involvement, study circles, dialogue circles, circles of culture, and the Study Circles Resource Center.

Search tools used included but were not limited to Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), Educational Research Complete, Education: A SAGE full-text database, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, ProQuest Science Journals ProQuest Central, PsycARTICLES, Springer e-books, Teacher Reference Center, AERA, EBSCO Host, Google, and Google Scholar.

The selection of articles, reports, and books used as sources in this study was based on the constraints that bounded the research, such as limiting the search to current references dated no earlier than 2016, sources that were research-based or applied to research-based concepts, and sources that were peer reviewed. Reports and articles were included if the content was relevant to the focus of parental involvement and study circles for this project. Additionally, I included reports that summarized research or considered the application of existing research, and those that used research for new learning in the area of barriers to parental involvement, parental involvement strategies, and the relationship between parental involvement and student achievement.

Abstracts were also searched when containing the key words singularly or in conjunction with each other. Some articles, however, were excluded when the abstract used the key terms but the article did not pertain to this research project. Parental involvement was used to provide the best method for analysis of information. The entries included in this report were chosen using a method of analysis that identified common

key terms and concepts listed under key words above. Finally, this method of analysis was further advanced by analyzing the common themes that had developed: a relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement, barriers to parental involvement, and Study Circles as an engagement strategy.

Conceptual Framework

Parental involvement theory provided the conceptual framework for this literature review and, more specifically, the types of involvement to increase engagement (Dumont et al., 2013; Núñez et al., 2017). The types of parental involvement that are most often classified as parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community are grounded in the Epstein model of parental involvement (Epstein & Dauber, 1991, 2001; Newman et al., 2019). For the purpose of this study, the three types of parental involvement of communication, decision making, and collaboration with the community were the most important aspects of the theory that were examined and used to guide the research (Hoover–Dempsey et al., 2005; Karbach et al., 2013; Lim, 2012). According to a survey study conducted by the Center for American Progress entitled *One Size Does Not Fit All* (Benner & Quirk, 2020), “parents prioritize types of information differently and value different types of communication methods” (p. 23). This emphasizes the need for more dynamic ways to connect with parents. Furthermore, administrators and teachers benefited from the perceptions gained from the Study Circles program concerning ways to increase their outreach to parents and to provide more inclusive practices to seek their involvement in less traditional approaches. Yulianti et al. (2020) suggested from their study that both leaders and teachers working

together to engage parents is powerful, yet teachers directly inviting parents to engage was extremely powerful for increasing involvement.

This research study focused on the perceptions of teachers and administrators pertaining to the benefits and challenges of implementing the Study Circles program for increasing parental involvement at Mid-Atlantic Middle School. The historical value of study circles as an engagement strategy for public citizens in democratic discussions for education was developed. Additionally, for parents who are not involved in their schools, this research study examined the benefits and challenges to Study Circles implementation to gain an understanding of increasing parental involvement. Three essential themes arose from the theoretical review of the literature: a relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement, barriers to parental involvement, and Study Circles as an engagement strategy.

Review of the Broader Literature

Less than a decade ago, acceptable parental involvement included providing a student with a means for lunch, attending back-to-school nights, visiting with teachers during the annual parent–teacher conference days, and rather inconsistently helping with homework (Kim & Fong, 2013; Rosário et al., 2015; Villiger, 2020; Zhou et al., 2020). Today, this level of participation is far from adequate, and in schools with high concentrations of poverty and diverse student populations, participation of any kind from many parents is completely void. Furthermore, culture is a significant factor in today’s global world. Many teachers, administrators, and district leaders have multicultural backgrounds and speak multiple languages that differ from those of the students and

families they serve. This creates a need for a more nuanced understanding of how to engage diverse parents and address the plausible cultural discontinuity that arises and remains relevant in schools around the district (De Luigi & Martelli, 2015; Delpit, 2006; Kim et al., 2018). According to the Migration Policy Institute (2019), some 25% of all students in schools today live with at least one immigrant parent. The urgency to address these cultural differences among an increasingly diverse student and parent population is essential to meeting their needs and creating opportunities for engagement.

A Relationship Between Parental Involvement and Academic Achievement

Research shows that parental involvement can have a meaningful impact on student success for students of every background. A strategic approach to family engagement based on the background, needs, and interests of diverse families in a school community is essential to build valuable partnerships with parents. According to the National Education Association (NEA) Education Policy and Practice Department Policy Brief (2008), when schools, parents, families, and communities work together to support learning, students are more likely to earn higher grades, attend school more routinely, stay in school for a longer period of time and enroll in higher level courses. The findings of this research study remained valid in 2019.

According to a study by Núñez et al. (2017), there are “several connections of students’ homework, parental involvement, and student achievement that must be understood” (p. 2) in order to address academic process. In the study, “children’s homework variables and perceived parental homework involvement were significantly and positively related” (p. 9). In other words, the more time that students spent on

homework with apparent parental involvement and with recognized parental support, the better they performed. Furthermore, Epstein et al. (2009) and Hoover–Dempsey et al. (2005) emphasized the importance of connecting with parents in the community to create comfortable venues for them to engage with the school. Connecting parental involvement to academics is key to bringing families into the school setting and building their capacity to assist and tutor their children at home (Kugler, 2015; Zhou et al., 2020). According to Fajoju et al. (2015), an important parental involvement study was conducted to determine a correlation with the academic achievement of primary school students. Consequently, the data analysis indicated that “parental involvement significantly influenced pupils’ academic achievements in three core subjects, English Language, Mathematics and Integrated Science, in primary school” (Abstract) and further concluded that the higher the parental involvement, the higher the level of achievement of the students in those three subject areas.

According to Epstein et al. (2009), when considering the areas of communication, decision making, and collaboration with the community for increasing the involvement of parents with their children and their academics, further examination of these concepts is necessary. For example, communication, as discussed earlier, is defined in relationship to school programs and student progress in as many forms as possible to support the connection to families. Communication can include practices such as translations, parent conferences, folders of student work, and articulation information (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Hanover Research, 2016), whereas decision making refers to a partnership of shared views directly related to “includ[ing] parents in school decisions [and] developing

parent leaders and representatives” (p. 291). Partnerships with the school staff and school community itself require deliberate action to become involved. These actions involve active membership in parent organizations such as the PTA, advisory councils, committees (e.g., curriculum), district-level councils, networks to link all families, advocacy for school improvement, and a focus on increased diversity among racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups. In a Swedish study on newly arrived parents, parents’ perceptions about collaboration focused on deliberate invitations experienced both from and to teachers to form a correlation partnership. This relationship appeared to create valuable collaboration around the beneficial interests of each child, to build bridges to a strong and durable partnership, and to center parental involvement within the school context itself (Johnsson et al., 2021). According to Johnsson et al. (2021), “Successful collaboration in the school context seems to be a basic prerequisite for the successful involvement and integration of parents from different ethnic backgrounds into general society” (Abstract).

As to the construct of decision making, a sense of shared values and beliefs, as well as an understanding of needs, must exist to engage parents (Warren & Locklear, 2021). According to Lopez and Caspe (2014), when families and schools “create avenues through which children and youth can explore their interests across grades and transition points” (p. 5), students are more likely to pursue and sustain these interests over time. These pursuits require parents to engage actively in decision making to support students within these learning pathways and involve a level of knowledge of their student’s strengths. When parents are working more closely with their school on a regular basis

through parent organizations and are actively engaged in the decision-making process of the school, learning takes place around the opportunities for students and allows for more informed decision making by parents along their student's learning pathways (Gilbert et al., 2017; Lopez & Caspe, 2014).

In addition, the notion of Epstein's concept of collaborating with the community is akin to parents actively engaging in community opportunities with their students. First and foremost, parents must have the desire to become involved with the school community (Jacques & Villegas, 2018). According to Goldkind and Farmer (2013), school climate and size may affect "parents' perceptions of invitations for involvement" (p. 223). Lavenda (2011) asserted that the school environment is as substantial a factor as any due to the attitudes that staff may hold toward parents, as indicated by staff attempts at communication and the opportunities for involvement that they provide (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). The concept of "community for parents" has been redefined (Epstein et al., 2009; Newman et al., 2019) to include the premises that resources are essential to increasing skills and identifying student talents, collaboration in community activities with different families is critical to connecting and communicating, community service is essential, all members of neighborhoods "influence their learning and development," and "all who are affected by the quality of education" (p. 21) should be included in the process, not just those members who have students in schools. These explicit and innovative ways to involve parents cannot be ignored (Jacques & Villegas, 2018). The impact that parents can have on their students' academic achievements is laudable. According to Gonzalez et al. (2013), in a national study of Mexican American

high school students, home-based involvement was correlated with academic achievement, and this correlation was mediated by “increased student engagement in learning.” In a study of Chinese parents who had not completed high school, Kim and Fong (2013) saw student achievement increase through graduation rates because parents employed involvement strategies that fostered their children’s motivation.

Barriers to Parental Involvement

According to the Harvard Family Research Project (2010) on family engagement, understanding the barriers to parental involvement is critical to student success. The authors of the report identified several key barriers, although they highlighted school culture and communication as their priority concerns. Parents also expressed frustration over the lack of communication with school officials regarding their child’s academic progress, and in some cases felt unwelcomed by the school. The Harvard Family Research Project (2014) and Hanover Research (2016) on connecting children and their families to learning and enrichment opportunities reported that parents indicated that language was sometimes a barrier and that communication in general was broken down. The Harvard Family Research Project (2014) report further stated that integrating families into the schools and especially afterschool learning is a proactive process that requires clearly defined action plans and goals. This study indicated that parent connections and communication venues are key factors in increasing involvement.

According to Hornby and Blackwell (2018), there is a gap between the current reality of parental involvement and previous beliefs regarding traditional involvement. The study examined four existing barriers to parent involvement, which were individual

parent and family barriers, child factors, parent–teacher factors, and societal factors. All of these factors have varied components, but the researchers were interested in the validity of these barriers in current terms. The study established that these four barriers still had significant impact. However, new learning emerged in the study that demonstrated that schools receiving reduced services and support to families from outside agencies resulted in a shift whereby schools provided to parents a more comprehensive series of supports (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018).

A study by Weiss et al. (2009) found that social, cultural, and political influences affect the level of parental involvement in schools. According to Calzada et al. (2015), Latino parents who are non-English-speaking are less likely to attend school events, speak directly with school staff, or volunteer regularly (Durand, 2011; Gilbert et al., 2017; Mariñez-Lora & Quintana, 2009) but may still promote education in the home by supervising schoolwork and behavior, providing educational supplies, and ensuring proper rest and nutrition for their children (Gilbert et al., 2017; Núñez et al., 2015). Latino families supporting home instruction coincides with the focus areas of Epstein’s framework: to be innovative and apply a cultural lens that builds relationships and connections to the school and larger community.

In a social cognitive study of families of color and school counselors (Harris, 2016), three factors (self-efficacy, multicultural competence, and environment) were examined and were determined to establish a connection between parental involvement and staff intentionally seeking venues for relationship building with parents. Particular to involving school counselors, “the relationship that may exist between these

characteristics and involvement in [parent] partnerships” (p. 92) was linked. The study demonstrated that “principal support, collaborative school climate, and self-efficacy about partnerships were all significant predictors of school counselor involvement in partnerships” (p. 102), which leads to an important acknowledgement that parental involvement is influenced by the self-efficacy of staff members to forge these relationships intentionally. There is a need to ensure ways to enhance involvement, acknowledge and embrace various cultural beliefs, and address gaps that exist for marginalized populations across the United States (Warren & Locklear, 2021). Creating new ways to work with diverse families and provide inclusive environments for all families is an essential undertaking (Takeuchi, 2018) in current global school communities.

Study Circles Program as an Engagement Strategy

The concept of study circles had a unique beginning. According to Brennan and Brophy (2010), study circles were introduced into American culture in the late 19th century through the “Chautauqua movement” in the form of an educational assembly or gathering. Its purpose by the late 1800s was to provide an educational setting for intellectual and moral self-improvement and civic involvement (Laginder et al., 2013). With the onset of new technology, however, in particular the radio, the notion of a circuit dialogue for social change fell by the wayside.

The practice of study circles, however, remained in use in other countries. Brennan and Brophy (2010) described how Sweden adopted the idea of study circles as a staple in their culture:

Over the next 100 years, Sweden developed the process to such an extent that the Government now subsidizes this form of education and uses it not only to educate people about government policies, but to receive feedback from the public.

(p. 411)

Participation within these study circles in Sweden is significant (Nyström et al., 2020). Over 75% of the population engages in this program within their lifetimes, and over three million people participate in 350,000 study circles annually (Brennan & Brophy, 2010). The value of the Study Circles program lies in the fostering of communicating, decision making, and collaboration with the community. Bronfenbrenner (1979) discussed the natural and necessary connections between and among individuals, groups, and organizations that are based on an ecological schema. Epstein (1986) in her parent engagement study emphasized these relationships as “interinstitutional interactions and ecological designs that emphasize the natural, nested, necessary connections” (p. 278) that schools and families need to engage in for a shared “responsibility for socialization.”

Epstein (1986) further espoused that parents “feel competent” when they understand and are kept well informed about what the school is trying to do instructionally with their student. When teachers had frequent communications with parents and used parent involvement strategies, there was a higher level of understanding among parents about school and instructional expectations (Barnett et al., 2020). Further, parent involvement in their child's academic development is of major importance both in early adolescence (Karbach et al., 2013) and throughout their schooling as well as

studying how parenting approaches alter by race and context (Huguley et al., 2021; Scharton, 2019).

As stated in a study by Nupap and Chakpitak (2016) in their work with small and medium sized groups, the use of small group dialogue through “stakeholders’ participation in sharing and analyzing the global market information” (p. 165), led to interactive problem solving and demonstrated the value and power of rich collaboration. According to Cohen and Daniel (2013), how teachers collaborate and work with new parents to engage them within the school and honor their differences is critical to their sense of belonging. These influences toward involvement need to include the cultural context and appeal to the differences among school families (Yosai, 2017) and embrace them.

Furthermore, new knowledge was gained in two studies with diverse families regarding the importance of linguistic and cultural understanding with respect to active involvement in programming (Aydm et al., 2012; Harrison et al., 2020). Without clear ways to communicate in multiple languages and minus a focus on cultural understanding, both a lack of involvement and poor outcomes were the result. This level of active involvement is what the Study Circles program contributes to a community of learners. By embracing diverse perspectives, creating an interdependent relationship between the school and parents centered on the common goals of student learning and achievement, and by leveraging time as well as technology, parent involvement can increase (Takeuchi, 2018).

Implications

Based on findings of the data collection and analysis, a model for transmitting the results of the study to the school district is to use the perceptions of administrators and teachers, and one coordinator regarding the implementation of the Study Circles program at Mid-Atlantic Middle School as a professional development training. This training will be for administrators, counselors, and teachers who assist in facilitating the Study Circles program in their schools within the district. This would require 3 days of training to be provided in the local district. This would include portions of the data and findings to substantiate the need for utilizing the Study Circles program as a specific strategy to increase the connection with and among parents, and in particular, the cultural connection between parents and their school, and improve the level of their involvement. Based on the findings of the research study, I can suggest ideas to address perspectives held by teachers and administrators as to barriers of participation and active involvement within their school community. The implications of this work may be a remarkable level of increased parent involvement across the district, due to the regular use of this program as a strategy to increase parent involvement.

Research indicated that increased parent involvement comparably affects student performance within a school (Gonida & Vauras, 2014; Scharton, 2019), and with this awareness and intentional program efforts, the district could possibly see student performance improve. Implementation of the Study Circles program as a district-wide strategy could have such an effect. Therefore, it is essential to inform the district's Executive Leadership Team of the importance of this program.

Summary

This research study is of particular importance at the local level to provide a working strategy for increasing parent involvement at the middle school level. Guiding research questions to establish what the benefits or challenges are to Study Circles program implementation are critical to this basic qualitative design. In order to determine if the Study Circles program implementation had any benefit, or to examine what the challenges were to implementation, RQ1 sought the perceptions of educators who completed and who facilitate the Study Circles program, and who would provide intentional supports to increase parent involvement. Their perspectives were sought as to the benefits and challenges of implementation in RQ1. Their perceptions did provide an understanding as to positive actions to take in future parent involvement strategies. Finally, to round out the perspectives of multiple sources, RQ2 included the lens of administrators or educational leaders, and the district program coordinator responsible for the implementation of the Study Circles program at Mid-Atlantic Middle School on the perceived benefits and challenges.

A review of the literature brought out three essential themes that correlate well with the guiding research questions RQ1 and RQ2: a relationship between parent involvement and academic achievement, barriers to parent involvement, and Study Circles as an engagement strategy. The Study Circles program is a way to increase parent involvement to remove cultural barriers to engagement (Everyday Democracy, 2018) and was beneficial to Mid-Atlantic Middle School.

Section 2: The Methodology

Introduction

The root problem to be investigated by this study was a lack of parental involvement in Mid-Atlantic Middle School. To enhance parent involvement and to address this concern, Mid-Atlantic Middle School had implemented the Study Circles program; however, the adequacy of the program's implementation to address the root problem at the school was not fully understood. With this problem as the foundation of the study, it was essential to investigate the perceptions of educators (teachers) and educational leaders (administrators) pertaining to the benefits and challenges of implementing the Study Circles program for increasing parental involvement at Mid-Atlantic Middle School. The research questions were examined through program participants' perceptions of the Study Circles program in one middle school (Mid-Atlantic Middle School) regarding benefits and challenges. This study has supported the understanding of the benefits and challenges of the Study Circles program as a way to increase parental involvement through the lens of educators and educational leaders who have participated in and led the program at this school.

Research Design and Approach

The research design selected for this study was a basic qualitative design. This basic qualitative design and purposeful sampling strategy answered the qualitative questions proposed for this research study. This basic qualitative study supported the understanding of the Study Circles program as a way to increase parental involvement through the eyes of participants and their experience. According to Creswell and

Creswell (2018), qualitative research is about “an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 3).

This basic qualitative study was anchored in what Lodico et al. (2010) stated as the “attempt to capture the essence of the human experience” (p. 16). Further, it is the researcher’s responsibility to capture in detail the individual participants’ perspectives on the experience and be able to use their perspectives to gain insight as to benefits and challenges of an experience. Therefore, a basic qualitative approach was used for this study, using systematic qualitative data collection, to gain an understanding of what participants’ perceptions were as to the benefits and challenges of the Study Circles program implementation at Mid-Atlantic Middle School.

The reason for selecting the basic qualitative design as opposed to a quantitative design was to be able to tell participants’ experience through rich descriptions, based on semistructured interviews with key informants. As stated by Lodico et al. (2010), the literature also addressed the systematic way in which the data were collected and recorded with accuracy in order to establish a nonbiased approach. This could then inform the research so that it was possible to paint a picture of increasing parental involvement through the use of a Study Circles program and examine the benefits and challenges of implementing such a program at one school. It was thus possible to tell a school’s story of Study Circle implementation.

Participants

The setting for the study was a diverse suburban middle school in a mid-Atlantic state. The building rests in a diverse community outside of the District of Columbia. There are over 1,000 students and more than seven specialty programs offered at the school as well as a large English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) program. It is an above-average public school in Grades 6-8, with a student-teacher ratio of 15 to 1. According to state test scores, 30% of students are at least proficient in math, and 43% are at least proficient in reading. The participants for the study were educators and educational leaders who participated in the Study Circles program, including the Study Circles program coordinator for the district. A total of 16 participants who completed the Study Circles program in the Fall Semester of 2019-2020 from Mid-Atlantic Middle School were invited to participate in this study.

I invited eight teachers, one counselor, three administrators, one Study Circles district coordinator, and three parents to take part in interviews. Both teachers and administrators responded to my invitation. However, due to the unexpected and abrupt changes that occurred following COVID-19 school closures and community restrictions, I was not able to include parents in the final sample for this study. Initially, I invited parents to interview and did not receive any participants. I persisted and invited parents a second time approximately 4 weeks after the first invitation. Three parents accepted, and I scheduled them for interviews. Each parent then delayed their interview, due to either work or home circumstances, and I rescheduled all three a second time. However, parent interviews were then canceled due to COVID-19 striking the area as soon as I had

rescheduled the interviews. High state-level restrictions were enforced for health as well as safety measures, and I was unable to reschedule the parents who initially agreed to be interviewed as well as being unable to conduct any further recruitment of parents into the study. Thus, I was able to get parents to volunteer but was never able to even start data collection with them due to COVID-19. This was further exacerbated by the continued restrictions in the state, which persisted for months and did not allow me to wait to collect parent interviews at another date, as schools remained restricted. The restrictions continued to be in place longer than anyone anticipated, which prevented the data collection from proceeding. The parents' data would have been equally meaningful to the educator and educational leader data if parent interviews had occurred at approximately the same time. Due to timing and restrictions, too much time went by to allow for valid and reliable interviewing with a parent participant group to occur.

Consequently, I had a final sample made up of seven participants that included two teachers, a counselor who facilitated the Study Circles program, three school administrators who ensured Study Circles program implementation, and the Study Circles program district coordinator, who was a district-level administrator and educational leader who oversaw the program implementation at Mid-Atlantic Middle School. All participants were invited to participate as key informants and were a diverse representation of the school population itself. These seven key informants provided this study with an actual depiction of their perspectives and lived experience of the Study Circles program from an educator and leadership lens. The strategy of inviting key informants who actually participated in a Study Circles program provided the knowledge

to be gained from the research questions referring to the benefits and challenges of the Study Circles program and shed light on the issues related to parental involvement within the school. With the addition of the Study Circles program district coordinator, a districtwide perspective was gained and provided data that enhanced the rich description that was gathered.

Data Collection

According to Lodico et al. (2010), using a qualitative approach to data collection allows for “rich and thick descriptions of the phenomena being studied” (p. 116). This is important to do in order to capture the true experience of participants of the Study Circles program. Furthermore, to consider bias and ways to address this issue, the data collection process must be systematic, and the data must be recorded with accuracy.

Data collection was managed through qualitative inquiry using one-on-one semistructured interviews with participants of the Study Circles program implementation at Mid-Atlantic Middle School. The interviews did make it possible for various perspectives to surface as a result of the open-ended questions and the ability to probe for clarity. I was fully engaged in thorough data collection to compose a rich description or picture surrounding the perceptions studied and made use of the three data sources—educators, educational leaders, and a district coordinator—as a strategy to enhance data credibility (Patton, 1990; Yin, 2003), as further discussed in the data analysis section below. By using both educators’ and educational leaders’ interviews, I gathered thick descriptions and rich data that supported inferences based on analyzing and combining data from multiple sources (Saldaña, 2016). When I refer to educational leaders, I am

including both school-level administrators and a district coordinator. To ensure confidentiality, I am including them into one category so as not to identify the coordinator, which is a single position in the district. However, through the multiple perspectives of school-based leaders and a district-wide leader, a third level of perspective was gained with the addition of the district-wide perspective.

Educator and educational leader invitations and consent forms were emailed. Hard copies were distributed to individuals who were interested in participating in the study. Interested participants contacted me by email or phone, and I informed each participant about the purpose of the study and provided my contact information. I had three educational leaders and two educators respond with their contact information and preferred method of communication. After waiting an additional 4 weeks and without hearing from any other potential volunteers, I sent out a second email to invite more volunteers to participate. The response that I received was from one other educator and the Study Circles coordinator, who wanted to participate in the study. I now had seven participants for my study but wanted to see if I could acquire more participants to volunteer. I then sent out a third and final email to obtain more participation, but with no response. It is important to note that further recruitment efforts could not be pursued due to COVID-19 restrictions. Although I was forced to cease recruitment efforts for parents, the interviews that I had already collected with the teachers and administrators appeared to have reached a saturation level in the aspect that there was consistency in participant responses without substantially new information being discussed and considered. Once

an educational leader or educator agreed to participate in the study, I scheduled an interview.

Before conducting interviews, I received the signed consent forms from participants. The educators who participated in the study were represented with an ESOL teacher, a reading/ESOL teacher, and a counselor. The educational leaders who participated were principal, former principal, assistant principal, and district Study Circles program coordinator.

Instrumentation

The use of semistructured interviews helped in collecting answers to the questions related to participants' perceptions as to the benefits and challenges that they encountered during the Study Circles program implementation. The purposeful sampling of key informants helped in gaining specific and rich information that revealed patterns and insight into the Study Circles program benefits and challenges at Mid-Atlantic Middle School. I used a traditional social science research interview protocol with standardized questions in order to minimize the effects of interviewer bias. The interview protocol increased the accuracy of interview implementation with each participant and provided the clarity needed to better understand the Study Circles program's benefits and challenges. It also provided specific information on how or to what extent the Study Circles program led to action and changed with increasing parental involvement. The fundamental underpinnings of the interview protocol were based on Patton's (2015) Module 57: Ten Interview Principles and Skills, in which the interviewer asked semistructured questions, provided clarity, listened, probed as appropriate, observed,

showed empathy but remained neutral, made transitions, distinguished types of questions, was prepared for the unexpected, as well as maintained active presence throughout the interview. The interview was expected to take between 30 and 45 minutes. However, four interviews were over 50 minutes long, as the participants wanted to expand and provide thorough answers.

The interview protocol was grounded in a pre-existing validated instrument used with documented permission of Inquiry to Insight (i2i) Institute Social Change Architects, Ranchos de Taos, New Mexico (i2i Institute, 2015). These questions gave the basis for the participant perceptions of the Study Circles program. The interview questions in the interview protocol both incorporated the relevant themes that connected back to the framework of the study and directly linked to the research questions. For example, to address RQ1 and RQ2, both educators and educational leaders were asked, “What are the benefits of the Study Circles Program?” and “What are the challenges of the Study Circles Program?” to gain their perspectives and address the research questions directly.

Additionally, the question “What problems/barriers did you discuss about increasing parent involvement?” addressed both RQ1 and RQ2 by providing a deeper dive into the experience of educators and educational leaders in the context of discussions within the Study Circle itself. Likewise, the existing research addressed the importance of providing multiple forms of school communication to parents and increasing outreach strategies to diverse parents. RQ2 addressed this with educational leaders through the interview question “What were some of the action ideas identified in increasing

communication with diverse parents?” to assist with communication strategies for Mid-Atlantic Middle School’s diverse parent population. Furthermore, to gain understanding and educators’ perceptions regarding any changes in involvement as a result of the Study Circles program, the interview question “What changes (if any) have you observed after the Study Circles program in your involvement or others’ involvement?” provided response data to RQ1.

Data Collection Strategies

Data collection strategies included contacting the participants, gaining access to participants, and securing locations to conduct interviews that ensured the ethical treatment and confidentiality of participants. These were critical to the validation of the study and ensuring that I did no harm. Most of the interviews were conducted face to face, and two were conducted by phone prior to COVID-19 appearing in the area. Data were recorded by using the interview protocol. The interview protocol and questions that related to each research question created a method to determine what the benefits and challenges were to the implementation of the Study Circles program and possible ways to engage parents. The method included the use of an interview protocol to control impartiality and bias. Further, the interviews were recorded on digitally audiotaped recordings. At the start of each interview, I asked for and received each participant’s approval to audio record the interviews. The entire process encompassed sending educators and educational leaders email invites and consent forms, delivering hard copies of consent forms to participants, scheduling interviews, and interviewing.

All of the participants voluntarily chose to use email, and two also used their phone to contact me as their preferred method of communication regarding any questions they might have about the study. Participants were provided with a 12-week window to schedule their interview. Once participants responded with a time and date of the interview, I then created a pseudonym for each participant. All pseudonyms were assigned based on the order in which participants were interviewed. For example, I assigned E1, E2, and E3 for educators, and EL1, EL2, EL3, and EL4 for educational leaders so that each pseudonym was random in order to protect the participants. Some participants chose to do the interview at the school, and others chose to conduct the interview off site. During the process of gathering data, I made sure to accommodate each participant. Based on Patton's (2015) Module 57: Ten Interview Principles and Skills in which the interviewer asks semistructured questions, provides clarity, listens, probes as appropriate, observes, and shows empathy but remains neutral, I established a good connection with each participant in the interview setting.

Site Access

The setting of this study was one school site of a diverse middle school in a large suburban school district in a mid-Atlantic state. First, I sought approval from the district to conduct a study. In addition, I sought approval from the principal to complete the study at their school. Next, I gained access to the participants through a formal invitation letter and established a time and place to conduct the interview. I interviewed employees at the site and one administrator at a central office in a conference room convenient for them. Consideration was given so as not to disturb or disrupt the school day and maintain

objective involvement. Finally, protecting anonymity of the participants of the Study Circles program was done through assigning random numbers to participants and not using names.

Protection of Participants

The data used in this basic qualitative design study conforms to all FERPA Regulations. No direct identifiers such as names were used in this research study; only the data fields listed in the methodological section of this research project are used. All IRB requirements were fulfilled prior to conducting this research. There was a District Site Permission form completed prior to the beginning of the research and after the Walden IRB application was approved with date and approval number for this study as 09-20-19-0074968. According to Merriam (2009), the researcher must utilize strategies to minimize bias language when discussing participants. Thus, the Study Circles program participants obtained were not distinguishable as specified by HIPAA regulations. No contact between the researcher and the participants of the Study Circles program was required, except for the invitations that were sent for interviews, correct emails supplied by the school administrator, and the seven interviewed participants. Participant consent was obtained, and confidentiality held through random number assignments for interview participants.

Data Analysis

All seven interviews were transcribed by the researcher, coded for themes, and analyzed inductively by building from facts to themes. I coded the data manually, collected and then organized into categories to find themes and attach meaning using

pattern matching and information building. I utilized an open coding and an iterative process to accomplish the analysis. When open coding, Saldaña (2016) stated, “reflect on how the codes tentatively get placed into categories and/or subcategories...create a sense of order to your analysis” (p.47). He further qualified that the “objective is researcher reflexivity on the data corpus” (p.44). This back and forth or reciprocal process is necessary for data analysis to be completed and exploring the phenomenon being studied fully.

Transcripts were verified by the committee chair for accuracy of transcription and adherence to the interview protocol. In addition to the manual creation of data bins, the use of digital recording facilitated the recording of source detail, the time and date of the data collection, storage, and using an excel format for search capabilities. The digital data were stored on a work computer that is password protected and to which only the researcher has access. The hard copies generated in the data analysis process are stored in a file cabinet that is private, locked, and only the researcher has access to this place. This confidential data will be maintained for five years.

Data analysis requires organizing a vast amount of written, audio, or visual data into a cohesive framework to convey an understanding. According to Glesne (2011), thematic analysis focuses on examining the data for themes and patterns. In this basic qualitative design, I looked for patterns in the codes in comparing the qualitative data checking and re-checking the interview data collection. In considering procedures for discrepant considerations, I was searching for data that were discrepant or negative from the main data. I had to process all information collected, code data that may contradict

within an emerging category or pattern, or code data that appeared to be a negative case. In considering data that provide a variant perspective, I had to examine counter evidence and be able to explain where this fits into the broader picture. I considered this data and could not just hold onto a primary guess or fail to explore counter evidence. This method provided an equalizer to the inclination to obey initial ideas and notions.

Trustworthiness Strategies

Many actions occur between the time of data collection and the report of the findings in qualitative research. Trustworthiness is about credibility or truth of the findings, dependability, or the ability of others to replicate the study, and transferability or how applicable is this study to other contexts (Merriam, 2009). In this section, I explain my approach to these strategies.

Credibility

To enhance credibility, I utilized the multiple sources or levels of data gained from the educators (teachers), and educational leaders (administrators) interview groups to provide a process of substantiating evidence from various sources. I wanted the findings to be a fair representation of their data and to be utilized for credibility and trustworthiness. According to Patton (2015), this is representational through “comparing the perspectives of people from different points of view” (p. 662). The multiple levels consisted of the local school level with teachers’ or staff views, and administrators’ views, which included a district Study Circles Coordinator through the use of multiple levels of interviews within the process. Furthermore, interviews were checked for consistent justification of themes and transcripts were verified by the committee chair for

accuracy of transcription and adherence to the interview protocol. In this process, transcript verification and secondary checking of my analysis ensured that my interpretations were consistent.

Dependability

In the area of dependability, both Yin (2009) and Stake (2010) recognized the importance of effectively organizing data. The advantage of using the researcher to manually accomplish this task is that raw data are available for independent inspection and seeing patterns and themes emerge organically. Utilizing an Excel spreadsheet, digital recording, transcript verification, and secondary checking provided credibility of the findings. It enabled me to track and organize data sources including notes, facilitated the recording of source detail, the time and date of the data collection, storage, and search capabilities through filtering, counting, sorting, and the use of pivot tables, all of which was stored in a database for easy retrieval at a later date and confidentially maintain for 5 years.

Transferability

According to Yin (2016), transferability is the idea of generalizing the findings to a similar population or context. Merriam (2009) stated:

Today, when rich, thick description is used as a strategy to enable transferability, it refers to a description of the setting and participants of the study, as well as a detailed description of the findings with adequate evidence presented in the form of quotes from participant interviews, field notes, and documents. (p. 257)

As well, I worked with a typical sample of this unique group of Study Circles participants. This leaves the possibility of other schools, with like demographics and the use of a Study Circles program, a possible comparison to explore.

Researcher Role

Because the evaluator is the primary instrument in the qualitative data collection and analysis of the interviews, I was self-reflective about my role in the research and the potential for researcher bias which had to be controlled. I worked within the district, but I was in no way connected with the Study Circles program participants. As the researcher, I had to be conscious of not adopting the practices of the participants studied. According to Creswell (2012), a researcher must carefully administer the interviews with “sensitivity to the challenges and ethical issues of gathering information face-to-face” (p. 205). Further, according to Patton (2015), “the quality of the information obtained during an interview is largely dependent on the interviewer” (p. 427). Considering this philosophical foundation, establishing a rapport and a welcoming environment was critical. I had to be able to ask questions well to illicit a person’s authentic story. I also realized that an interview is a bilateral communication and being nonjudgmental was vital to encouraging open and honest responses. Based on the thorough responses and the length of the interviews, participants were engaged and commented frequently.

Data Analysis Results

In this basic qualitative study, I explored middle school educators (teachers) and educational leaders (administrators), including a district coordinator’s perceptions about the benefits and challenges of utilizing the Study Circles program as a way to increase

parent involvement through the eyes of participants and their experience. These overarching questions were the central point of the interviews within this study.

Research Questions

RQ1. What are the perceptions of teachers who facilitate the Study Circles program at Mid-Atlantic Middle School regarding the program's benefits and challenges for increasing parental involvement?

RQ2. How do the school administrators and the program coordinator responsible for the implementation of the Study Circles program at Mid-Atlantic Middle School perceive the benefits and challenges of the program as it relates to increasing parental involvement?

Interview findings are presented by theme. I created tables and data files into Excel Microsoft software to keep track of all data. Coding was manually completed after transcribing the interviews. Once the coding information was finalized, I based themes on the subthemes of data. I observed relationships among the data when organizing types of data by combining codes. Multiple concepts emerged from the subthemes, that led to the themes, and I have listed them below. I recorded each theme and then listed the subthemes under the issue as related examples. The interview data provided the development of the findings. Table 3 provides a summary of the themes and subthemes derived from the interview data to shed light on answers to the research questions.

Table 3

Summary of Themes and Subthemes Derived From the Research Questions

Theme	Subtheme	RQ1	RQ2
Theme 1. Creating the conditions for relationship building within a school community	1.1 Connected and engaged	x	x
	1.2 Encouragement and empowerment	x	x
	1.3 Race and culture	x	x
	1.4 Relationships	x	x
	1.5 Trust and psychological safety	x	x
	1.6 Vulnerability	x	x
Theme 2. Developing positive networks through growth and overcoming obstacles	2.1 Action/action plans	x	x
	2.2 Benefits	x	x
	2.3 Change	x	x
	2.4 Factors for success	x	x
	2.5 Importance of why	x	x
	2.6 Leadership	x	x
	2.7 Positive Study Circles	x	x
	2.8 Powerful	x	x
Theme 3. Recommendations for making it work through examining the barriers and challenges	3.1 Barriers	x	x
	3.2 Challenges	x	x
	3.3 Communication	x	x
	3.4 Data	x	x
	3.5 Decision making	x	x
	3.6 Equity	x	x

In terms of the three themes that emerged as a result of the coding of the interviews within the study, both educators and educational leaders responded consistently across the themes. Meaning, that both educators and educational leaders response areas were represented equitably in the total number of responses. This represents the fact that they each had multiple viewpoints and expanded on them during the interviews. This is important as the descriptive nature of the study was saturated with responses to the questions and provided a rich description to answer the research

questions regarding the benefits and challenges of the Study Circles program. The three themes that emerged from the study were *Theme 1: Creating the Conditions for Relationship Building Within a School Community*, *Theme 2: Developing Positive Networks Through Growth and Overcoming Obstacles*, and *Theme 3: Recommendations for Making It Work Through Examining the Barriers and Challenges*. These themes were derived from the interviews and manual coding procedures through an open coding and iterative process.

To address research questions one and two, I asked participants to discuss the experiences they had with the district Study Circles program which was based on increasing parent involvement and to consider the benefits and challenges that emerge from Study Circle participation and increasing parent involvement.

Theme 1: Creating the Conditions for Relationship Building Within a School Community

In this first theme I found six subthemes that encompass the concept of creating the conditions for building relationships within a school community. The importance of relationship building and creating new ways to build relationships more intentionally with parents were stated by Hornby and Blackwell (2018), as they described the gap between the current reality of parent involvement and previous held beliefs about traditional involvement within a school. The six subthemes are derived from the responses and terminology that participants described as the conditions necessary for building relationships. To address RQ1 and RQ2, I asked participants to discuss the experiences they had with the district Study Circles Program which was based on

increasing parent involvement. Responses were generated around these six subthemes which included *connected and engaged, encouragement and empowerment, race and culture, relationships, trust and psychological safety, and vulnerability*.

Subtheme 1.1. Connected and Engaged

According to educators and educational leaders, this was an area of concurrence in this section. The level of engagement and connection to the school was important to each participant group. All four educational leaders spoke to the importance of connection, and two out of three educators believed this to be critical to engagement. Demonstrating a need for more methods of outreach, E3 stated, “I think we are so busy that sometimes we just call or email, and we don’t realize that maybe they don’t...they can’t read. So, an email really isn’t the best way or...more help with translation or understanding.” The use of the Study Circles program as a tool for outreach was emphasized when E3 further stated, “...it was a good way for us to, even though there were only three or four parents there, to make that connection with them and put a face to the name.” Educational leaders as well highlighted the need for and significance of connection when EL1 stated, “to do...interviews with participants afterwards, and most of the parents that had participated in Study Circles...continually stay engaged in their school in a whole different way.” This highlighted the need for connection and engagement, and the positive connection the Study Circles program had with parents.

Subtheme 1.2. Encouragement and Empowerment

According to Evans and Radina (2014), empowering others by maintaining inclusive practices such as involving parents in school improvement planning and as

decision-making partners within the school, can increase connections and empower parents to stay involved. Educators and educational leaders believed this to be important in empowering parents and students to actively engage when EL2 stated, “trying to convince them [parents], that...we need you here, we need your voice here—or what you say matters.” Further, EL3 continued, “even if they put something out there and it doesn’t work...that’s building their ownership over it...that’s where that engagement, hopefully will come.” As well, three out of three educators were consistent in their voice and this was best exemplified by E2’s response, “the parents too, you know, being grateful...they wanted the adults to know...the staff members to know...we are grateful for what you do and we do care a lot.” The empowerment and encouragement within the Study Circle was evident in responses and could potentially lead to further involvement.

Subtheme 1.3. Race and Culture

This was another subtheme within Theme 1 in which there was consistency in agreement with both educators and educational leaders. There were three out of four educational leaders who felt very strongly about the implications of race and culture within the Study Circle and within the school community at large. In particular, the district coordinator was the most emphatic regarding the critical importance of the role race and culture impacts parents, staff, and students as more comments were made in this subtheme than any other in all three themes. Educators as well with three out of three describing the critical part race and culture play in the school environment and interactions between people. According to Patton (2015), “comparing the perspectives of people from different points of view” (p. 662) truly lends credibility to a situation or

analysis.” EL2 qualified this when stated, “I think in large part it [race and culture] is at the crux of the concerns we have about our students not learning enough.” EL2 continued, “So important especially since our Spanish Speaking population is our highest...our largest demographic in school...and I would dare say it has had the least representation.” EL4 indicated that, “...the parent may not have experience teaching in a classroom, but they have experience in how to help their kids...about their kids, and about their own cultural experience.” EL4 further stated, “So, your cultural experience is one-way, we usually listen through that lens.”

Educators expanded on their experience when, for example, E2 described the progression of discussion within the Study Circle, “Start to hit from surface level to deep culture... then you start exploring your personal beliefs, through current events.” And further deepens into what E2 described, “really start to tell people...about your personal point of view, your implicit biases.” The participant’s responses, like those of E2 quoted above, appeared to require thoughtful reflection to articulate during the interview. The consistency was evident in the responses and in the passionate reactions from all participants.

Subtheme 1.4. Relationships

Overall, educators and educational leaders articulated that they sought better relationships with parents. According to Harris (2016), self-efficacy, multicultural competence, and environment were determined to establish a connection between parental involvement and staff intentionally seeking venues for relationship building with parents. This was a notable subtheme in Theme 1 and is one of the most frequent

response subthemes for two out of three educators, and for two out of four educational leaders out of all three themes. According to E1, “with the parents it was a recognition and a validation of, ‘You are a parent, you are a voice’, let me show you a way that you are being heard as a way of this opportunity (Study Circles).” E1 continued with, “I knew that we were doing the first part of ‘let’s build the relationships’ and trust.” Educational leader EL1 stated, “invite the parents through phone calls, through texts...just a personal invitation...to get them to become more involved in the school, then, we would show them what that would look like once they came.” A key factor to relationship building was expressed thoroughly by E3 who during the interview stated:

Two of the parents, [who were in Study Circles] I have their child[ren] in 6th, 7th, and 8th grade...and this was the first time I met them. So that was nice to actually know who I was speaking to, or know who I was emailing, and working with after 3 years.

Educator E3 further added, “We had more of that...kind of personal bond, that they saw me as a person, I saw them as a person.” Finally, EL4 summed up the subtheme when stating, “when we first started doing Study Circles here, it was really about building the relationships between, teachers and...parents from diverse backgrounds.” The power of relationships was evident throughout participants’ responses.

Subtheme 1.5. Trust and Psychological Safety

Trust is a core component for relationship building and engaging in any relationship. Cohen and Daniel (2013) explored the notion that teachers who work with new parents to engage them within the school and honor their differences is critical to

their sense of belonging. In the Study Circles Program, activities focused at the beginning on building trust and connection, and six out of seven participants made comments on this. Educational leader EL2 states concisely, “But the first one or two sessions you spend time team building. And I think because of that...that helps to...ripen the conditions for having the conversation.” EL2 further clarified, “And then as I said developing that psychological safety because these are...individuals, both parents and staff who may not have spent time together number one, extended time.” EL1 observed, “to have the conversations but not just to stop there with having the conversation. To develop trust.” Educators as well commented and E1 remarked, “Because it’s important for your word to be kept.” EL1 completed with, “Because that’s what the Circle is all about. Your Trust.” This was a central concept underscored throughout the study in terms building relationships through trust.

Subtheme 1.6. Vulnerability

This subtheme in Theme 1 was interesting in that educational leaders had the least number of responses while the educators had much to say. The highest difference between number of responses for educators and respectively educational leaders within all Theme 1 subthemes. The question of vulnerability as being perhaps more difficult to interpret for administrators or the positional leadership in a school is thought provoking. As for educators, E1 mentioned an interaction with a student as a result of the Study Circle, “I was so human to him! And he was like, ‘I got you!’ (laughing) I mean being able to laugh about it and...that to me was one of the most...the biggest turning points in that situation.” E3 further expanded on the concept and commented, “There’s more of

like empathy. ... I knew their struggles and they knew mine.” E2 discussed the sharing that occurred in discussions in the Study Circle, “that connection of having adversity in your life...telling your story that you don’t necessarily share with people...because you’re embarrassed...you’re scared.” Educator E2 further described the experience with, “You know...that vulnerability that she experienced with them, they were then in turn, able to experience and share their vulnerabilities with her.” Educational leader EL1 stated, “become vulnerable, speak their truths and listen to understand the truths of other people.” EL4 reflected about discussions with colleagues in other schools and the power of the open dialogue when EL4 shared, “I’ll often hear principals say they [the principal] changed their story, they were not going to give that much about themselves, but because others had opened up so deeply, they then, shared about themselves, in a deep way.” This is a category to further explore for future research.

In Theme 1, the connections between parents, educators, and educational leaders in the Study Circles group were built on activities, and intentional engagement toward creating social trust with a move toward relational trust. In a study by Robbins (2016), it was found through unique findings a “statistically significant relationship between particular social trust and relational trust.” In particular, “trust toward specific people about particular matters of interest is influenced to a similar degree by my beliefs in the general cooperativeness and helpfulness of friends, family, and strangers” (p. 24). This pertains to the Theme 1 subthemes and their overarching patterns of connections, trust, vulnerability, empowerment, race, and culture in which ‘strangers’ may exhibit social trust under the conditions created within the Study Circles program. This is clearly a

move to engaging parents for further involvement within the school and community with the support of the Study Circles program.

Theme 2: Developing Positive Networks Through Growth and Overcoming

Obstacles

There were eight subthemes that emerged under Theme 2. To address research questions one and two, I asked participants to discuss the experiences they had with the district Study Circles program. Specifically, to consider the benefits and actions that emerge from Study Circle participation as well as increasing parent involvement. The Study Circle at Mid-Atlantic Middle School was an opportunity to gather diverse members of the school community together to address barriers to all parent involvement and student achievement with a focus on race and ethnicity. The interviews provided the chance to explore the factors that led to success in the Study Circles implementation, the ‘why’ behind its importance, and possible action steps to further develop opportunities for parents to connect and engage with the school on a regular basis. Responses were generated around these eight subthemes which included *action/action plans, benefits, change, factors for success, importance of why, leadership, positive study circles and powerful.*

Subtheme 2.1. Action and Action Plans

With this subtheme comes the idea of accountability for actions and follow-up after the Study Circle occurs. Nupap and Chakpitak’s (2016) work with small group dialogue through “stakeholders’ participation in sharing and analyzing...” (p. 165), led to interactive problem solving and demonstrates the value and power of rich collaboration.

Actions are critical to sustaining the level of collaboration and relationships that have been built as a result of the Study Circles program. According to educators and educational leaders, this subtheme garnered a number of responses under Theme 2 higher than other subtheme responses in total. Educational leader EL4 emphasized, “So, one of the most important action steps is writing...whatever communication, whether it’s a phone call or a document that goes out...it’s understanding the cultural norms of the people.” EL4 further emphasized the importance of successful actions with, “so that was a huge action that comes out of Study Circles...is learning how to write, how to communicate in a way that’s connected to the culture of the people, your audience.” This is further examined by EL1 who expressed, “But there’s where the ‘real work’ begins [actions/action plans] ...to continue to keep that energy high, keep the momentum moving...and also to seek supports.” EL1 additionally discussed the importance of building out the learning, and inviting others to learn as well by stating, “[the] continued sessions of our group that participated in Study Circle...the parent group that participated in Study Circle but also inviting additional parents too.”

Furthermore, E1 exemplifies what many are saying when E1 stated, “how do you...you make that essence—that seed that grows from the program... you transform it into a task.” Educator E1 further clarifies the value of follow up action steps, “that family is going to speak to somebody else and that family is going to speak to somebody else, and we need to build that for it to continue.” The importance of actions/action plans are further explained when E2 stated the point of action plans, “What are the issues that we have identified at our school that we need to work on?” E2 then defines the questions

that need to be explored with, “What can administrators do about it? What can students do about it? What can teachers do about it? What can parents do about it?” The educator emphasized the importance of defining clarity of next steps that can lead to action that includes all stakeholders. E2 adds, “so those actions take place in very small increments or it can look like one culminating event, or a new club or program.” The aspect of sustainability is what was coming out as a focus for continuity of programming. The discord that was expressed was related to the ability to have and gain sustained support to engage parents by staff on a consistent basis.

Subtheme 2.2. Benefits

Lodico et al. (2010) stated the “attempt to capture the essence of the human experience” (p.16) is critical and to find that way through research. In the interview process the lens of the participants provides a real human experience in regard to the Study Circles program. Both educators and educational leaders alike held the benefits subtheme as important through the number of responses they provided under Theme 2. All seven participants provided substantial responses in this area. Educational leader EL4 declared, “I think another outcome of Study Circles is helping staff understand that race is a part of most interactions with our families, especially our families of color.” EL4 further added two benefits, “I think the main benefits are, we’re creating the conditions for people to learn from each other. I would say the second is “relationships.” Educational leader EL2 identified, “the benefits for the school I think we’re just...huge in the sense that the staff, the students, and the parents were all able to talk about themselves.” EL2 further highlighted, “like when we talked about addressing problems in

the community I do think Study Circles can be an avenue to get stakeholders involved in this area to talk about it from various perspectives.” Finally, educator E3 highlighted, “I think the biggest benefit was getting to know the students and the families better.” E3 continued with describing the follow-up with, “After the Study Circles, I started to reach out to parents in a different way.” Finally, educator E3 mentioned the importance of perspective with, “I think it really helped me when I reached out to the parents...from hearing the parents that were there, from their perspective.” Creating the conditions for cultural understanding and the power of authentic relationships are significant benefits of the Study Circles program and align with the research questions distinctly for educators and educational leaders.

Subtheme 2.3. Change

Change and the change process are areas that both educators and educational leaders had different viewpoints. One out of four educational leaders had noteworthy responses and one out of three educators had substantial responses. Educator E1 was reflective in their consideration of the Study Circles program and saw the program as a conduit for change when the educator stated, “It’s best about the kid. And I think that that’s the place that I would love to see us grow. How do we engage the kids in a stronger way?” A sense of ownership and intentional engagement was conveyed. E1 went on further to say, “And that we have clarity on how what will happen after the first time? And how we going to lead to that change...that continuity.” The educational leader EL2 stated, “I believe that SC is the perfect engine to begin the process of change along any identified area of concern.” Further stated by EL3, “without this, I think I’d still be in that

cycle of just looking at the data, talking to teachers, I mean talking to students every now and then.” The idea that relationships have changed and that the leader or teacher views relationships differently and more meaningful is consistent. However how to make change happen or sustainable was inconsistent in participants’ responses.

Subtheme 2.4. Factors for Success

The factors for success were areas that both educators and educational leaders had agreement and consistency in their perspectives on the importance of facilitation, relationship building, the setting being outside of school, and creating the conditions for listening to each other and a deeper level of engagement. In Theme 2, three out of four educational leaders and two out of three educators responded with clear factors for creating successful conditions for parent engagement through the use of the Study Circles program. The logistical factors for engagement are represented by educational administrator EL2 who said, “did a lot of footwork in connecting with our parents and working to identify the appropriate students and staff to join us...put a lot of time into that.” The set up required time, preparation, and intention. EL3 stated, “the facilitators were really significant to doing the Study Circles and creating that warm inviting safe space where you want to participate in.” Educational leader EL3 continued with the level of participation that was created, “and it’s because of that, that people were so open and vulnerable.” Facilitation comments were a quarter of the overall comments in this category and presented the strength of this factor. EL4 discussed the facilitators’ role as a factor for success and responded, “a lot of time training our facilitators. So, that it’s being done in a way that, it doesn’t feel like you’re teaching.” EL4 further highlighted, “it

doesn't feel like you know, the facilitators have an agenda, and really have the skills to be able to get everyone to engage with each other." EL4 further expanded on the use of time and its value with, "we spent a lot of time...creating culturally responsive relationships...so people feel like they can talk."

E3 also spoke about the relationship building leading to deeper understanding, "I think it would create a lot more empathy...thinking of like specific teachers in the building who may get frustrated with our ESOL population." E3 further spoke to the importance of facilitation with, "it allowed our principal to fully participate." Educator E2 stated the staff members goals were, "We want you to know that we are here for you, and...language is not a barrier to us!" E2 further added, "It's an opportunity, we have resources in place that will help us communicate. Don't let that be a barrier to you." These statements were speaking to the value of both the relationship building and facilitation. Finally, E3 emphasized the importance of location when stated, "I think being outside of the building." Many of the factors named are potential areas to work on to build partnerships with parents.

Subtheme 2.5. Importance of Why

The importance of why is best expressed candidly in the statement from participant EL4, "without learning and understanding of racial differences and our racial experiences, we're never going to be successful. And that's been proven over and over and over again!" Participant EL1 further explained, "the importance of "why" this was necessary past the point of some staff members saying, 'we don't need to do this, you can't make us do this!'...but I really had to rely on the data." The link to data supporting

the why was elevated in the aspect of raising a level of consciousness among staff to support families. Educator E1 expressed the importance of why for parents through the dialogue in the circles by stating, “How do you permeate the feeling of community and the feeling of growth and the feeling of investment on the future of your child through the Circles.” Participant EL4 emphasized the discussion of the Study Circles program afterwards and why it was important by saying, “at the end of those Study Circles, we pulled all the participants together and...saw people through this meeting who would never have showed up to a Board meeting or a PTA meeting.” EL4 also stated how engaged participants had become as a result of the Study Circle experience with the comment, “they felt empowered and had the connections that they never would have gotten before.” Both educators and educational leaders were consistent in the need for knowing the importance of why in regard to participating in the Study Circles program.

Subtheme 2.6. Leadership

Regarding the importance of leadership in the process of engaging parents and the school community, both educational leaders and educators were consistent in their responses, with three out of four educational leaders and two out of three educators providing notable responses in this subtheme. The importance of school leadership to parental involvement was highlighted in an Australian study by Povey et al. (2016). Poor leadership practices “such as a lack of communication between parents and teachers and a lack of trust in the responsiveness of the school to parent concerns” (Povey et al., 2016, p. 138) were found to reduce parent involvement by 25%. The data from the current study supports the notion of school leadership practices supporting parental involvement.

As participant EL1 stated, “the best leadership practice was not simply for me to tell them what they needed to do, I needed to lead and be a part of the solution.” Furthermore, the educator E1 stated, “So, who and where do you ask the questions? I don’t feel I was a leader in that activity—and this idea that we’re all leaders...says yeah, yeah it sounds wonderful but...somebody has to be chief.” E1 further added, “But it’s a movement of my whole administration.” This extended in additional statements by educational leader EL2 who stated, “...as a principal, again, you know, overall, it’s my responsibility to make sure that our learning organization is firing on all fronts, in terms of making sure that all of our students have opportunity and access...” and “... it’s our responsibility to connect.” More confirmations were made as to the responsibility of leaders within the school building by participant EL3 who remarked, “our job as leaders is to elevate those topics and to make sure we’re addressing them...and it’s our job.” EL3 further clarified the need for shared or distributive leadership for continuing this level of engagement with, “I’m trying to get other people...to like sort of leading, because I want them to...take on this work.” Educator E2 captured the idea of shared leadership with, “The goal of the principal was to give the parents and students the platform to talk about their experiences and how the school can help them.” Educator E3 concurred with the continuation of a shared leadership approach, “I think the Admin was so supportive that whatever we wanted to do with them or for those students who came, and including more students...they were very...very open to supporting us with that.” Finally, EL4 educational leader sums up the importance of leadership involvement in the Study Circles program within this subtheme with, “if the Principal isn’t brought in from the beginning,

and is going through this process, actions are probably not going to happen.” These comments affirm the critical aspect of leadership having a vital role in Theme 2. According to a study by Yulianti et al. (2019), leadership is a transformational component in the framework of parental involvement.

Subtheme 2.7. Positive Study Circle

The positive aspects of the Study Circles program were expressed by all seven participants in the study. The positive qualities highlighted in their responses were specifically the opportunity provided to participate in circles of dialogue, utilization of facilitators, ability to share openly in discussions, opportunity to participate in activities that encouraged relationship building, and to hold meetings in Spanish with translations. These qualities assisted in creating the conditions for powerful conversations, and according to EL3, “these Study Circles are giving me an opportunity to...have these conversations with people in a very comfortable and safe space.” Educator E3 further elaborated, “I thought it was really ‘eye opening’...it was a very emotional experience to hear the student’s stories and the parents [stories]. The importance of the positive tone set within the Study Circles program was further described when educator E2 stated, “not placing blame on others just being able and open to listening before judging.” The conditions created by the structures of the Study Circles program increased the ability for the conversations to be honest and for participants to speak truthfully. Participant E2 continued, “I think it depends on the culture of the school and what they wish to accomplish. And the Study Circles can be tailored to be individualized for the needs of the school.” Educational leader EL1 stated, “So, I thought it was a natural fit and I had

seen, I should preface that by saying I had seen positive results in working with them.” And participant EL2 expanded, “the structured sessions and activities that the Study Circles brings really allows the participants to open up very quickly and in a way that is non-threatening...” Finally, educator E1 affirmed, “It was a circle that was done primarily in Spanish. It was so cool that the translation was from Spanish to English, not English to Spanish...The Spanish speaking community was not second-handed!” and further expanded, “The parents got to do a lot of talking and that was very positive.” The positive nature of the Study Circles program was apparent through participant comments for both educators and educational leaders, and its impact on Study Circles participants expression for next steps.

Subtheme 2.8. Powerful

In the powerful subtheme, the nature of the emotional impression of the Study Circles program on participants was elevated slightly across responses from all four educational leaders, and one out of three educators. The responses emphasized the power of the conversation, the level of participant engagement, and importance of culture and translation. Perhaps participant EL4 captured it best when describing the power of Study Circles program, “when you talk to people who were in Study Circles 10 years ago, they’ll still come and talk to you about that experience and how they’ve changed the way they do things now.” Educational leader EL1 emphasized, “a combination parent-staff (student) Study Circle which was so powerful and it was conducted in Spanish.” With further emphasis by E1, “I speak Spanish...And that was as clear as that, and as powerful.” Educational leader EL2 highlighted, “the parents that participated ...we are

hanging on their every word and definitely valuing their experience...and became very engaged by the second day.” Finally, participant EL3’s response illustrated the power of connection that can be built as a result of the experience by stating, “it’s pretty powerful when you get people in the same room talking about their experiences and talking about the school.” In a study by Owen (2016), the emotional connection of learning was viewed as ‘fitting in’ and a ‘socialization process’ and was exemplified within the membership of the Study Circles program.

Theme 3: Recommendations for Making It Work Through Examining the Barriers and Challenges

According to Epstein (2011) and FitzGerald (2013), effective ways to engage parents include two-way communication, effective collaboration, and opportunities for shared decision making which are essential to increasing their involvement. Traditionally, attending back-to-school nights, annual parent teacher conference days, and assisting with homework have been the types of parent involvement expected from parents by teachers and administrators (Kim & Fong, 2013; Rosário et al., 2015). To address RQ1 and RQ2, I asked participants to discuss the experiences they had with the district Study Circles program which was based on increasing parent involvement in the school in a variety of ways and to consider barriers and challenges to Study Circle implementation. I found six subthemes under the Theme 3 as follows.

Subtheme 3.1. Barriers to Parent Involvement

As participants addressed the barriers to increasing parent involvement through the Study Circles program, multiple factors emerged in this subtheme for examination.

All seven participants had numerous responses and demonstrated consistency about the barriers they perceived. According to Hornby and Blackwell (2018), “parent-teacher factors” contributed as barriers to parent involvement, which indicated the importance of building relationships and clear communication among these two groups. The participants in this study mentioned the factors of connection, communication, and availability as barriers to involvement. Educational leader EL1 stated, “... one of the barriers that I have found in my experience is the language barrier” and “understanding how to navigate the system.” When referring to increasing parent involvement and availability, E1 affirmed “First barrier was my very own, on...who is really going to be available to get it done.” EL2 continued with, “Well the 1st one of course is...real barriers to connecting with our Spanish speaking parents.” And further stated, “Cultural differences being another barrier...embrace sort of our culture of partnership and hearing each other’s voices to help shape what goes on in school.” The barrier of time emerged when EL3 declared, “the first time I was calling parents...it happened to be like ‘Yes, I’m on-board, this is a great idea, I can’t wait!’ And then every week, ‘I can’t do it. This has come up.’ Furthermore, the barrier of culture and information was emphasized when educator E2 explained, “lack of knowing the culture, being intimidated by the inundation of information.” E2 also explained that parents did provide information for their own barriers to involvement and said that they mentioned, “sometimes language barriers were one of them...Another one was the responsibilities of work, and the access to the school was limiting because of their work schedule.” E3 also expanded on comments regarding parent perceptions when stating, “they [parents] brought to our attention that there were

many parents who weren't literate in their native language either." Educator E3 also explained that parents acknowledged, "they didn't feel that they kind of knew what was going on in the school. So, I think that was the main barrier...was communication." Educational leader EL2 advocated for more intentional practices in providing parents ways to participate by advocating, "we're not building a program for them that allows them to connect to it." EL4 believed that, "issues themselves are pretty typical...lack of trust...lack of relationships...like real relationships...between parents and school staff." EL4 further expanded with the notion that schools maintain the same approach to parent involvement and the outreach or communication involved with it, when stating, "I think the largest thing is...when it comes to Parent Engagement...we are still doing things based on the way we have done them for 20, 30, 40 years." In conclusion, the issues associated with the barriers to parent involvement were conveyed by all participants interviewed.

Subtheme 3.2. Challenges

Under the subtheme of challenges, various perceptions emerged from participants regarding the Study Circles program for increasing parent involvement. Both educators and educational leaders were outspoken about the challenges they perceived and had the most responses in Theme 3 in this area. Educator E2 began by stating, "that there's a shift in the culture that the students and adults brought up at the Study Circle." E2 further explained, "The other challenge is the after—Who is going to be held accountable for making sure that actionable items take place?" Educational leader EL4 admitted, "we can get to the issue, we can come up with what the solutions are but they [schools] don't

always have...the structures to be able to overcome those problems.” EL4, further identified, “the other hard thing is to make sure that you have facilitators that know what they’re doing.” E3 stated, “the challenges are...the size of it [Study Circle].” E3 expanded, “it was such a powerful experience that...I wish it was something that could be done more often.” Educational leader EL2 declared, “we had a lot of parent interest.” EL2 then goes on to state that the challenge was the fact that, “less than half showed up.” Then EL2 expounded another challenge, “resources both from the school and the district that are sometimes hard to come by” when describing the difficulty in organizing for the Study Circles program. Educator E2 clarified, “... speaking about all Study Circles in general. Sometimes it takes a little while for people to warm up to each other and become vulnerable and speak their truth.” EL3 continued with, “just the coordination of it [Study Circle]” and added “we felt we were going to be at the end...walking out with either identified barriers, or action steps to address some of those.” When prompted about why not walking out with specific action steps, EL2 stated, “Not enough time. We could have gone on for days honestly, to continue to mine the rich data and create the very strong bridges that we started.” Furthermore, another area highlighted was individual feelings about next steps; as educator E1 declared, “I am challenged with not being able to connect that experience, that positive experience, to what I do every day.” E1 added, “how do you keep the promise that you make in the circle?” Finally, educational leader EL1 stated, “challenges of a Study Circle I would say are recruitment.” EL1 continued to highlight what challenges others had stated with, “so sustaining attendance but also sustaining the work.”

Subtheme 3.3. Communication

According to Ozmen et al. (2016), language and barriers to communication can stifle the involvement of parents. The implications of cultural differences and not utilizing multiple lens of inclusion in communication practices were underscored when educational leader EL4 detailed, “the communication that typically comes from schools is written in a way that no one understands.” Educational leader EL1 posed the question that parents may not know where to get communication, “how do you get access to all the communications that are coming home to keep you informed?” On the other hand, EL1 assured, “I was pleasantly surprised with the amount of talking that our staff members brought back to the building.” Educational leader EL3 pointed out a salient point made by parents about communication, with the recollection, “one of the things that came out as a comment from the Study Circles...the parents are like...you know, just because...I don’t speak English doesn’t mean I don’t know or I can’t contribute.”

Educator E2 made a comment regarding the importance of the kind of conversations that took place during the Study Circles program using “debate versus dialogue.” Participants were provided information on how to engage with each other in discussions. Meaning, rather than engaging in adverse conversations that may create barriers to discussion of tough issues, participants engage in dialogues that are meaningful and posed to solve a problem (Everyday Democracy, 2018). Furthermore, Educator E3 emphasized the importance of materials created to outreach to parents regarding ways to join the Study Circles program and found, “Making sure it was in the languages...making sure it’s accessible.” E3 further asserted, “So, it really opened up

lines of communication with those parents.” Communication was clearly an area of growth for the future and a consistent concern among participants.

Subtheme 3.4. Data

In the data subtheme for Theme 3, educational leaders were the respondents for this set. Whereas three out of four administrators provided responses pertinent to this subtheme, no educators responded with comments pertaining to data. There was an impetus to provide a data discussion and rationale for the implementation of the Study Circles program at the school. Educational leader EL1 underscored this when stating, “I was doing some research on some of the data of our school...and what I learned in looking at that was that there was a definite achievement gap.” EL1 added, “particularly with our Hispanic students... in test scores, achievement data...as well as attendance.” EL2 further highlighted student academic issues that emerged from the data with, “and realized that some of our most vulnerable students...were not on track to experience...success.” Educational leader EL2 additionally spoke to the purpose of exploring more deeply the reasons through the use of the Study Circles program including parents, staff, and students when explaining, “and to sort of round out our understanding of experiences our students and their families were having.” Educational leader EL3 emphasized “I tell everyone about the Study Circles that...when we were doing this it was just like...data-data-data.” The data conversation was an important aspect for educational leaders.

Subtheme 3.5. Decision Making

According to Epstein et al. (2009), schools must consider the areas of communication, decision-making, and collaboration with the community for increasing the involvement of parents with their children and their academics. The statements of one out of four educational leaders, and two out of three educators provided answers that led to this subtheme. However, both groups of participants did not have many comments. When discussing the Study Circles program supporting parents included in decision-making within the school, educator leader EL3 stated, “it didn’t really seem that there were any negatives” and continued, “Everyone was really responsive.” However, educator E3 stated, “We didn’t get that deep into that [decision-making with the school].” As a result, E3 wanted more time for this subtheme. Educator E1 stated, “So we talk of the needs in the future... We need to reassess this, we need to work as a group to reassess it.” The general consensus was that more work needed to occur to engage parents in decision making.

Subtheme 3.6. Equity

In the equity subtheme of Theme 3, all seven participants responded and were strong in their opinions and perspectives about the impact equity, race, culture, and inclusion play in the school community, but in particular, in garnering parent involvement within the school community in many ways. The school district is a minority majority, meaning that the majority of the student population is non-White. The student population is opposite of a 74% white teaching staff. Cultural factors persist as an area of controversy. According to educational leader EL4, “I think every issue is around race,

equity, and inclusion. I don't think there is one issue in [School District] regarding our families and communities that race isn't part of it." This is echoed by educator E3 in the school itself when stated, "I think all of our ESOL kids, regardless of their race or ethnicity...there's a very big gap in the parent involvement component of our native English speakers." Educator E2 stated that equity within the Study Circles program for Mid-Atlantic Middle School was, "...what we talked about. From the very beginning, the students...addressed it." E2 further examined the parents' experience when working with a school and information and supports, "everyone needs to know. It should be coming out in multiple languages...and then how will they know where to access that information in that language? Who's the point of contact from the school." Educational leader EL3 espoused, "the same thing applies to the parents...the idea of equity and race and inclusion were sort of like, the center of our discussions and the reason for the Study Circles." EL3 added about the concepts of equity, race, and inclusivity, "you could hear themes of that...through people's comments in the Study Circle."

Educational leader EL2 underscored the importance of the Study Circle participants when stating, "I think it's brilliant because you get a cross-section of identified stakeholders who have to come and form a very tight-knit community in a short amount of time." EL2 continued to highlight possible next steps with staff as a result of the Study Circles program with the reflection, "maybe with the next phase of work we do with our staff in general regarding our on-going professional learning around race, equity, cultural proficiency." Educator E1 also highlighted the participants within the Study Circle by stating, "It was very diverse group of parents, age, gender, personal histories."

E1 further qualified the impact of the equity conversations and the lack of titles used and the first name basis that participants were on, with, “So, it put us all on the same plane and for the parents on the same plane... you are just YOU.” EL4 summed up the category when stating, “if we don’t engage with an understanding that there is a racial piece to this conversation or engagement...we’re not going to be able to engage those families in a deep way.” When considering the subthemes in *Theme 3*, there were passionate responses from participants in the subthemes of barriers, challenges, communication, and equity. The participants strongly represented these areas with much reflection and heartfelt responses. Clearly, to highlight the knowledge gained around these areas would assist in understanding the barriers and challenges to provide recommendations for making it work.

Summary of Findings

The Study Circles program is a way to increase parent involvement and remove cultural barriers to engagement (Everyday Democracy, 2018) and was beneficial to Mid-Atlantic Middle School. This basic qualitative design study was guided by two research questions. The first research question explored the perceptions of teachers who facilitated the Study Circles program at Mid-Atlantic Middle School regarding the program’s benefits and challenges for increasing parent involvement. The second research question examined the ways the school administrators and the program coordinator, responsible for the implementation of the Study Circles program at Mid-Atlantic Middle School, perceived the benefits and challenges of the program as it related to increasing parent involvement.

The findings provided considerably rich information to highlight from both educators and educational leaders as to their perceptions of the challenges and barriers to the Study Circles implementation. To fully understand the meaning and relevance of the current study, I must consider the findings from the existing literature. The three areas that emerged from the literature as essential to establishing sustainable parent involvement were the relationship between parent involvement and academic achievement, barriers to parent involvement, and Study Circles as an engagement strategy. These three areas were also acknowledged as important within the review of the thematic data from the interviews. Finally, the findings of this study materialized in the three essential themes and subsequent subthemes which emerged as a result of data analysis guided by research questions RQ1 and RQ2, which informed and answered the research questions.

In Theme 1: Creating the Conditions for Relationship Building Within a School Community, there was an emphasis on *connected and engaged, relationships, race and culture, trust and psychological safety* among both educators and educational leaders, and *vulnerability* among educators. This theme also addressed the RQ1 and RQ2 as to the barriers and challenges of Study Circles program implementation through understanding the impact relationships, culture, and trust have on connections to school and school staff for engaging parents. As well, the importance of the Study Circles program in providing opportunities for these experiences to take place was a factor that emerged in the data. According to Hornby and Blackwell (2018), creating new ways to connect and engage

parents was vital in today's world and the increasing diverse nature of families who require different structures to engage more fully.

The Study Circles program afforded a new way of engaging parents and staff in a psychologically safe environment according to participants. The educators utilized words and phrases such as “vulnerable, empathy, keep your word, trust, and value” when they discussed the parent interactions in the circle. Educational leader EL2 mentioned, “ripen the conditions for having the conversation” which is what Theme 1 represented. Creating the conditions for dialogue, through creating the conditions for listening, and doing so through one's own cultural lens. This was associated with the importance of the Study Circles program by both educators and educational leaders and was a critical discovery. The enhanced understanding of communication and ways to actively engage with parents may impact the relationship between parent involvement and academic achievement. This finding highlighted the need for urgency when establishing relationships with parents to increase their knowledge about academic supports for their students, educational opportunities their children may not have been aware of, and access to data for their student.

Theme 2: Developing Positive Networks Through Growth and Overcoming Obstacles stated the benefits of the Study Circles program, and suggested ways to overcome the barriers and challenges. This clearly responded to RQ1 and RQ 2. The participants had alignment within the areas of *actions/action plans, benefits, factors for success, leadership*, and the *positive study circles* categories. For all seven participants, *actions/action plans* held a deep significance to the idea of next steps, continuity of

connections established from the Study Circles program and sustainability of the work that was started with parents, educators, and educational leaders. The concept of addressing issues within the school and problem solving collaboratively was expressed. There was hope and a positive sense of moving forward. This appeared in tandem with the *positive study circles* subtheme. Participants perceived *positive study circles* opportunities provided by the Study Circles program in the areas of circles of dialogue, utilized facilitators, shared honestly, and began with activities that encouraged immediate relationship building. These topics had alignment among educators and educational leaders and were important to the next steps of the school.

Furthermore, *benefits* and *factors for success* emerged as ways to both influence others to participate in future circles, and create the conditions for better engagement within the school among students, parents, teachers, and administrators. In particular, within the *benefits* subtheme, seven out of seven participants strongly emphasized cultural understanding, relationships, and the ability to talk about problems were important to involvement. A prevailing outlook by all was emphasized when EL4 stated, “we’re creating the conditions for people to learn from each other.” As to the *factors for success*, both educators and educational leaders had agreement and consistency in their perspectives on the aspects that facilitated success within the Study Circle. Participants responded to the importance of well-trained facilitators, utilization of activities that led to a deeper level of engagement among participants and established trust, eliminated titles or positional leadership among participants, employment of interpretation and that

language was not seen as a barrier to communication, and being outside of the school building in a different location.

A notable subtheme that emerged was *leadership*. According to Povey et al. (2016), leadership was essential for creating the conditions for collaboration and a positive climate. Both educational leaders and educators were consistent in their responses with three out of four educational leaders and two out of three educators aligning with the belief that administrators need to be part of the solution in problem solving engagement with parents and the community. As well, there was consistency in the sense of responsibility that falls on the principal and administrators to build relationships and provide for experiences like the Study Circles program to engage families in this way and to provide real opportunities for listening and dialogue. The importance of educational leaders who actively communicate with families, listen to their issues, and build out explicit opportunities for parent to engage with the school was a very powerful finding that emerged in the study.

Theme 3: Recommendations for Making It Work Through Examining the Barriers and Challenges addressed both RQ1 and RQ2 in the findings for barriers and challenges directly. The strength of the responses in Theme 3 around equity, communication, barriers, and challenges emphasized the importance of the Study Circles program providing opportunities for meaningful relationship building among participants, opportunities for all voices to be heard through meaningful dialogue, not debate, and valuing the culture and experiences that the participants brought to the circle. These comments were expanded into the expectations for the school to gain from the experience

and involvement with the parents who attended as well as the future hope that a sustainable plan would be put into place. This clearly relays back to the framework of the study as to the lack of parent involvement and the need for a suite of strategies for outreach to the increased number of diverse families attending the school. In a study on Strategies for Equitable Family Engagement by Jacques and Villegas (2018), the critical concept of equitable family engagement was defined. It focused on “meaningful engagement activities and systems between schools and families that do not characterize or treat specific parent groups as deficient in their level of engagement or approach to education” (p. 1). Not considering parents in a deficit mindset when looking for reasons for their lack of involvement was a very strong concept that emerged from the findings in the study.

The *barriers* that emerged from the data in the study in connecting with parents more deeply were language barriers, lack of cultural understanding, parent work schedules and times to engage, lack of clear communication, and inconsistent relationship building between parents and teachers. An example of the need for better relationship building was expressed most appropriately when EL4 stated, “We keep running our meetings the exact same way we’ve always run them...schools do a terrible job of building relationships with families...Especially...if the families are of a cultural perspective different than... than the staff.” This sentiment was reverberated by all seven participants in multiple categories including Theme 2 and *relationship building, race and culture*, and *connected and engaged*. The importance of *equity* from Theme 3, and the equitable approach to engaging parents was an important finding and pressed for

increased cultural competence by staff. Also, in Theme 3, the findings in subtheme *challenges* were an area of consistency among participants as to the recruitment of participants, the logistics of setting up the Study Circle, time and location, resources, and in particular the accountability of follow up after the Study Circle was completed. All seven participants believed that it was valuable to participate in the Study Circles program. This finding further identifies the need for better communication and relationship building to increase parent involvement within the school.

During the interviews, all participants became passionate about particular subthemes and their emotions were genuine. As a researcher, I was aware of the importance of these moments and alert as to ensuring that these perceptions were captured accurately. The importance these staff members felt about their involvement with the parent community was encouraging. Furthermore, according to Jacques & Villegas (2018), the importance of parents having a trusted relationship with someone at the school and feeling valued by the interactions as well as through the types of communication that takes place at the school is vital to their involvement. Finally, the findings from the data that emerged from this study are powerful and could enhance strategies for parent involvement by creating the conditions for more involvement to occur.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

According to Yin (2016), the methods utilized to obtain the data ultimately emerge out of the credibility established through embedded processes based on trustworthiness. In my role as researcher, I clarified who were the participants, how the

data was collected, coded, and analyzed utilizing proper collection procedures, and to control for bias through an interview protocol, and coding through thematic analysis with transcript verification. None of the methods of trustworthiness varied from Section 1. Furthermore, according to Merriam (2009), trustworthiness is also about how a study may apply in other contexts. The dependability and transferability of others to duplicate the study is important to trustworthiness and the truth of the findings or credibility.

In this study, to strengthen credibility, utilizing an excel spreadsheet, digital recording, transcript verification, and secondary checking provided credibility of the findings as it enabled me to track and organize data sources. The transcript verification by the committee chair ensured accuracy of the transcripts for coding and themes provided accuracy of the data. According to Lodico et al. (2010), if another researcher replicated the study, they would reach the same findings and thus the dependability of the study is secure based on the interview protocol utilized and the adherence to data collection procedures. Furthermore, the findings may or may not be generalized to other middle school contexts or situations due to the small number of participants interviewed. It is important to recognize and acknowledge limitations as a key element of establishing the trustworthiness of the data collected. According to Glesne (2011), limitations of a study may flow from methodology and it is essential for the researcher to disclose any limitations. In this basic qualitative design, one limitation is the number of participants in the study. There were seven participants consisting of educators and educational leaders. More participants, specifically educators could have provided a bigger perspective to generalize to other middle schools and down to the classroom level.

The perspectives of staff, school leaders, and a district leader provided three essential viewpoints for this study. According to Merriam (2009), the reader may determine whether the findings can be generalized or the level of transferability to another elementary, middle, or high school within the district. Ultimately, the Study Circles program could become an important tool for increasing parent involvement throughout the district.

Discrepant Cases

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), patterns that are opposite to the themes that emerge are considered discrepant cases during data analysis. Credibility according to Patton (2015), “comparing the perspectives of people from different points of view” (p. 662), clarifies that the researcher must recognize the participants varied points of view and capture them and not discount them. Through this study, both in the coding of the interviews and subsequent analysis, I did not find discrepant cases. Whereas I have found different perspectives, there has been consistency in the patterns of responses.

Conclusion

This research study through the basic qualitative design approach was conceived to provide new information about the perceptions of educators and educational leaders pertaining to the benefits and challenges of implementing the Study Circles program for increasing parent involvement at Mid-Atlantic Middle School. The ultimate goal from the Study Circles program was to provide an appropriate experience for diverse parents, teachers, and administrators to engage in the areas of communicating, decision-making,

and collaborating in the community as described by Epstein et al. (2009). When race, culture and the importance of diverse perspectives are considered in the broad context of parent involvement, a greater connection and involvement with the school and community can take place.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

This research study was a basic qualitative study of the Study Circles program in one middle school in a suburban mid-Atlantic state school district that serves students from more than 157 countries speaking 150 languages. The root problem investigated by this study was a lack of parental involvement in Mid-Atlantic Middle School. To enhance parental involvement and to address this concern, Mid-Atlantic Middle School had implemented the Study Circles program; however, the adequacy of the program's implementation to address the root problem at the school was not fully understood. Educational leaders were concerned over the lack of parental involvement and the challenges facing the school with creating better outreach efforts for involvement. The Study Circles program was a way to increase parental involvement at the middle school level and to remove cultural barriers to engagement. The purpose of the study was to investigate the perceptions of teachers and administrators pertaining to the benefits and challenges of implementing the Study Circles program for increasing parental involvement at Mid-Atlantic Middle School. I used semistructured interviews as the method of data collection. The staff who took part in this study had also been participants in the Study Circles program. Three themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) creating the conditions for relationship building within a school community, (b) developing positive networks through growth and overcoming obstacles, and (c) recommendations for making it work through examining the barriers and challenges. The subthemes from Theme 1 of *relationship building*, *race and culture*, and *connected and engaged*, as well

as the subthemes from Theme 2 of *actions/action plans, benefits, factors for success, and leadership* were critical to considering how to address the barriers and challenges of implementing the Study Circles program. Theme 3, recommendations for making it work through examining the *barriers and challenges*, was a way to explore the benefits and address the challenges of the Study Circles program, and all participants contributed to this theme with significant ideas for change. It is with this consideration that the model of a professional development training for staff is deemed essential to improving the Study Circles program implementation at the middle school level.

Rationale

As lack of parental involvement was the root problem of the research study and engagement in the Study Circles program was seen as a way to increase parental involvement at Mid-Atlantic Middle School, it will be critical to use the findings of this study with educators and educational leaders to create better avenues to home-school partnerships. The Study Circles program was a new way to support these partnerships, and educating more middle school administrators, teachers, and counselors about the benefits and challenges of implementation would be a positive outcome of this research. Using a professional development model as a support structure to increase learning and understanding of the Study Circles program implementation at the local middle school, sharing the results of this study may benefit school staff and possibly other middle school communities. Current research for effective professional development and facilitation will be used to enhance the training built on the content of the findings of the study as

related to the benefits, relationship building, factors for success, barriers, and challenges that will drive the professional development training.

According to the national professional development organization dedicated to supporting educator professional learning, Learning Forward (2020), interactive learning opportunities for participant discussion, conversation, and involvement are at the cornerstone of professional development standards and teaching. Critical to the context of all adult learning is how relevant the information is to the individual and their work, the timeliness of feedback regarding the implementation of the specific learning within their work context, and how specific feedback is provided for facilitation (Learning Forward, 2020). According to Quirk and Chumley (2018), the concept of continuous improvement is an adaptive, ongoing cycle of change through stakeholder engagement and reflection. The continuous improvement model, within the context of professional development, is applicable to the improvement of the implementation of the Study Circles program. Learning Forward (2020) considers the use of data to determine needs, shared goals for learning, and professional learning to extend staff's knowledge of the content within the environments in which they work as critical to the professional development experience.

The conditions for continuous improvement of educators and educational leaders to exist as a result of the professional development experience are essential. The ability to transfer learning from these professional development experiences directly to the school site, classrooms, and potentially with networked professional learning communities (PLCs) is necessary for sustained improvement. Direct application of learning within the educators' environment is valuable and follows the continuous improvement cycle

(Learning Forward, 2020; Quirk & Chumley, 2018). Furthermore, the use of data and evidence to monitor and adjust implementation of the learning and evaluation of the results are the final considerations when developing the training plan and equitable outcomes for involvement through true collaboration efforts.

According to Learning Forward's Revised Standards for Professional Learning Draft (2020), creating the conditions for equitable outcomes as well as involvement and engagement of adults proceeds from the concept of adult learning. Creating equity in systems work around professional development is stated in Learning Forward's draft standards statement: "Equity in professional learning systems happens when educators attend to its presence in the conditions for professional learning, the processes of professional learning, and the content of professional learning" (p. 5). Whereas this research study focused on the perceptions of educators and educational leaders pertaining to the benefits and challenges of implementing the Study Circles program for increasing parental involvement at Mid-Atlantic Middle School, the historical value of study circles as an engagement strategy for community members in democratic discussions for education cannot be ignored. Based on the findings of this study, expansion of educator understanding around the benefits and challenges of implementing the Study Circles program through a professional development training could prove very beneficial with administrators, teachers, and counselors.

Review of the Literature

The results of this research study indicate that both educators and educational leaders would gain valuable insight from a professional development training that focuses

on the current research findings in the areas of benefits, relationship building, factors for success, barriers, and challenges when implementing the Study Circles program. In order to determine the best model of professional development to use, I searched the following data sources for this review of the literature, which included Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), Educational Research Complete, Education: A SAGE full-text database, AERA, and EBSCO Host, Google, and Google Scholar. The following terms were searched: *adult learning, collaboration, continuous improvement, engagement strategies for adult learners, facilitation strategies for professional learning, professional development, professional development training models, professional learning, and Study Circles professional development*. I reviewed the relevant literature to identify the best strategy to apply the findings of my research in designing the professional development training for teachers, administrators, and counselors about the benefits, relationship building, factors for success, barriers, and challenges of implementing the Study Circles program.

The Purpose of Professional Development

According to Dufour and Marzano (2011), “school improvement means people improvement” (p. 15), and professional development must be embedded within a school culture. In particular, their research demonstrated that educational leaders must model an ongoing mentality of professional development for their teams. When educational leaders expect others to be accountable for their own growth to meet new challenges, then they must provide the professional development necessary to build the capacity of the individual to meet that new challenge (Dufour & Marzano, 2011; Wilson, 2016).

Furthermore, in a case study by Brigandi et al. (2019), professional development improved the participating teachers' mindset regarding an adaptive challenge, inventory of strategies, and content knowledge. As a result, the study provided evidence that effective professional development can provide for collaboration in learning within current research and best practices, time for guided practice of learning, skilled discussion, and deep reflection.

According to Frankling et al. (2017), collaboration through ongoing dialogue during professional development provides opportunities for educators to learn from one another. The ability to examine, discuss, and learn new concepts together enhances deeper understanding of the content through multiple perspectives. In the research associated with this project study, both educators and educational leaders expressed the need for deeper learning of race and culture, better communication methods with the school community, and beneficial ways to build trust and relationships.

According to Lovett (2020), leadership is considered a collective enterprise within professional development, and learning is shared rather than an individual endeavor. This is important in order to shift a culture. Dufour et al. (2008) proposed that professional learning and development must be a culture shift from isolation to collaboration: "Cultural changes are less visible, more amorphous, and much more difficult to make; yet unless efforts to improve schools ultimately impact the culture, there is no reason to believe schools will produce better results" (p. 167). In my research study, educators and educational leaders also emphasized the importance of the role that culture played in relationship building and communication, and the need for deeper understanding of

culture within the school community. The professional development from the findings of this research study could provide a more collaborative approach within schools that implement a Study Circles program and address the need for more cultural understanding for increased parental involvement.

According to Korthagen (2017), teacher learning is a multilevel process that, when effectively nurtured and supported, can influence teacher behavior positively toward change in daily practices. This ability to change behavior is powerful for continuous improvement and embedding the learning into the daily work of staff within the school environment (Brigandi et al., 2019; Quirk & Chumley, 2018). However, there is still a looming gap between theory and practice when it comes to professional development training; hence, there must be multiple ways to ensure a transfer of knowledge within the training itself (Shulman, 1998; Thumlert et al., 2018). Thumlert et al. (2018) proposed closing the gap between theory and practice by transforming professional development cultures into collaborative, innovative experiences. The research study by Thumlert et al. (2018) paralleled the innovative learning approach that PLC work exhibited through the transformation within the culture of learning in the classroom, and their study found that capacity building among teachers led to 21st century learning for students. The importance of professional development is the capacity building of adults and the direct transference of their own learning into the school and community in which they work.

Korthagen (2017) promoted the value of teachers' professional identity and purpose. In the study, a link to beliefs and behaviors around professional identity and

purpose was stated that could particularly influence an educator's approach to professional development and learning of any kind. With these concepts in mind, the importance of understanding the role that professional development and subsequent learning has in establishing the significance of collaborative work and collective learning is a vital undertaking (Admiraal et al., 2019). According to Schleicher (2016), an important factor of school improvement practice among cultures is imparting knowledge as a shared experience among educators, and the ongoing enrichment of teachers' professional learning and development. Therefore, instilling the true sense of collaboration within a community of learners, monitoring the facilitation experienced, and assessing the crux of cultural understanding within the process and among participants are at the heart of effective professional development and learning.

Professional Development Facilitation for Sustained Engagement and Collaboration

Consistent and job-embedded professional development is considerably more valuable than the one-time seminar (Guskey, 2000; Middlehurst et al., 2018). McRee and Haber-Curran (2016) explored effective facilitation practices in multiday cocurricular leadership development programs, and two themes were identified as essential to effective facilitation. The themes of mastering the content/knowledge and being well-organized were found to be critical to the success of the facilitation. McRee and Haber-Curran also discovered several other notable key practices of facilitation, which included creating environments conducive to learning and featured the concept of psychological safety and another key practice of displaying vulnerability, which provided participants with facilitators who brought their authentic, real selves. The above key practices

highlight the need for professional development facilitation to be engaging and authentic as well as organized with knowledge expertise.

According to Echelberger et al. (2018), in a 5-week study circle held to improve integrated pronunciation instruction, the improved understanding that resulted in the study circle overwhelmingly changed many participants' mindsets for the positive. The study circle was deemed successful because participants believed that they had built their own ability to become better at problem solving for student learners. This finding was significant as facilitation was a contributing factor to providing the ability for participants to connect and engage not only with the content and context, but also with the facilitator and each other as sources of learning (Echelberger et al., 2018). Study circles for these adult learners were in essence professional development and learning for participants. They made connections to the content and each other, which could provide for direct connections to the school community.

Furthermore, in a study about job-embedded, reflective, and collaborative programs for South African university administrators, facilitation was found to be a key element of adult learning sessions (Middlehurst et al., 2018). The facilitators' ability during the professional development sessions to effectively use the practice of collaborative inquiry resulted in collective questions and problem solving practices experienced by participants, which enhanced the learning and problem solving among communities at multiple institutions in which they were working. The professional development sessions also used intentional relationship building activities to engage learners with *getting to know you actions* that resulted in productive dialogue among the

administrators (Middlehurst et al., 2018). This revealed the importance of relationship building and creating the conditions for reflective dialogue within a professional development experience.

Smith (2016) emphasized the importance of bridging research into practice and specifically helping teachers to do this through job-embedded professional development. Research on adult literacy demonstrated the powerful effects on sustained learning. The concept of facilitation within professional development was critical due to its impact and effectiveness on its consumers. Prenger et al. (2019) stated that teachers are in a global era in which they are expected to “constantly advance both their own professional knowledge and that of their profession” (p. 441). Learning is seen as a notion that is ongoing, embedded, and sustained over time, and collaboration is analogous to ongoing dialogue and working together toward a common goal (Guskey, 2000; Prenger et al., 2019; Stoll et al., 2006). The idea of well facilitated professional development that holds the key elements of great organization and expert knowledge in the content to be delivered is the underpinning of this project. Involving participants in relevant content and experiential learning is essential to keeping them focused and engaged in the training. This is critical to providing an aligned, cohesive, and collaborative professional development for teachers, administrators, and counselors in the district that is focused on the findings of this research study for increasing parental involvement. For school staff to learn from the training on the results of the study, the opportunity for them to use and transfer this knowledge into their own school’s implementation of the Study Circles program could benefit their implementation and increase parental involvement.

Differentiated Professional Development for Adult Learners

According to the Center for Research and Evaluation, Lifelong Learning Group (2016), in order to create differentiated professional development for adults, the first step is to “understand how adults learn” (p. 3). The Center for Research and Evaluation, Lifelong Learning Group (2016) further endorsed Dewey’s initial 1938 research, in which he proposed that adults may learn through experience, and as a social interaction, and that learning can be inclusive (Dewey, 1938; Williams, 2017). The concept of experiential learning and providing for the various adult learning needs is mired by traditional professional development that may focus on the technical aspects of the training, and that do not become job-embedded, nor transfer back into the classroom or workspace (Center for Research and Evaluation, Lifelong Learning Group, 2016). Thus, there needs to be a transformative approach to adult professional development that not only motivates learners, but also encourages accountability to transfer the new knowledge and learning back to the workplace. To provide professional development that is differentiated for the various types of adult learners in the training and facilitated with a focus on active involvement in relevant content is essential to providing a space for active learning. Finally, the Center for Research and Evaluation, Lifelong Learning Group (2016) acknowledged that adults bring historical knowledge, cultural values, and relevance to the experience that cannot be ignored or understated.

In terms of adult learning and the concept of differentiation, many professional development models have been devised for use and study. According to Kennedy (2005), there are eight professional development models. Two of the models are informative to

the professional development training grounded in my research findings. A professional development training that uses an action model, in which the focused topic of the professional development includes active learning research of the participants working together to collect and learn information. The action model uses collaborative action research in which participants themselves research their understanding of the professional situation in order to improve it (Kennedy, 2005).

As with the implementation of the Study Circles program, participants using an action approach can apply their learning within the circle itself. This can be done with a Study Circle simulation or scenario for instance. The second model provides participants more say and governance in their professional development training in which a transformation may occur in ownership of the learning and accountability to one another. Thus, the transformative model according to Kennedy (2005), relies on a differentiated approach with multiple combinations including coaching, collaboration, innovation, and inclusion. The action and transformative models, both support the ideas of being innovative and transformative in the approach to learning and knowledge transfer among training participants that is aligned to implementation in the workplace (Nolan & Molla, 2020). For example, the transfer of learning based on the professional development training delivered from the findings from this research study could be directly applied to the Study Circle implementation at a participant's school.

Nolan and Molla (2020) stated that transformative professional development is seen as a social exercise which interprets the “interplay between subjective meaning systems and objective conditions of the social space where learning occurs” (p. 5). With a

lens to the Study Circles facilitation and implementation, both the action model and the transformative model lend themselves to the facilitation of training for the professional development sessions. Through the innovative practices and direct application focus for participants, the incentives for adult learners as well as being a tool to monitor the effectiveness of the professional development training are substantial reasons to use the action and transformative models. Well cultivated professional development training has the distinctive components of form and purposeful content, duration and opportunities for engaged and active learning, collaborative and collective participation, modeling and coaching supports, and critical feedback and reflection (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Garet et al., 2001).

Furthermore, according to Feinstein (2020), in a study of a high school faculty initiating a writers' guild, teachers requested a new approach to professional development using a differentiated model for adults. The model provided participants opportunities to gain an understanding of ways in which research informed practice, engagement in collaborative discourse that contributed to increased accountability to performance and results, and required a combination of a coordinator and facilitator role. Both the collective contributions and active participation by participants in the training, modeled the effectiveness of the facilitated learning. The differentiated learning experienced by participants was vital to their sustained learning and engagement back at their worksites.

In a study by Gallagher et al. (2017), a strategic professional development model was found to have had a positive effect on the teaching practices of teachers working with students' argument-based writing skills. This study was developed from a National

Writing Project's College Ready Writers Program (CRWP) and was implemented in highly impacted rural districts in 10 states. The model of Gallagher's study was an accountability model to provide professional development for teachers aligned to acquiring new content knowledge and transferring those newly acquired concepts into their classrooms. The goal of improving on the writing task was accomplished through a focus on continuous learning and improvement, and in particular, the implementation of the new instructional concepts into all teachers' classrooms. The transformative nature of the professional development training was used throughout multiple districts and was essential to continued improvement efforts. These opportunities for engaged professional development in a cohesive manner are paramount to the success of educators and educational leaders gaining insight as to the benefits and challenges of implementing the Study Circles program. By transferring the newly gained knowledge of the benefits and challenges to their own school's implementation of the Study Circles program, the experience could be better, more inclusive, and have more parent involvement as a result.

Project Description

Professional development training preparation begins by planning with the end in mind, and is, according to Killion (2016), a three-step process of "analyzing what students need to learn next; developing instructional practices to achieve the student outcomes; and evaluating the impact of new practices on student learning" (p. 64). In considering this approach for a diverse audience of adult learners consisting of administrators, teachers, and counselors at the middle school level representing multiple ethnicities and races, I propose a 3-Day Professional Development Training entitled:

Study Circles 3.0. The rationale for 3 days is based on multiple factors including the nature of the content and depth of dialogue needed, the ability to provide staff the time needed to explore, learn, and reflect on the content and facilitation techniques, and length of time staff can participate. According to Guskey and Yoon (2009), positive improvements in the classroom as a result of professional development require 30 or more hours of training.

A well-planned professional development training provides aligned activities and skill development to enhance professional learning technically and in content. I created a 3-day professional development training for teachers, administrators, and counselors that will illustrate to them effective strategies for facilitating engagement and collaboration with Study Circle implementation, differentiated strategies for exploring race and culture at the middle school level, scenario facilitation, and examining the importance of dialogue versus debate. When I consider the need for a differentiated approach to professional development training, it must be an inclusive one. A way to utilize what participant learners bring to the experience, ready to contribute to the dialogue and knowledge sharing, as well as how they may receive it. Specifically, in this 3-day professional development training, participants will learn how to create a safe environment to effectively manage, engage, and facilitate interracial dialogue with school staff, parents/families, and students. It is crucial to provide participants the time needed to explore, learn, and reflect on the content and facilitation techniques within the training. By the end of the 3-day professional development training, participants will have learned the skills to be able to: (a) create the conditions for safe and productive dialogue in an

environment in which racial, cultural, and ethnic issues are discussed openly and honestly, (b) build relationships and trust with one another, (c) identify and address the structural challenges and barriers that marginalize individuals, (d) examine the structures, processes, and strategies required for productive dialogue to occur, and (e) observe and manage group dynamics. The 3-day professional development training will be a proactive approach to helping educators and educational leaders to facilitate more comfortably the implementation of the Study Circles program at their middle school. As noted in the findings of this study, six out of seven participants enthusiastically expressed the importance race and culture play in the interactions with students and families. As a foundational component of the professional development training, providing experiences that engender social trust are important to model within the professional development training space.

The 3-day professional development training open to middle school teachers, administrators, and counselors will be held between the hours of 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. The training will be open to teachers, administrators, and counselors at the middle school level, participants will need to sign up in advance, on a first come, first served basis. There will be three circles of learning for the professional development training held simultaneously in a large training room. The total of this training would be 45 participants [15 participants per circle], and the number of administrators, teachers, and counselors would be diversified with all three groups in each of the three circles. The first 30 minutes of Day 1, Day 2, and Day 3 will provide time for activating participant thinking through exercises and socializing within the group. Activating thinking is a way

to prepare a learner for a learning activity. By activating thinking, I am preparing the adult learners for learning about the first activity regarding building relationships, making connections to the people in the room, learning to actively listen, and learning the importance of dialogue versus debate. This creates a venue for immediate engagement with participants. Beginning the day in this way provides for relationship building and the foundation for psychological safety.

Another factor to consider as critical to the effectiveness of the professional development is the importance of sustained duration in the training (Guskey & Yoon, 2009). The total amount of training time for the three days is planned for 22 hours and 30 minutes with three 30-minute lunches built on top of the time. The Study Circles training will be cofacilitated by one equity specialist, two Study Circles facilitators (two teachers), and myself. In the findings of my research study, all seven participants emphasized the positive aspects of the Study Circles program as highlighted in Theme 2. One participant emphasized the feeling they had within the dialogues and stated the importance of “these conversations with people in a very comfortable and safe space.” Thus, creating the conditions for a learning experience that includes opportunities to practice portions of the Study Circles themselves was significant in developing a comprehensive professional development training plan as well as a judicious eye to culturally responsive teaching and learning, and critical race theory.

On the first day, participants will begin to explore and learn Study Circles content and facilitation skills. They will engage in a modified Study Circle which is a simulation of a Study Circle with the exercises broken down into deeper learning portions for

participants to be able to observe how to facilitate a concept or strategy, prior to having to plan for facilitation. A modified Study Circle provides participants experiences of effectively managing and engaging in uncomfortable conversations as well as observing the processes and skills involved in becoming an effective facilitator. Furthermore, a modified Study Circle will provide a simulated Study Circle experience with the participants and facilitators. In this modified Study Circle, the idea of dialogue versus debate is introduced to the group and explored, providing the strategies for active listening and speaking without judgement. There is also an introduction that briefly discusses the findings of my research study to set the contextual understanding of how this professional development training can improve the Study Circles implementation with teachers, administrators, parents, and students at their own schools. Participants will then explore the activities of Dialogue versus Debate, Community Agreements, Why We Avoid Talking About Race, The Compass, Reach Out and Make a Friend, Making Our Own Cultural Timeline, Identity and Intersectionality and a Fishbowl Dialogue which models conversations. The training day ends with reflecting on learning from the day in Exit Card #1 to determine the effectiveness of the facilitation within each of the three circles. Based on the questions on Exit Card #1, facilitators will determine what participants have gained in learning of Day 1 concepts and may revisit or reexamine certain concepts to increase understanding of concepts and skills necessary for effective Study Circles program implementation.

The second day participants will continue to explore and learn Study Circles content and facilitation skills. The participants are engaged in relationship building

exercises, structures, and processes the facilitators have put into place to help participants feel safe to engage in uncomfortable conversations, practicing active listening skills, discussing race and culture through engagement and awareness activities, and learning about levels of racism. The day ends with a reflection activity and an Exit Card #2 in which participants respond to questions. Facilitators will determine what participants have gained in learning of Day 2 concepts by reviewing Exit Card #2 and may revisit or reexamine certain concepts to increase understanding of skills and concepts necessary for effective Study Circles program implementation.

Finally, on the third day participants will practice facilitation of a Study Circle by incorporating the skills and practices learned over the first two days through constructing processes, planning, and engaging actively within scenarios. The scenarios are directly connected to the findings of this study and are based on actual quotes presented within the findings. This provides authentic scenarios within the professional development training for participants to engage and experience in their training and learning.

Resources and Existing Support

The 3-Day Professional Development Training will require resources such as a space for three large circles of learning, technology (white board), computer access, and speakers for sound production to play information and sound clips through the speakers. The ability to log into the computer in the room(s), load the PowerPoints, set up all technology necessary for the delivery of the facilitation, and check for the following: slides, sound, projection/white board, and videos. It is important to ensure the ability to play music to create a welcoming atmosphere, and videos needed within the training.

One of the most important resources are the facilitators for each day of the professional development training. Facilitators will be recruited from the equity unit and teachers that have participated in the Study Circles program previously. Each day of the professional development training, I will have one of the facilitators stand at the door to enthusiastically welcome participants and make sure people sign-in and create their name tag. Another facilitator will direct participants to sit in one of the seats set up in the semi-circle and share that the first activity is on the slide being projected. A bank of the co-facilitation Think-Abouts for facilitators include: (1) Don't take shortcuts. (2) Remember that we are modeling how the trainees should facilitate Study Circles back in their workplaces. (3) Remember transitions. (4) Explain how one activity leads into the next one. (5) Use plural pronouns (ex. them, their, themselves, etc. rather than binary designations of he/she, him/her, etc.) (6) At strategic points in the day, have participants reflect on and discuss the facilitation explicitly (Everyday Democracy, 2021). As a result of the professional development training plan, which explicitly states each planned activity for the learning within the training (Appendix), and the preparation work with facilitators prior to the training, the facilitators will be organized and prepared for Study Circles 3.0.

Potential Barriers and Potential Solutions

A potential barrier to the professional development training would be the recruitment of administrative participants in the Winter of 2022. Ensuring the information is targeted to the proper audiences of teachers, administrators, and counselors. Averaging between 12-15 participants per Study Circle, working with administrative leadership

within the district to recruit 9-10 administrators is important. However, the solution is that this 3-Day Professional Development Training: Study Circles 3.0 could be replicated multiple times over the year as interest may grow to support increased training efforts. I could work with two administrators per circle initially, and this would still provide the perspective necessary within the training. Another potential barrier that could exist is one of the facilitators is unable to make a training. In this case, I could provide the facilitation, and/or, I recruit one extra facilitator in advance to support the work and potentially provide support in future trainings. I could see this as a beginning to possible future trainings within the year as a continued need for increasing parent involvement in the Study Circle program exists.

Proposal for Timeline and Implementation

The 3-Day Professional Development Training: Study Circles 3.0 would be presented to the executive leadership in the Fall of 2021 as a districtwide training for middle schools interested in utilizing the Study Circles program for increased parent involvement. There is consistent interest in the Study Circles program within the district at the middle school level. The timeline to offer the training would be in a January 2022 time frame. This provides time for recruiting efforts for facilitators and participants, and training for the facilitators. Furthermore, providing information at the middle school principals professional learning community meeting, and the counselors professional learning community meeting will provide the opportunity to cast a wider net to gain participants in the sessions.

Roles and Responsibilities

The equity specialist, the two Study Circles facilitators, and an additional staff member that will act as a facilitator would be responsible for providing the set-up of materials, technology, and dissemination of professional learning. The equity specialist would specifically work with the recruitment of administrators, teachers, and counselors in the district through the professional learning office and providing materials to advertise for this specific training. I will work with the facilitators on the theory and content learning to be discussed and read by participants. Again, providing information at the middle school principals professional learning community meeting, and the counselors professional learning community meeting will provide the opportunity to gain more participants in the sessions. The content is shared among the facilitators including providing the evaluations.

Project Evaluation Plan

Critically assessing and evaluating the effectiveness of professional development training is quintessential to determining if your planning was effective, and whether adult learners will implement what they learned with fidelity (Guskey, 2000; Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Labone & Long, 2016). The key to effective professional development is in the implementation. The learning process needs to be mediated or supported by instructional activities and can be with a well-designed professional development plan that is aligned to instructional goals, implemented for the goal outcomes, and evaluated for meeting the goals. As with the Study Circles program, the key to true engagement with parents is in

the facilitation of the Study Circle and the connections the school makes to involve parents in meaningful ways and build culturally responsive relationships.

There will be a survey at the beginning of session one and the end of session three to provide a pre and post survey (Appendix). The first, or pre-training survey will provide questions to determine the experience the participant has had with the Study Circles program prior to Study Circles 3.0 in terms of content interaction and any facilitation experience. The second, or post-training survey, will provide questions to determine the experience the participant had with the Study Circles 3.0 in terms of content understanding and facilitation experience. Furthermore, facilitators will determine which concepts to revisit with the built-in reviews that occur on Day 1, Day 2 and Day 3 for participants and will also utilize the Exit Cards (Appendix) for Day 1, Day 2, and Day 3. At the end of each session, there will be an evaluation of the learning for each day and upgrades to improve the session, and these are completed in the form of Exit Cards defined earlier in the Project Description that provide formative assessment information around distinct concepts for the participant. This information is used to create opportunities for reteaching and relearning in a dynamic setting.

Type of Evaluation

I will utilize multiple surveys to capture multiple lens regarding the professional development training and what the participants are taking away from the training to take back to their schools. There is a pre-training survey and post-training survey (Appendix) for the entire three-day experience which includes a survey at the beginning of session one and the end of session three. The first, or pre-training survey, will provide questions

to determine the experience the participant has had with the Study Circles program prior to Study Circles 3.0 in terms of content interaction and any facilitation experience. The second, or post-training survey, will provide questions to determine the experience the participant had with the Study Circles 3.0 in terms of content understanding and facilitation experience. The Exit Card #1 at the end of day one will focus on the over-arching learning goals for Day 1, the Exit Card #2 at the end of day two will focus on the over-arching learning goals for Day 2, and the Exit Card #3 at the end of day three will focus on the over-arching learning goals for Day 3, and where each participant is entering in the process of understanding of the goals. Facilitators will determine which concepts to revisit in addition to the built-in reviews that occur on Day 2 and Day 3 for participants. Day 1 and Day 2 provide new concepts with guided practice, and thorough practice occurs in Day 3. The Exit Cards provide formative information to provide support in reteaching concepts as needed within the next day's training. At the end of day three, the final post-assessment will provide information as to where each participant is leaving in their learning, and could provide for follow-up materials or information as they begin their journey for Study Circles implementation at their schools.

Project Implications

Guided by Epstein's model of parental involvement (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Epstein, 2001; Epstein et al., 2009; Newman et al., 2019), the purpose of the research study associated with this project study was to investigate the perceptions of teachers and administrators pertaining to the benefits and challenges of implementing the Study Circles program for increasing parent involvement at Mid-Atlantic Middle School.

Ultimately, the project could have a positive effect on the improvement of the middle school Study Circles program implementation. In a large diverse school district, the implications of providing more supports to implementing the Study Circles program at the middle school level with real life experience, data that provides upgrades, and a commitment to continuous improvement, this project could provide sustained growth experiences.

Social Change Implications

With a direct experience in the Study Circles and Study Circles facilitation as part of the training itself, an insight and lens of understanding in both active listening and cultural perspective can be gained. The need for better communication, collaboration, and cultural understanding between parents and school staff is essential in this large diverse school system. According to Brown and Di Lallo (2020), the dialogue circle can be a culturally responsive practice for participants to empower each other to engage in courageous conversations, build relationships, and solve problems. Cultural responsiveness is a critical element in the concept of using dialogue circles, not debate circles, and the notion of a circuit dialogue for social change that was begun in American culture in the late 1880's (Brennan & Brophy, 2010; Laginder et al., 2013). In addition, with the cultural understanding that is necessary in such diverse school communities, the professional development training can enhance this through the tools utilized, experiential learning provided, and facilitation priorities.

Importance of Project

The project was created to improve the implementation of the Study Circles program at the middle school level based on the findings from a basic qualitative design study. The results of the research study were three themes developed and the third theme, recommendations for making it work through examining the barriers and challenges, as well as the factors for success, and the benefits as determined by the participants of the study, provided the data as the foundational context for the professional development training. The importance of the project to the administrators, teachers, counselors, and school staff in the larger context, is that the findings provide actionable change within the Study Circles implementation. The information on logistics, communication, and recruitment is invaluable. The findings also provided data to improve cultural responsiveness, ways to utilize dialogue versus debate, and active listening exercises. However, a significant part of the project focuses on providing resources for schools to more actively engage with parents. This essential aspect could improve future implementation by participants returning to their schools and implementing the techniques discussed in the findings.

Summary

In Section 3, I discussed the rationale, timeline, supports, barriers, and evaluations related to the professional development training in order to express the purpose of the training, its importance, and its social implications. In Section 4, I examine the project's strengths and limitations as a whole. I further address scholarship, project development

and evaluation, leadership and change, reflect on the importance of the work, and examine implications, applications, and directions for future research.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

The root problem investigated by this study was a lack of parental involvement in Mid-Atlantic Middle School. To enhance parental involvement and to address this concern, Mid-Atlantic Middle School had implemented the Study Circles program; however, the adequacy of the program's implementation to address the root problem at the school was not fully understood. According to the state department of education in 2020, the student population at the middle school level in the district increased by more than 23% over the last 10 years. School administrators at Mid-Atlantic Middle School were concerned over the lack of parental involvement and the challenges facing the school in meeting the diverse needs of the rapidly growing student population entering the school. During this study, benefits and challenges to implementation of the Study Circles program were clarified by teachers and administrators within the school and at the district level. The findings of the study provide the importance of participants' perceptions regarding ways to improve the Study Circles program implementation for sustained parental involvement. The literature review underscores meeting the cultural challenges of engaged parental involvement. This led to the conclusion that a 3-day professional development training, which would be open to middle school teachers, administrators, and counselors, would be the fundamental project to undertake as a result of the findings.

The participants interviewed in the study cited the need for activities that build relationships and cultural sharing early in the Study Circles program and create the conditions for learning experiences that include opportunities to practice portions of the

Study Circle itself. The importance of the participants' perceptions to identify and address the structural challenges and barriers to involvement and that marginalize individuals was evident, as well as examining the structures, processes, and strategies required for productive dialogue to occur consistently within the Study Circle.

Project Strengths and Limitations

The strength of this project, professional development training on the benefits and challenges of implementation of the Study Circles program at the middle school level, lies in the effective strategies and practices that emerged from the results of the participant interviews and the research gained from the literature review. The three areas that emerged from the literature review regarding the relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement, barriers to parental involvement, and Study Circles as an engagement strategy were aligned with the review of the thematic data from the interviews in the results. As the needs of educators and educational leaders were illuminated within the results, recommendations for making it work through examining the barriers and challenges, as well as the factors for success and benefits, were the foundational context for the professional development training.

Critical to providing an aligned, cohesive, and collaborative professional training for teachers, administrators, and counselors in the district is keeping them focused and engaged in the learning (Labone & Long, 2016). Well-facilitated professional development that embraces the central components of expert knowledge in the content, relevant content, and experiential learning is essential to an effective training (Guskey, 2000; Prenger et al., 2019). The importance of the knowledge transfer being job

embedded cannot be underscored enough (Gallagher et al., 2017; Smith, 2016). It was with this laser-like focus that the skills to be developed within the training from the study findings are the strengths of the project. By the end of the three sessions, participants will learn the skills to be able to (a) create the conditions for safe and productive dialogue in an environment in which racial, cultural, and ethnic issues are discussed openly and honestly; (b) build relationships and trust with one another; (c) identify and address the structural challenges and barriers that marginalize individuals; (d) examine the structures, processes, and strategies required for productive dialogue to occur; and (e) observe and manage group dynamics.

The first strength is to create the conditions for safe and productive dialogue in an environment in which racial, cultural, and ethnic issues are discussed openly and honestly. Participants in the study discussed the idea that language is not an issue; it was an opportunity to engage with different cultures. Additionally, they described creating the conditions for dialogue through creating the conditions for listening through one's own cultural lens as essential to learning. Our different identities shape our interactions and lived experiences (Singleton, 2014). It is imperative to create community agreements in order to feel safe to participate in dialogue, and interactions as a group, so that the conditions are established to engage in uncomfortable dialogue about race, culture, ethnicity. Providing specific activities for participants to engage in learning such as the compass and cultural timeline is critical, and I believe that training participants to understand and engage in this way is an important skill.

The second strength is to build relationships and trust with one another. Study participants discussed the impact that relationships, culture, and trust have on connections to school and school staff for engaging parents. I believe that engaging in *get-to-know-you* activities that introduce professional learning participants to each other on each day is important, as well as facilitators providing a positive, structured, and welcoming environment. The activities gain a deeper significance each day in building relationships and practice listening skills. Active listening helps in recognizing other people's perspectives and feelings and helps individuals to appreciate them. This not only helps in resolving conflicts, but also helps to foster a culture of respect.

The third strength is to identify and address the structural challenges and barriers that marginalize individuals. Individuals' identities exist on their own, and when combined, they compound and impact the experiences of inclusion or advantage or oppression and disadvantage that people experience. Participants in the study stated that cultural differences were at times barriers to hearing each other's voices, and it was necessary to be keenly aware of how any of one's own biases affect what happens in any interactions. Finding ways to address parent work schedules and times to engage, lack of clear communication in multiple languages, working through different value systems, and dismantling stereotypes are issues that are addressed in the training.

The fourth strength is to examine the structures, processes, and strategies required for productive dialogue to occur. Study participants stated the importance of connection, and two out of three educators believed this to be critical to engagement, further clarifying a need for more methods of outreach. Creating a safe space for participants to

engage in uncomfortable conversations, as well as discussing the difference between a dialogue and a debate, is critical for full engagement in the process and challenging conversations. In dialogues about race and culture, there are belief and behavioral patterns that get in the way of productive dialogue. I believe that going over a few of those patterns and then talking about structures that help in overcoming these challenges is vital to developing deeper authentic connections to each other, and the ability to openly talk about race and culture.

The last strength is to observe and manage group dynamics. Managing group dynamics does not come naturally to all people. Therefore, being strategic with resources and ways to provide diverse experiences is essential to the training as well as being relevant to the participants. Thus, providing authentic scenarios based on the research results, engaging training participants in multiple ways with the content, and providing real-world experiences is a way to manage dynamics. Furthermore, exploring questions through the fishbowl activities provides experience that can be transferred directly back to the school Study Circles program implementation.

In addition, I have identified several limitations to this project. The professional development training has been developed for the middle school level. However, the high school level could possibly benefit from the training as well. Secondary schools could utilize many of the strategies with appropriate level work with parents, students, and teachers around dialogue and creating conditions for building trusting relationships. In particular, courageous conversations around race, equity, and opportunity would be very

important at the high school level in addressing students' success and parent engagement essentials.

Further, the professional development is a 3-day training and is not continuously offered throughout the school year, which could have a more positive impact. The training could be developed to foster a more continuous improvement model in which schools could have access to the training throughout the year prior to hosting the Study Circles program, and then could participate in a follow-up debriefing after the schools engage in a Study Circle. This could provide further knowledge and become action research as schools continue to participate.

Finally, the training is only open to teachers, administrators, and counselors. Other staff members are not able to experience this due to capacity constraints with only 45 people per session. However, the benefit of having all staff participate would be powerful, especially with the diverse experience that each staff member may bring to the group. The relational trust and engagement that could come from this level of participation have an exponential possibility within the school community.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

An alternative approach that could be explored would be a mixed-method approach to the study. Lodico et al. (2010) advocated for the blending of qualitative and quantitative data collection within the mixed-methods approach due to the added value of rich descriptions and numerical data to further support the findings. The strength of the data collected and the rich story it can tell, particularly in the results section with a rich description, and the numerical data to support it could provide even more distinct

information. This could also represent a larger sample with the additional statistical significance from the qualitative portion and be generalized to the larger population (Merriam, 2009). Furthermore, according to Creswell (2013), a mixed-method approach would allow researchers to use multiple data sources, including surveys, document reviews, field notes, and observations in conjunction with one another to capture the whole picture the data are describing.

Another central idea would be to explore the problem through the impact of leadership and administrators within the building. Through the lens of leadership challenges to parental involvement, future researchers could seek the implementation of the Study Circles program in a case study of the principal and examine the complexities of collaboration and inclusivity. According to Lodico et al. (2010), a researcher conducting case study seeks meaning and insight from a “single unit or bounded system” (p. 269). This could provide an in-depth look at the administrative dilemmas in parent outreach and structural implications to sustaining a Study Circles program.

However, in addition to the professional development training, another way to solve the problem could be to work directly with the administrators in the building. According to Dufour and Marzano (2011), “principals are culture-makers, intentionally or not” (p. 47). In providing the data findings to the principal and administrative team at the school, strategies could be developed into a long-term plan for the school. The Study Circles program could be used as an ongoing strategy to build networks with parents and teachers to engage regularly. Furthermore, networks and parent groups could be developed as a result of the initial Study Circles program to engage with and recruit for

the other parents who did not participate. Practicing and implementing the suggested parental engagement strategies that were developed by the Study Circles program participants from the school could be the starting point for the school engagement plan.

Another way to solve the problem would be to work with the Study Circles Unit and the district administrator and team to increase their ability with more approaches to the work as an action research model. Providing feedback directly from schools is essential to improving the program effectiveness and deliverables. Additionally, working for increased staffing in this area to help the team meet more of schools in need would be an improvement. All of these approaches could benefit schools and their work with the Study Circles program.

Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change

I gained a wealth of knowledge through completing this research study and the ensuing project. The ubiquitous nature of research, and recognizing how to narrow down the question to the problem that I was trying to solve, was the first lesson for me. Learning how to use research to explore, examine, and seek in a nonbiased way answers to the posed question(s) from multiple perspectives and analyzing research studies that were completed previously were enlightening. Exhausting the literature until it began to sound the same was illuminating and provided a thorough and deep understanding of the phenomenon of parental involvement being studied from multiple angles. I truly learned what it means to be a reflective research practitioner through multiple lenses. I also realized that learning and research are ongoing, iterative processes in which researchers live the method of continuous improvement.

I learned the comprehensive progression of data collection and analysis and the methodical disposition that I had to undertake in order to provide a credible and dependable research study. Working with the participants was amazing and required great care, attention to detail, flexibility in meeting schedules and timelines, and persistence in logistics. Most important, however, was maintaining a welcoming environment for the interviews, preserving objectivity and a nonbiased approach in capturing the data, and describing participants' experiences and perceptions through their eyes. I gained such a deep humility for the sharing of people's experiences, stories, and cultures.

This journey has provided me with much knowledge that I will carry into my own profession. The most important aspect for me is that I have learned to ask better questions. With that comes seeking better answers. In my educational work as a district administrator, I have implemented my learning all along the way in my doctoral journey. I triangulate data for decision making and seek perspectives different from mine at all times. This is represented in my leadership team and the PLCs that we have built. I intentionally surround myself with people who do not think like me, so that the diversity of perspectives is there and challenges the thinking in the room. I also bring research-based learning to the table constantly to challenge my own staff to think differently in order to effect change. I challenge them to do the research and bring a research-based approach, not a personal judgement-based approach, to the work. This also lends itself to the discussion of evaluation and assessment. It is critical to have data performance measures to determine whether one is making progress and how much progress one is making in a timely manner. This is the process of continuous improvement with a "plan,

do, study, act” model. The critical aspect of this is to study. To collect and analyze the data to determine if what one has planned for is actually happening and how one can change to improve. I look at this as ongoing action research as a result of my learning through this research study. The value of this collaborative thinking and analysis approach cannot be underscored enough.

Furthermore, as a leader in the district, I am consistently providing professional development sessions to staff and as part of meetings. This professional development training project, however, was completed as a result of a data collection process. I have used surveys previously and analyzed the results to inform thinking. However, this research and subsequent project have taught me the importance of developing very meaningful and specific questions to get at the heart of what the problem is that one is trying to solve. Learning from the interviews was significant in regard to questions and responses and analyzing what the responses say. It is important to then utilize the data gained to inform practice and make improvements or changes as a result of what the data say.

As a leader, I found that this research study and the project emphasized to me the importance of research-based practice and embedded professional learning. I have learned through this study that research is critical to credibility of information and data, especially with a lens to cultural understanding. The most vulnerable communities and underserved populations are at constant risk when their perspective is not considered, included, or provided. This can be a quiet staff member, a parent that is not engaged, or a student in poverty. This is why outreach is so important, along with providing avenues

for all to be involved in learning and decision making. This section is too short to effectively list all that I have learned, but know that I am in a continuous cycle of learning and improvement that includes ongoing research, data analysis, and reflection.

Reflection on Importance of the Work

This study utilized interviews and a small segment of the population of the middle school. However, it did provide a depth and wholistic view from the three levels of staff interviewed. The study was developed to examine the benefits and challenges of the Study Circles program to ultimately increase parent involvement. The project was born out of the participants' responses to the questions of benefits and challenges in implementation, and the value of providing this information to others seeking to implement the Study Circles program at the middle school level is significant. This first-hand experience, and lessons learned was beneficial and should be shared with others to provide insight in their own Study Circles journey.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

Implications for Social Change

For more than a decade, students, teachers, and parents have participated in dialogues to help find ways to address racial and cultural barriers to student achievement within an ever-increasing diverse student population (Baker, 2011; Brown & Di Lallo, 2020). Parent involvement and student achievement propose that increased family involvement is positively associated with improved outcomes for children of all ages (Barnett et al., 2020; Fajoju et al., 2015; Gilbert et al., 2017; Henderson et al., 2007; Hill & Torres, 2010; Jeynes, 2007). Current research in the study of parent involvement is

dynamic in the multiple approaches utilized to engage parents on a regular basis (Calzada et al., 2015; Epstein et al., 2009; Hanover Research, 2016; Harris, 2016). The Study Circles program was a way to increase parent involvement at the middle school level and to remove cultural barriers to engagement. In this study, I provided perspectives from educators and educational leaders about the benefits and challenges of implementing a Study Circles program.

The benefits of Study Circles implementation emphasized by participants were cultural understanding, building relationships, the ability to discuss problems, and the value of participating. Challenges expressed were recruitment of participants, logistics of set up, follow up after the Study Circles completion, and better communication and relationship building with parents. Through the professional development training for teachers, administrators, and counselors, insight into these benefits and challenges could provide positive implications for social change by improving Study Circles implementation at the school level for parents, and consequently, their level of school engagement. Furthermore, with improved cultural understanding regarding communication, and intensified outreach efforts to include parents in meaningful dialogue about race, culture, and student well-being; student achievement could improve.

The implications of the professional development training are substantial to providing staff with key strategies to engage diverse families (Admiraal et al., 2019) in dialogue that is inclusive, communication that is clear, and opportunities to build meaningful relationships with school staff so they have resources within the building. The Study Circles program as an engagement strategy for inclusive practice is built on

the foundational principal of engaging stakeholders in meaningful dialogue about race and culture to overcome inequities among families within the school (Everyday Democracy, 2018). The long-term possibilities of the professional development training for staff is to create the conditions for inclusive engagement practices, and to break down the barriers for all parents to engage with the school in meaningful ways, but in particular, our most vulnerable and impacted families.

This could be accomplished by the continuation of the professional development training model transferring back (Badri et al., 2016) to the middle school itself, and staff continuing to share the practices learned in the training with other staff within the school. A trainer of trainer model so to speak. Additionally, it could be opened up for other staff members to have the training at the middle school level, by expanding participation opportunities for others to facilitate the training across the district. The training could then be offered in multiple points throughout the year, and provide this learning to more schools throughout the district. The impact of this could be extremely positive in providing much needed resources for parent engagement strategies, with real-world scenarios and experiential learning.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on the participants' responses and the themes that emerged from the data analysis, further research should be conducted with the addition of the parents' perspectives. Parents voices are critical to understanding the success or failure of the program. Parent-school partnerships are essential for student success and academic achievement as well as building a bridge to cultural understanding and differences

(Freeman, 2010; Henderson et al., 2007). Schools have long been the heart of communities since their first inception in the early days of America. However, the cultural and racial lens that we need to meet the diverse nature of our students and their families, must be embraced. The importance of the parent's perspective is critical to breaking down barriers and challenges to true involvement and sustained engagement. The study findings revealed the Study Circles program provided opportunities for meaningful relationship building among participants, opportunities for all voices to be heard through meaningful dialogue, not debate, and the culture and experiences that the participants brought to the circle were respected. These comments were cultivated into expectations that a sustainable plan would be put into place based on the involvement with the parents who attended the Study Circle. Furthermore, expanding our understanding of parent involvement through the lens of racial socialization, and the context in which African American parents use racialized parenting strategies to build resilience in their children when faced with structural racism (Wang et al., 2020). Learning the context in which various cultures adapt parenting strategies to be involved and assimilate into educational environments would be critical to inclusion. This propagates the need for interviewing parents to gain insight as to their explicit needs and desires for information, resources, communication, and levels of engagement with the school and staff.

I recommend further research be completed with increasing the number of Study Circles program participants. Amplify the number of staff members interviewed or complete a survey to gain information on a larger scale at the middle school level with

teachers, counselors, support professionals across the district. This could provide a more comprehensive view of the needs that staff have to engage parents, and each other, within buildings. Likewise, completing a survey among administrators across the district regarding Study Circles program implementation would benefit the information gap as to the struggles within different school communities, and the issues that different areas within the district confront. This would expand the research into both affluent communities and communities in poverty. A wide range approach could yield critical information as to the level of impact parents are experiencing, and provide opportunities for schools to engage in more inclusive practices of outreach and better supports or resources to families.

This research study was conducted at the middle school level. However, so much could be gained from seeking information at the elementary level where all relationship building begins with families. By starting from the beginning, in the formative years of schooling, a different experience could exist for students, parents, and families within each school community (Barnard, 2004). A focus on cultural differences and the inclusivity to be gained by exploring the experiences families bring to each community is a critical element to engagement (Jacques & Villegas, 2018). Seeing difference as a strength as opposed to a deficit. The elementary level could be an informative place to learn from and make an impact earlier with engaging more families from the beginning.

Conclusion

The parent involvement research cited in this study, confirms that a greater connection and engagement with the school community can take place when the

importance of race, culture, and diverse perspectives are considered in the broad context of parent involvement (Jacques & Villegas, 2018; Stefanski et al., 2016; Vega, 2010; Zhou et al., 2020). As a result, connections and outreach with parents need to be more intentional and inclusive to remove barriers to involvement within the school and with the staff. The relationships that evolve through collaboration and interpersonal discourse are nurtured by learning together which is rooted in social value systems (Stitt & Brooks, 2014). Thus, the importance of a Study Circles program in which circles of dialogue with parents, students, educators, and educational leaders are rooted in learning about race and culture to overcome the obstacles within a school, is such a vital mission.

The findings of the study attest to the importance of learning about ways to engage in interpersonal discourse through the responses from educators and educational leaders. The significance of the Study Circles program for both educators and educational leaders was affirmed through Theme 1 when all participants expressed the value of creating the conditions for dialogue, through creating the conditions for listening, by doing so through one's own cultural lens. This was a critical discovery that informed the need for the professional learning model for teacher, administrators, and counselors in providing experiences in dialogue circles with learning about dialogue versus debate, and courageous conversations about race.

The framework of the study as to the lack of parent involvement, and the need for a suite of strategies for intentional outreach to the increased number of diverse families attending the school is foundational for the rationale of effective implementation of the Study Circles program. The very strong subtheme concept that emerged in the study in

Theme 3: recommendations for making it work through examining the barriers and challenges was the concept of equitable family engagement (Jacques & Villegas, 2018), and not treating certain families or cultures as deficit in family engagement practices. It is the idea of not making assumptions about cultures, beliefs, or placing values on certain groups. As a result of this learning from the study findings, parent involvement can be enhanced by the effective implementation of the Study Circles program at the middle school level.

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Appendix: The Project

Study Circles 3.0: 3-Day Professional Development Training Plan

Description

In this 3-day training, participants will learn how to create a safe environment to effectively manage, engage, and facilitate interracial dialogue with school staff, parents/families, and/or students.

- Day 1-Participants engage in a modified Study Circle for the experiences of effectively managing and engaging in uncomfortable conversations and to observe the processes and skills involved to become an effective facilitator **(Engage in a Pre-Survey)**
- Day 2- Participants continue to explore and learn Study Circles content and facilitation skills.
- Day 3- Participants practice facilitation by incorporating the skills and practices learned over the first two days. **(Engage in a Post-Survey)**

Training Outcomes:

- By the end of the three sessions, participants will learn the skills to be able to:
 - Create the conditions for safe and productive dialogue in an environment in which racial, cultural, ethnic, etc. issues are discussed openly and honestly
 - Build relationships and trust with one another
 - Identify and address the structural challenges and barriers that marginalize individuals
 - Examine the structures, processes, and strategies required for productive dialogue to occur versus debate
 - Observe and manage group dynamics

Co-facilitation Day One Think-Abouts:

- Don't take shortcuts. Remember that we are modeling how the trainees should facilitate Study Circles back in their workplaces.
- Remember transitions. Explain how one activity leads into the next one.
- Use plural pronouns (ex. them, their, themselves, etc. rather than binary designations of he/she, him/her, etc.)
- At strategic points in the day, have participants reflect on and discuss the facilitation

Room Setup

The room will have:

- Semi-circle of chairs facing the screen. Each chair will have a sticky note and pen on it.
- Chart paper, pens, markers, clipboards, and handouts that will be distributed
- Timeline chart
- Parking Lot chart
- Community agreements recoded on chart paper once they have been created and agreed to by all participants
- Poster with the reflection questions:
 - What structures and process have the facilitators put in place to help participants feel safe to engage in uncomfortable and productive conversations?
 - What do facilitators do to make the conversation go deep instead of staying on a surface level?
 - What is coming up for you personally throughout the training? (Ex. your beliefs, personality, skills, etc.)

Training Plan Day 1

Time & Facilitators	Content/Directions	PowerPoint & Materials
7:30 am	<p style="text-align: center;">Facilitators Arrive*</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Day One</p> <p><i>*NOTE: If possible, the room set-up of tables and materials should be done the afternoon before the session.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Log into the computer in the room(s) and check the following: slides, sound, projector/Promethean, and videos. 2. Put on a music playlist (Pandora or Spotify) to create a welcoming atmosphere. 3. Write down the Wi-Fi information on chart paper for participants to access. 	
8:00-8:30am	<p style="text-align: center;">Participants Arrive</p> <p>Directions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have one of the facilitators stand at the door to enthusiastically welcome participants and make sure people sign-in and create their name tag. 2. Direct participants to sit in one of the seats set up in the semi-circle. 	Slide 1-2

	<p>3. Take a Study Circles 3.0: Pre-Survey</p> <p>4. Share that the first activity is on the slide being projected. It asks participants to write on a sticky note the difference between a debate and a dialogue. Once they have done this, they place their sticky note on the large piece of chart paper.</p> <p><i>*Note: The information is developed by the researcher and directions for the facilitators' language is adapted from The National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation, Everyday Democracy Dialogue-to-Change, and The National Equity Project</i></p>	
TBD	<p style="text-align: center;">Welcome and Overview</p> <p>Outcomes/Rationale:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To welcome everyone in an engaging way. ● To set the context for what we are doing and why. <p>Facilitator Considerations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Facilitators need to be energetic and warm to set the right mood for a full day of training. <p>Directions/What to Say/Do:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Put up the Hello slide. 2. Facilitators briefly introduce themselves. 3. Give the directions for the Hello Circle activity. Say: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Now that (Facilitator name) and I have introduced ourselves, we want to make sure that all of you feel welcomed. We call this activity the Hello Circle. b. Please stand up in a circle near your chairs. c. When I say "Go", one person will get us started by introducing them self to the group telling us their name, position at the school, and why they are participating in a Study Circle. d. It is important for us to greet one another as well as wear our name tags each day. e. Any questions? f. "Go" 4. Give the participants time to greet one another in the 	Slide 3

	<p>circle. Ask if we missed anyone who might have come into the session after we began the activity.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Thank the participants. Say... <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Study Circles is a process that helps to create a safe space for participants to engage in uncomfortable conversations. You will see throughout today that we have a number of activities to help create community. This was obviously just a quick way to say, "Hello." We will have many opportunities all day to get to know each other better. 6. Share the goal of the Study Circles Program. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Societally we need to stop debating and actually engage in productive dialogue with one another. 7. Show the Study Circles as a Way to Increase Parent Involvement: A Brief Overview slide and then share the information on slides 6-8. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. The Research b. The Research (Continued) c. The Research Finale 8. Explain the why behind Study Circles listed on the slide. 9. Share the outcomes for the three sessions listed on the slide. 10. Now open the large group discussion up to answer the question, What is the difference between a dialogue and a debate? 	<p>Slide 4</p> <p>Slide 5</p> <p>Slide 6</p> <p>Slide 7</p> <p>Slide 8</p> <p>Slide 9</p> <p>Slide 10</p> <p>Slide 11</p>
	<p style="text-align: center;">Dialogue vs Debate Review</p> <p>Directions/What to Say/Do:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review the Dialogue vs Debate information on the slide. Check for understanding among the participants. 	<p>Slide 12</p>
	<p style="text-align: center;">Community Agreements</p> <p>Facilitator Considerations:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. One facilitator leads the discussion while the other writes on chart paper. 	

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Write only the agreements that everyone agrees to (thumbs up). 3. Facilitator asks clarifying questions as needed. <p>Directions/What to Say/Do:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Explain what community agreements are. Say: A Community Agreement is a way of behaving that we all agree to. For example, some Study Circles agree to have one person talk at a time. So... think about what agreements you need from the other participants for you to feel safe to engage in safe, uncomfortable dialogue about race, culture, ethnicity, etc.? (And, think about what we need to make the sessions productive?) 2. Give everyone a minute to think about your question before getting suggestions. 3. Take one suggestion at a time. 4. Make sure to get consensus for each agreement before writing anything on the chart paper. Say: It's only a community agreement if everyone agrees. Ask each other for clarification or speak up if you disagree before we ask for group agreement. 5. After each agreement, I will ask for a thumbs up. If everyone agrees, we will put it on the chart paper. If not, we can talk about it some more. If we can't come to an agreement on someone's suggestion, we may end up putting it on the parking lot and come back to it later. <p>Facilitator Considerations:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ask for clarification or see if others can help explain or clarify a proposed community agreement if people are not clear about it. For example, after a participant said that everyone should participate and the discussion created some confusion about the meaning of the agreement, the facilitator asked if other participants could clarify. 2. Below are some sample agreements you can suggest if no one brings them up. Make sure you give these as a suggestion, and not a demand. Say: "In some of our 	Slide 13
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	<p>other Study Circles, participants suggested ... Speak for yourself. Don't try to speak for "your group." Use "I" statements. If you feel hurt by what someone says, say so, and say why. ("Ouch and Educate")</p> <p>It's okay to disagree. Confidentiality. We want people to keep our conversations in the room."</p> <p>3. Once all of the agreements been suggested and agreed to, read through them again and make sure everyone is okay. Then Say: It is up to everyone to hold everyone accountable to these agreements. Not just the facilitators.</p>	
	<p style="text-align: center;">Why We Avoid Talking About Race</p> <p>Directions/What to Say/Do:</p> <p>Say: Raise your hands if you have ever been in a conversation about race that didn't go well. Or, raise your hand if you have avoided a conversation because you were afraid it would go badly.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ask the question on the slide and allow participants time to think. Then open the discussion up within the group. 2. Show the slide, Why it is so hard to talk about race with people from other racial backgrounds. Say: Part of learning how to facilitate productive dialogue is to understand why so many conversations about race end badly. The Study Circles Program has been leading dialogues about race and culture for many years. We have seen patterns that get in the way of productive dialogue. We're going to go over a few of these patterns and then talk about some structures that help overcome these challenges. (Note: Go over and explain one at a time.) 3. Some people have been socialized to not talk about race or to be "colorblind." (Some people have been taught to not talk about race or other challenging issues with people who may be different from them. This is especially true among staff and students.) 4. We talk past each other rather than to one another; Personal vs Systemic Racism (There are different types of racism. One of the man reasons that conversations 	<p>Slide 14 Slide 15</p>

	<p>fail is because people are talking on different levels. We will look at these levels of racism later on in the training.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. We focus on intent rather than look at the impact. Good intentions don't always equal good outcomes. (Everyone makes mistakes when talking about racism and cultural proficiency. When we realize that someone else was hurt, we too often say "that wasn't what I intended" or "I didn't mean to harm you." But, the harm is still there and we need to move the conversation to understanding the impact of our words and actions.) 6. We are fearful of offending others. 7. Some feel a burden to have to educate others. (We are all in different places in our understanding of racism. In many conversations, people from the dominant group feel the need to lean on their colleagues and friends of color to explain racism and other topics related to race and racism. It is important to remember that this practice can be exhausting for the person(s) who always find themselves in the position to have to explain and educate other people. 8. Power dynamics—the "cost" of speaking up; reprimands or reprisals. (Conversations about racism with students, staff, and administrators can be hard because people at all levels have had bad experiences when they have spoken up in the past. They are afraid there will be consequences if they share their honest thoughts and feelings. 	
	<p style="text-align: center;">The Compass</p> <p>Directions/What to Say/Do: Say: Has anyone seen or used the Courageous Conversations Compass? We are going to review the quadrants of this equity tool.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Pull up the slide with the compass and ask everyone to get something to write with and a piece of paper. Ask them to draw the 4 quadrants or boxes of 	Slide 16

	<p>the compass. Give them a minute to do it before moving on.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Give the directions. Say: When we engage in conversations about race or other challenging issues, we have all kinds of reactions. The Compass helps us to organize these reactions so that we can deepen a conversation instead of being overwhelmed. 3. Explain the Compass. Say: You can see that there are 4 squares. Each square is a place where you can put in different reactions. The bottom left corner is where you put your <i>emotions</i>. Something may make you feel sad or happy, or angry. The top left is a scale. It's where you put your <i>moral</i> reaction to something. For example, sometimes we have a feeling that something is just wrong, or just right. The top right square is where you put in your questions or things you are thinking about. This is the <i>intellectual</i> quadrant. The bottom right square is where you put the things you want to do in reaction to what you just saw or what you are feeling. This is the <i>social</i> quadrant. 4. Check for understanding. Say: Does everyone understand? Are there any questions? 5. We are now going to share an image that illustrates some of the events that have impacted our community and country over the past months. Put up the slide. As you see the image, write down your reactions in all 4 quadrants of the compass. 6. After a couple minutes, ask several participants to share what they wrote. 7. Say: In closing, the Compass is a tool we use for helping us understand where we and others enter a conversation or dialogue. It is a way to engage in multiple perspectives. It is NOT about arguing with others in order to change their thinking. It is about respecting these perspectives, even those that we do not agree with or support! 	Slide 17
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	<p style="text-align: center;">Reach Out and Make a Friend</p> <p>Facilitator Considerations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If running behind in time, we will only do questions for Red, Green, and Yellow • During the report out, make sure to get different people to report out. Say: " Let's hear from someone who hasn't spoken yet this morning." Or, after one person speaks, ask that person's partner if they have anything to add. <p>Directions/What to Say/Do:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Put up the Reach Out and Make a Friend slide and hand out of the blank capture sheet. Say... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ We are going to do an activity that is going to help us begin to tell and hear our stories. ○ It's called Reach Out and Make a Friend 2. Have the participants find 4 partners. Say: When I give the signal, find a different partner for each colored ball. Both of you write the name of your partner in the center of the same color circle. Try to get partners who you don't know as well. Remember, if (co-facilitator) is my red, then I need to be (co-facilitator's) red. Once you have 4 partners, please sit down for more directions. 3. Explain the directions. Say: We will discuss a different question for each ball. We will read you the question and then model it for you. You will then go to your partner for that ball and have a discussion. At the end, we will ask a few people to share out with the whole group. Put up the Red Question Slide, read and model it. Model as personally as possible. Give participants 4 minutes to talk with their Red Partner. Remind the participants to share the time. 4. Give the signal. Repeat the same process with the Green, Purple and Yellow questions. After the last discussion, ask participants to return to their seats. 5. Say: The purpose of asking those specific questions is to get you to reflect on the diversity in your life. It's to get you think about where you get different 	<p>Slide 18 Handout with circles</p> <p>Slides 19-22</p> <p>Slide 23</p> <p>Slide 24</p>
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	<p>perspectives about race. If you are only talking about race with people who may have the same racial experiences as you, then it's possible you are missing some things. Study Circles is a way to help people get different perspectives and develop the skills to hear and understand the new perspectives.</p> <p>6. Thank everyone for participating and sharing. Say: Let's go through the questions and ask for volunteers to share their discussions. Get some responses for all 4 color questions.</p> <p>7. Say: Why did we have you engage in this Reach Out and Make as Friend structure/activity? What did you notice about how it was organized? What did the facilitators do to make it easier to participate? As we continue through the Study Circles training, we will get to know one another better and share more about ourselves.</p>	
	Break	Slide 25
	<p style="text-align: center;">Transition</p> <p>Directions/What to Say/Do: Read the slide as a way to wrap up the Reach Out and Make as Friend structure/activity and also transition to the next one.</p> <p>Say: Developing our understanding of other cultures or cultural awareness promotes more meaningful interactions with those around you. It helps us build our understanding, respect, and empathy for other people. We can celebrate our differences as well as our similarities. This makes us less likely to treat someone differently, just because they are from a different culture or ethnicity than you.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Making Our Own Cultural Timeline</p> <p>Outcomes/Rationale:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Participants start to become more vulnerable and deepen the relationship building. 2. This is important in order for participants to feel they can engage in more challenging dialogue later in the Study Circle. The process also helps participants 	Slide 26

	<p>understand how their past experiences impact their current beliefs about race and achievement.</p> <p>Facilitator Considerations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the groups are too big to get this done in 55-60 minutes, each Study Circle can split into 2 groups. • Prepare a roll of paper or have 3 chart papers taped together. Draw a timeline on it from 1940 to 2021. Leave a lot more space for 2000 to 2021 than the rest of the decades. • Model a response to each and model to show vulnerability. And, also model how to share deeply AND succinctly so people understand that they don't have 5 minutes to talk. • It's okay to model positive stories. • Remind participants that this activity is not a dialogue. We won't be responding to or asking questions of people's stories. <p>Directions/What to Say/Do:</p> <p>1. Say:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. This next activity will help us to continue learning about each other. It builds on the Reach Out and Make a Friend activity we just did. The goals are to help us share our personal stories and understand how we got to where we are today. 2. We call this the cultural timeline. You can see that there is an actual timeline on wall (or table). 3. We (co-facilitators) are going to give you the directions and then model responses to the questions. We will then give you time to do the activity yourself. 4. We want you to think about memorable events or turning points in your life. Think about them in the following categories: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An important national or global event (for example: the 9/11, war breaking 	<p>Slide 27</p> <p>Slide 28</p> <p>Slide 29</p> <p>Slide 30</p> <p>Slide 31</p> <p>Slide 32</p>
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	<p>out in your country of origin)? For some people, it's an event you lived through. For others, it is an event that happened before you were born.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An important personal event (for example: parents divorcing or moving to a new place, going to a new school, illness, or an accomplishment). • Think about an event or experience that impacted the way you think about race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, politics, and culture. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Model a response for each category. Make it as personal/vulnerable as possible, <i>but don't talk too long</i>. 3. Have everyone write on the actual timeline. Say: Write 1 event for <i>each</i> category on the timeline. When we come back, we will ask everyone to choose only 1 of their events to share with the large group. You'll get to pick. (Several people can be up at the timeline at the same time.) 4. Once everyone is done, bring the timeline into the center of the circle. Say: As you can see, we have put the timeline in the circle. We would like everyone to share one event. You get to choose. We'd like you to talk about the event AND how it impacted you. Remember, the goal is for this group to learn more about each other. This is the time to take some risks. We won't go in any order, share when you are ready. <i>Also, this part is not a dialogue. We won't be responding to or asking questions of people's stories.</i> 5. Allow as much time as needed for everyone to share 1 event. 6. Break for lunch and finish the activity when participants return. 7. LUNCH BREAK 8. Welcome them back after they return from lunch. Put up the slide and share the quote. "Building trusting relationships takes time, practice, and patience. The 	<p>Slide 33</p> <p>Slide 34</p> <p>Slide 35</p> <p>Slide 36</p> <p>Slide 37</p> <p>Slide 38</p> <p>Slide 39</p>
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	<p>rewards are endless!" Say: We are going to continue to share our stories with each other so everyone's voice can be heard.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. Put up the timeline slide again. 10. When finished, put up the next slide about vulnerability. Debrief the process as participants. Say: Thank you for sharing so deeply. What did you get out of this activity or hearing each other's stories? Why did we do this activity? How do you think this activity will help participants to talk about challenging issues? 11. Transition. Say: Remember our community agreement(s) around confidentiality. Remind them not to share someone's story when they meet up with their friends/colleagues. <p style="text-align: center;">Lies and the Truth</p> <p>Directions/What to Say/Do:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Say: This next activity is about the lies and stereotypes that you hear in your life. Before we do this activity, I want to show you this diversity wheel slide. We are all parts of lots of different groups and identities. You can probably see yourself in different parts of this wheel. For this activity, we want you to think of the group(s) you strongly identify with and write the group(s) on the top of the white paper. For example, I wrote _____. 2. Give everyone 2 pieces of blank paper. 3. Put up the My Identity slide. Say: For this activity, we want you to think of the group you most identify with and write the group on the top of the white paper. You can define yourself however you feel, using one or more of the parts of the diversity wheel. For example, you can say your race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or combination of some. 4. Each facilitator should model the response by putting up their white paper with their group(s) on the top. 5. Give participants a minute to write their identity. (Note: You may need to help people.) Then Say: Now, think about the lies or stereotypes you have heard 	
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	<p>about your group. Write the lies large on the paper so it can be seen. For example, I wrote that</p> <p>_____</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Put up the next slide. Have everyone stand up in a circle and hold up their paper with the “Lie” side facing the rest of the group and keep it up for a minute or two. Tell people to look around. 7. Then go around the circle and have everyone hold their sign and read their group and the lies out loud. 8. After everyone has gone around the circle, Debrief. (Note: Don’t spend too much time on this. Use some of these questions: Was it uncomfortable for anyone to either write and/or talk about the lies you have heard about your group. Was it uncomfortable to hear what other people said? Why? What did you notice about the lies? Were there any patterns? What were the differences between groups? Was anyone surprised by the things you heard? If it applies, ask Why do you think some people had race as their label and some didn’t? 9. Transition to hearing the truths. Put up the “Truth” slide. Give the direction and have each facilitator model their response. Say: Use a new sheet of paper and write the truth about you. For example, the truth about me is I am_____. Give participants time to accomplish this. 10. Then have everyone stand in a circle and hold up their paper with the “Truth” facing the rest of the group. Keep it up for a minute or two. Tell people to look around the circle. Hold the “Truth” paper up and read what you wrote as the truth. 11. Debrief this part. Say: What did you notice this time? Were there patterns this time? What were those patterns? What was it like to read/hear what other people wrote about their group(s)? What was it like to write the lies about your own group(s)? What did you notice about the lies? What patterns did you see? Was anyone surprised by the things that you read/heard? 12. Transition to the Break. 	
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	<p>to begin the dialogue. Read from the slide: <i>Everyone has identities and how we perceive our various roles in society in relation to others. Whether it is through social position, language, culture, ethnicity, interests, achievements, or beliefs, we derive a sense of pride, self-worth, and consistency from our various social identities.</i> Possible questions to ask: What do you think about this statement? Do people around you “see” you the same or different from how you “see” yourself? What needs to happen in our school/school community for people to feel safe to be who they are?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Say: Are there any questions before we get started? 5. Say: I (one of the 2 facilitators) will be in the circle facilitating the discussion/dialogue. My colleague will take the role of the 2nd facilitator. We need 6 volunteers to be in the inside circle. Also, we need to have a mix of students and adults in this inside circle. Everyone else will sit in the outside circle and follow the discussion as you may want to take the empty seat OR you may be tapped in by the 2nd facilitator. Remember, this is an opportunity to practice your skills. It is NOT about being perfect. We are all learning and growing together. Any questions? 6. The fishbowl dialogue should be at least 15-20 minutes long. 7. Say: Thank you. That concludes our dialogue. Take a deep breath and let’s thank everyone for their participation! Now, let’s debrief using these prompts: I noticed...I wonder...I still have questions about... Allow participants time to share some of their thoughts. 	Slide 44
	<p style="text-align: center;">Pulling It All Together</p> <p>Say: We want you to respond to these questions.</p> <p>Exit Card Day #1:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is the difference between a dialogue and a debate? 2. What are community agreements? 3. Give 2 examples of why we avoid talking about race. 	Slide 45 Exit Card Day #1

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. What structures and processes have the facilitators put into place to help participants feel safe to engage in uncomfortable conversations? 5. What do the facilitators do to make the conversations go deeper instead of staying on the surface level? 6. How are you feeling about your own facilitation skills at this point? 	
	<p style="text-align: center;">Homework</p> <p>Say: Before our next session it is important that you read and review these handouts. Briefly go over them and then ask, Are there any questions? Please bring them with you the next time as we will be using them.</p>	<p>Slide 46 Handouts</p>
	<p style="text-align: center;">Thank You</p> <p>Say: On an index card, write a quick take away or appreciation from today's session. We will collect these. (Note: As time allows) Let's stand and go around the circle and share one take away or one appreciation from today's session. Then, thank everyone for their attention and participation and say that we will see everyone at the next session!</p> <p style="text-align: center;">References</p> <p>Epstein, J. L, Sanders, M. G., Simon, B. S., Salinas, K. C, Jansorn, N. R., & Van Voorhis, F. L. (2009). <i>School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action</i>. Corwin Press.</p> <p>Everyday Democracy Dialogue-to-Change (2021). https://www.everyday-democracy.org/dialogue-to-change</p> <p>Povey, J., Campbell, A.K., Willis, L.D., Haynes, M., Western, M., Bennett, S., Antrobus, E., & Pedde, C. (2016). Engaging parents in schools and building parent-school partnerships: The role of school and parent organization leadership. <i>International Journal of Educational Research</i>, 79, 128-141.</p> <p>Singleton, G. (2014). <i>Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools</i>, (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.</p> <p>The National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (2021). https://www.NCDD.org/rc/</p> <p>The National Equity Project (2021). https://www.nationalequityproject.org/</p>	<p>Slide 47</p> <p>Extra Card for a take-away important for the participant</p>

Training Plan Day 2

Time & Facilitators	Content/Directions	PowerPoint & Materials
7:30 am	<p style="text-align: center;">Facilitators Arrive*</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Day Two</p> <p><i>*NOTE: If possible, the room set-up of tables and materials should be done the afternoon before the session.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Log into the computer in the room(s) and check the following: slides, sound, projector/Promethean, and videos. • Put on a music playlist (Pandora or Spotify) to create a welcoming atmosphere. • Write down the WIFI information on chart paper for participants to access. 	
8:00-8:30 am	<p style="text-align: center;">Participants Arrive</p> <p>Directions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have one of the facilitators stand at the door to enthusiastically welcome participants and make sure people sign-in and create their name tag. 2. Direct participants to sit in one of the seats set up in the semi-circle. 3. Share that the first activity is on the slide being projected. It asks participants to reflect on what their minds are full of these days and what they are doing for their own self-care and mindfulness. 	Slide 48-49
TBD	<p style="text-align: center;">Welcome and Overview</p> <p>Outcomes/Rationale:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To welcome everyone in an engaging way. • To set the context for what we are doing and why. <p>Facilitator Considerations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitators need to be energetic and warm to set the right mood for a full day of training. <p>Directions/What to Say/Do:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Keep up the activator slide and ask for some responses to the questions, one at a time. 	Slide 49

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Facilitators should also contribute to the discussion to model being part of the group. 3. Share the information on the next slide which is a definition of mindfulness. Say: Mindfulness: The ability to be fully present in the moment, aware of where we are and what we're doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what's going on around us. 4. Say: We are focusing on self-care and mindfulness because practicing it can help you find the roots behind stress, anxiety, or other negative feelings. By recognizing these emotions and feelings for what they are and accepting them, you can better overcome psychological distress. Anyone, from children to adults, can find a greater peace of mind through mindfulness techniques. So, do your best to let go of all of the many thoughts that are keeping your brain and mind full and focus and engage in our work together today! 5. Share out a couple of the take aways or appreciations from day one on slide. 	<p>Slide 50</p> <p>Slide 51</p>
	<p style="text-align: center;">Community Agreements</p> <p>Directions/What to Say/Do:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Say: Remember a Community Agreement is a way of behaving that we all agree to. Review the Community Agreements agreed to on day one from the slide. 	Slide 52
	<p style="text-align: center;">Goal of the Study Circle</p> <p>Directions/What to Say/Do:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Again, share the goal of the Study Circles Program. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Societally we need to stop debating issues and engage in productive dialogue/discussion with one another to share multiple perspectives and get to know one another better. 	Slide 53
	<p style="text-align: center;">Review of Day One</p> <p>Directions/What to Say/Do:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share a review of the content from day one using the slide images. 	Slide 54
	<p style="text-align: center;">Dialogue vs Debate Review</p> <p>Directions/What to Say/Do:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review the Dialogue vs Debate information on the slide. Check for understanding among the participants. 	Slide 55

	<p style="text-align: center;">The Compass</p> <p>Directions/What to Say/Do:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pull up the slide with the Compass and very quickly review the 4 quadrants. Have the participants look at their Compass handout that they reviewed as part of their homework as the facilitator reviews the information. 	<p>Slide 56 Handout</p>
	<p style="text-align: center;">Homework</p> <p>Directions/What to Say/Do:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Say: You read through the Sample Facilitator Questions handout for homework. These open-ended questions are helpful because they require more than a simple “yes” or “no” response. This is certainly not an all-inclusive list but it should help as you begin to facilitate dialogues. Add to it as you develop some of your own questions. Keep it with you and always feel free to use it! Check for understanding: Are there any questions? 	<p>Slide 57 Handout</p>
	<p style="text-align: center;">Homework/Knowing Yourself Capture Sheet</p> <p>Directions/What to Say/Do:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Put up the Partner Switch Activity slide. Say: Part of your homework was to reflect on your knowledge and skills using the Knowing Yourself Capture Sheet handouts (the checklist and the 3 questions that followed.) Now, we want you to follow the directions that you see on the slide. When you hear the signal, get up, find a partner, and share something from your Knowing Yourself Capture Sheet. Change partners when you hear the signal again. Return to your seat when you are given the final signal. • Say: Let’s look at the next slide and the question posed on it. Why is it important to know yourself as you move through this process of learning how to facilitate Study Circles? Have some participants respond to the question posed. 	<p>Slide 58 Handouts</p> <p>Slide 59</p>
	<p style="text-align: center;">Does Skin Color Matter? Survey</p> <p>Directions? What to Say/Do:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Pull up the slide with the Does Skin Color Matter? Survey on it. Distribute the survey handout. Say: Please follow along as I go through the directions that you see 	<p>Slide 60 Handout</p>

	<p>on the handout. I will answer questions after I have explained them to you.</p> <p>2. Check for understanding. Say: Are there any questions?</p> <p>Say: So, let's be mindful of everyone's learning preferences and silently take the survey. When you finish, please remain quiet so others can finish as well. Give everyone time to complete. Thanks!</p> <p>3. When it looks like everyone is done, share the next slide. Distribute blank pieces of paper and read the directions on the slide. Directions: On a piece of paper, write down the number of TRUE responses you had. Make the number large enough to read. When signaled, get up and line yourselves up by the numbers around the room, highest to lowest.</p> <p>4. Begin with the highest number and have participants hold up their paper with the number on it and read the number on their paper out loud so everyone can hear. Once everyone has shared, ask participants to look around the room and think about what they see and have heard.</p> <p>5. Debrief. Read the questions from the slide. What do you notice? What patterns do you see? What do you wonder?</p> <p>6. Transition to Break.</p>	<p>Slide 61 Blank piece of paper</p> <p>Slide 62</p>
	BREAK	Slide 63
	<p style="text-align: center;">Active Listening Partner A and Partner B</p> <p>Directions/What to Say/Do:</p> <p>1. Pull up the slide with Active Listening on it. Say: Active listening helps in recognizing other peoples' perspectives and feelings and helps us appreciate them. This not only helps in resolving conflicts but also helps foster a culture of respect. It is important to listen to understand others' perspectives before formulating a response.</p> <p>2. Say: We are going to continue our dialogue about the survey activity by using a Partner A and Partner B</p>	<p>Slide 64</p> <p>Slide 65</p>

	<p>listening protocol or tool. Please get up and find a partner in the room. Decide who will be A and who will be B. (Note: If there is an odd number of people in the room, one of the facilitators will partner with that person who does not have someone with whom to talk.)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Review the directions on slide 65 and keep that slide up. Say: Are there any questions? Let's begin. 4. When the time is up, pull the group back together. Then share slide 66 where the partners switch roles. Engage in the activity again. Give signal for the activity to end and for people to return to their seats. 5. Say: Thank you for engaging in this listening activity. Quickly, how did it feel to engage in conversation this way? Was it comfortable or uncomfortable and why? 6. Transition to lunch. 	Slide 66
	Lunch	Slide 67
	<p style="text-align: center;">Where the Tide Flows</p> <p>Directions/What to Say/Do:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Put up Where the Tide Flows slide and make sure there are no empty chairs. Also, be sure to remove one chair (the one that the facilitator was seated on is fine.) 2. Give the directions standing up in the middle of the circle. Say: We are going to begin this afternoon with something silly to continue to create the environment that we need. We are going to play a game called Where the Tide Flows. The person in the middle says a statement about something that applies to them. For example, the tide flows for anyone who likes country music. (Note: Other examples could be "eats Thai food, plays basketball, or speaks more than one language.") Anyone in the circle who likes country music has to get up and find a new seat. 3. You cannot go to the seat next to you. 4. The person in the middle also looks for a seat. But, remember, I took a seat out, so there is one more person than seats. The person who doesn't find a seat 	Slide 68

	<p>will be in the middle and make a new “where the tide flows” statement.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Check for understanding. Are there any questions before we start? Ok, Let’s begin. I will do the first one. 6. Continue for several examples. 7. Debrief. Say: So, let’s talk about why we did this activity. Thoughts? 	
	<p style="text-align: center;">Fishbowl Dialogue</p> <p>Directions/What to Say/Do:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Say: You are now going to have another opportunity to take what you have been seeing, hearing, and learning today and apply it in a fishbowl dialogue. Let’s look at the directions for the activity together and we will answer any questions that you might have. These directions are different from yesterday’s so please follow along. Read the directions from the slide: 2. The inner circle will include 6 participants, 2 co-facilitators, and an empty seat. 3. The 2 co-facilitators will work together to engage participants in the dialogue. 4. The inner circle will engage in a facilitated dialogue about a specific topic. The rest of the participants will be on the outside observing and listening to the discussion. 5. If a participant on the outside wants to join the conversation or respond to what someone said, they can move into the empty seat. 6. Check for understanding. Say: Are there any questions? 7. Say: Now we are going to look at the prompt of the fishbowl dialogue and some sample questions to use to begin the dialogue. Read from the slide: <i>“In this society, people with light skin have advantages-or privilege-over people whose skin is darker. This advantage is often invisible and people who benefit from it often do not see it. Some people refer to this as White Privilege.”</i> 8. Say: Remember to use any of the tools that we have shared with you. Are there any questions before we get started? I will put the slide with the discussion topic back up. 	<p>Slide 69</p> <p>Slide 70</p> <p>Slide 71</p> <p>Slide 72</p>

	<p>9. Say: We need 2 co-facilitators (one adult and one student) and 6 volunteers to be in the inside circle. Also, we need to have a mix of students and adults in this inside circle. Everyone else will sit in the outside circle and follow the discussion as you may want to take the empty seat at any time. Remember, this is an opportunity to practice your skills. It is NOT about being perfect. We are all learning and growing together. Any questions? I will put the prompt slide back up.</p> <p>10. The fishbowl dialogue should be at least 15-20 minutes long.</p> <p>11. Say: Thank you. That concludes our dialogue. Take a deep breath and let's thank everyone for their participation! Now, let's debrief in this order: Co-facilitators, Dialogue participants, Observers, The process itself, and Other.</p>	
	<p style="text-align: center;">Levels of Racism</p> <p>Directions/What to Say/Do:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Put up slide. Say: Throughout our sessions, we have been talking about racism and how it impedes our equity work and dialogues. We have found that everyone has a different understanding of what racism means. We are going to look at four levels of racism to help us be more specific about the challenges we face. The first two levels are referred to as micro-levels of racism. 2. Say: The first level is interpersonal Racism. This is the level that most people talk about as it's easy to identify. We saw with the people that stormed the capitol with Confederate flags, Nazi symbols and yelled the N-word at Black police officers. Some schools in the nation have had racist and anti-Semitic language and symbols written on walls or posted on social media. It's important for us to address these issues. However, only focusing on the interpersonal level is insufficient for addressing the issues our school districts and nation face. 3. Say: The next level of racism is internalized Racism. It lies within individuals and groups. It is a multi-generational process of dehumanization that can 	Slide 73

	<p>manifest as inferiority within people of color and as superiority within white people. An example of this is when we believe that straight hair is the standard of beauty.</p> <p>4. Say: The remaining two levels are considered macro-levels of racism. The next level is institutional Racism. This level occurs within institutions. It is the discriminatory treatment, unfair policies and practices, and inequitable opportunities and impacts, that are based on race. Sometimes these are intentional and sometimes they're not. But regardless of intention, the impact is inequitable. An example that has come up in this training is that curriculum often makes white European culture the norm or standard. People of color are only shown negatively or in their interactions with Whites or Europeans.</p> <p>5. Say: The final level is structural racism. It is the combination of all our history with current policies and practices across segments of our society. The disproportionate levels of Black and Latino residents getting sick and dying of Covid-19 is a clear example of how our economic, housing and health care systems all work together to have the results that we get.</p>	
	<p style="text-align: center;">Pulling It All Together</p> <p>Say: We want you to respond to these questions.</p> <p>Exit Card Day #2:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • List 2 Sample Facilitator Questions that resonated with you. • What is one strategy that helps in resolving conflicts but also helps foster a culture of respect? • What structures and processes have the facilitators put into place to help participants feel safe to engage in uncomfortable conversations? • What do the facilitators do to make the conversations go deeper instead of staying on the surface level? • How are you feeling about your own facilitation skills at this point? 	<p>Slide 74 Exit Card Day #2</p>

	<p style="text-align: center;">Homework</p> <p>Say: Before our next session it is important that you read and review these handouts. Briefly go over them and then ask, Are there any questions? Please bring them with you the next time as we will be using them.</p>	Slide 75 Handouts
	<p style="text-align: center;">Thank You</p> <p>Say: Take a minute to write an appreciation or a take aways from today's session on an index card. We will collect these. Let's again stand up and go around the circle and share one take away or one appreciation from today's session. Then, thank everyone for their attention and participation and say that we will see everyone at the next session!</p> <p style="text-align: center;">References</p> <p>Everyday Democracy Dialogue-to-Change (2021). https://www.everyday-democracy.org/dialogue-to-change</p> <p>Singleton, G. (2014). Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools, (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.</p> <p>The National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (2021). https://www.NCDD.org/rc/</p> <p>The National Equity Project (2021). https://www.nationalequityproject.org/</p>	Slide 76 Exit Card for a take-away important for the participant

Training Plan Day 3

Time & Facilitators	Content/Directions	PowerPoint & Materials
7:30 am	<p style="text-align: center;">Facilitators Arrive*</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Day Three</p> <p><i>*NOTE: If possible, the room set-up of tables and materials should be done the afternoon before the session.</i></p>	

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Log into the computer in the room(s) and check the following: slides, sound, projector/Promethean, and videos. 2. Put on a music playlist (Pandora or Spotify) to create a welcoming atmosphere. 3. Write down the WIFI information on chart paper for participants to access. 	
8:00-8:30 am	<p style="text-align: center;">Participants Arrive</p> <p>Directions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have one of the facilitators stand at the door to enthusiastically welcome participants and make sure people sign-in and create their name tag. 2. Direct participants to sit in one of the seats set up in the semi-circle. 3. Share that the first activity is on the slide being projected. It asks participants to complete the sentence starters on the slide. 	Slide 77-78
TBD	<p style="text-align: center;">Welcome and Overview</p> <p>Outcomes/Rationale:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To welcome everyone in an engaging way. ● To set the context for what we are doing and why. <p>Facilitator Considerations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Facilitators need to be energetic and warm to set the right mood for a full day of training. <p>Directions/What to Say/Do:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Keep up the activator slide and ask for some responses to the statements, one at a time. 2. Facilitators should also contribute to the discussion to model being part of the group. 	<p>Slide 78</p> <p>Slide 79</p>

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Share the information on the next slide which talks about why we begin with an activator. 4. Share out a couple of the take aways or appreciations from day one on slide. 	Slide 80
	<p style="text-align: center;">Community Agreements</p> <p>Directions/What to Say/Do:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Say: Remember a Community Agreement is a way of behaving that we all agree to. Review the Community Agreements agreed to on day one from the slide. 	Slide 81
	<p style="text-align: center;">Goal of the Study Circle</p> <p>Directions/What to Say/Do:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Again, share the goal of the Study Circles Program. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Say: Societally we need to stop debating issues and engage in productive dialogue/discussion with one another to share multiple perspectives and get to know one another better. 	Slide 82
	<p style="text-align: center;">Review of Day Two</p> <p>Directions/What to Say/Do:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share a review of the content from day two using the slide images. 	Slide 83
	<p style="text-align: center;">Dialogue vs Debate Review</p> <p>Directions/What to Say/Do:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Remind participants that we will continue to engage in dialogue and not debate. Check for understanding among the participants. 	Slide 84
	<p style="text-align: center;">The Compass</p> <p>Directions/What to Say/Do:</p> <p>Pull up the slide with the Compass and very quickly remind participants that there are the 4 quadrants. Remind the participants look at their Compass handout at any time in the</p>	Slide 85 Handout

	session.	
	<p style="text-align: center;">Homework</p> <p>Directions/What to Say/Do:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Say: You read through the Suggestions for Handling Challenging Situations handout for homework. These are some of the questions and situations that participants have raised over the years. We are providing this to you as a sample of some ways to tackle these situations if they arise. This is certainly not an all-inclusive list but it should help as you begin to facilitate dialogues. Add to it as you develop some of your own challenges and how you handled them. Keep it with you and always feel free to use it! Check for understanding. Say: Are there any questions? Say: So, take a couple of minutes and turn to a person next to you and engage in some partner talk. Which of these situations might be challenging for you? Which of them do you feel confident that you could handle it well? Engaging in this talk time is another way for you to review and reflect on these situations. 	<p>Slide 86 Handout</p> <p>Slide 87</p>
	<p style="text-align: center;">Important and Sometimes Difficult Conversations</p> <p>Directions/What to Say/Do:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Put up the slide. Say: We have been talking over the sessions about engaging in difficult conversations. We know that there are many reasons why it is hard for people to do this. Here we are reinforcing some of those reasons. We know that our society still struggles to honestly confront and discuss the complex issues that contribute to the predictability of students' academic success by race, culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language or disability. The truth of the matter is we must not remain silent or be silenced. We must provide a "safe space" for shared dialogue to be our best selves and to see the best selves in others. 	<p>Slide 88</p>

	<p>4. Hopefully, during these Study Circles sessions, you have seen and participated in well-established practices and procedures, that can help us to engage in dialogue and respectful listening about challenging topics.</p>	
	<p style="text-align: center;">Agenda</p> <p>Directions? What to Say/Do:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Pull up the slide with the agenda on it. Say: Please follow along as I go through the directions for what you will be doing for a good portion of the day. You may want to have your Planning for Co-facilitation of a Dialogue and Process Observer handouts that you reviewed for homework out as we will be referring to them. I will answer questions after I have explained the agenda. Review the agenda slowly. 2. Check for understanding. Say: Are there any questions? 3. Pull up the next slide. Say: Let's look more closely at the two handouts you will use to plan and engage in a dialogue. Explain both the planning sheet and the process observer sheet. 4. Check for understanding. Say: Are there any questions? Then share that we will both be circulating among the three groups as you engage in planning for your dialogue. We will tell each of you which group- Scenario A, B, or C – you are in. Find a space in the room with the others in your group to meet, talk, and plan together. Remember, you will have 30 minutes to plan. 5. Distribute the scenario handouts to the groups. 6. Transition to a brief break after 30 minutes 	<p>Slide 89 Handouts</p> <p>Slide 90</p>
	BREAK	Slide 91
	Groups Dialogue	
	Directions/What to Say/Do:	

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Say we begin with the first dialogue, are there any additional questions for the good of the group? 2. Say: We can begin with Scenario A group unless another group wants to go first. Put up the appropriate slide. Tell the co-facilitators that we can assist with keeping time if they wish. Share that they may want to have a 5 minute to go warning and then another 2 minute one. 3. When ready, put up the correct slide and have them begin the dialogue. End it after 25 minutes. Ask everyone to give a round of applause to the group who presented. 4. Say: We are now going to move through our dialogue debriefing process. Put up the slide. We will debrief in the following order: co-facilitators, dialogue participants, observers, The process itself and any other comments. Remind them that this is the same process we used in day 2. 5. When ready, put up the correct slide and begin the second dialogue. End it after 25 minutes. Ask everyone to give a round of applause to the group who presented. 6. Say: We will debrief the same way we did earlier. Put up appropriate slide for debriefing process. 7. Transition to lunch. 	<p>Slide 92</p> <p>Slide 93 (95 or 99 if they chose a different order)</p> <p>Slide 94 (95 or 100 depending on order of presentations)</p> <p>Slide 95</p> <p>See above depending on order.</p> <p>96</p>
	Lunch	Slide 97
	<p style="text-align: center;">Groups Dialogue (Continued)</p> <p>Directions/What to Say/Do:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Say: Welcome back. Before we begin, are there any questions? 2. When ready, put up the correct slide and begin the third dialogue. End it after 25 minutes. Ask everyone to give a round of applause to the group who presented. 	<p>Slide 98</p> <p>(Slide Scenario 99)</p> <p>Slide 100</p>

	<p>3. Say: We will debrief the same way we did earlier. Put up appropriate slide for debriefing process.</p> <p>4. Say: This is your opportunity to ask any additional questions, make comments, etc. Please take a minute or two and turn to the person next to you to reflect first. Then we will open the discussion to the entire group.</p> <p>5. Engage in the large group discussion.</p>	Final Thoughts Slide 101
	<p>Say: We want you to respond to these questions.</p> <p>Exit Card Day #3:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the difference between a dialogue and a debate? • What are community agreements? • Give 2 examples of why we avoid talking about race. • List 2 Sample Facilitator Questions that resonated with you. • What is one strategy that helps in resolving conflicts but also helps foster a culture of respect? • What structures and processes have the facilitators put into place to help participants feel safe to engage in uncomfortable conversations? • What do the facilitators do to make the conversations go deeper instead of staying on the surface level? • How are you feeling about your own facilitation skills at this point? 	Slide 102 Exit Card Day #3
	<p style="text-align: center;">Planning</p> <p>Directions/What to Say/Do:</p> <p>Say: Now this is your time to engage in deeper conversation with the members of your team. Put up the slide. This is your planning time to discuss any positives and possible barriers that exist in the school and school community that may facilitate or impact engaging in Study Circles. Please remember to use any of the resources that we have given you during the</p>	Slide 103

	Study Circle. We will be here to answer any questions you may have.	
	Study Circles 3.0: Post Survey Participants take the Post Survey.	Slide 104
	Reference Slide	Slide 105
	<p style="text-align: center;">Thank You</p> <p>Say: Take a minute to write an appreciation or a take-aways from today's session on an index card. We will collect these. Let's stand up for a final time and go around the circle and share one take away or one appreciation from today's session. Then, thank everyone for their attention and participation!</p> <p style="text-align: center;">References</p> <p>Everyday Democracy Dialogue-to-Change (2021). https://www.everyday-democracy.org/dialogue-to-change</p> <p>Singleton, G. (2014). Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools, (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.</p> <p>The National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (2021). https://www.NCDD.org/rc/</p> <p>The National Equity Project (2021). https://www.nationalequityproject.org/</p>	<p>Slide 106</p> <p>Exit Card for a take-away important for the participant</p>

Study Circle 3.0: Pre-Survey

I am comfortable having conversations with others related to race	Y	N
I am comfortable having conversations with others related to culture	Y	N
I am comfortable having conversations with others related to ethnicity	Y	N
I know how to build relationship with others		
I know how to build trust with others	Y	N
I am able to identify structural challenges and barriers that effect individuals	Y	N

Please provide an example:

I know the difference between dialogue and debate	Y	N
---	---	---

Explain the difference:

I know how to manage group dynamics by reducing conflict	Y	N
--	---	---

Additional comments:

Study Circle 3.0: Post Survey

I am comfortable having conversations with others related to race	Y	N
I am comfortable having conversations with others related to culture	Y	N
I am comfortable having conversations with others related to ethnicity	Y	N
I know how to build relationship with others		
I know how to build trust with others	Y	N
I am able to identify structural challenges and barriers that effect individuals	Y	N

As a result of the 3 days of training please provide 2 examples:

I know the difference between dialogue and debate	Y	N
---	---	---

As a result of the 3 days of training, please explain the difference:

I know how to manage group dynamics by reducing conflict	Y	N
--	---	---

As a result of the 3 days of training please provide an example:

Additional comments:

Exit Card Day #1:

- What is the difference between a dialogue and a debate?
- What are community agreements?
- Give 2 examples of why we avoid talking about race.
- What structures and processes have the facilitators put into place to help participants feel safe to engage in uncomfortable conversations?
- What do the facilitators do to make the conversations go deeper instead of staying on the surface level?
- How are you feeling about your own facilitation skills at this point?

Exit Card Day #2:


- List 2 Sample Facilitator Questions that resonated with you.
- What is one strategy that helps in resolving conflicts but also helps foster a culture of respect?
- What structures and processes have the facilitators put into place to help participants feel safe to engage in uncomfortable conversations?
- What do the facilitators do to make the conversations go deeper instead of staying on the surface level?
- How are you feeling about your own facilitation skills at this point?

Exit Card Day #3:

- What is the difference between a dialogue and a debate?
- What are community agreements?
- Give 2 examples of why we avoid talking about race.
- List 2 Sample Facilitator Questions that resonated with you.
- What is one strategy that helps in resolving conflicts but also helps foster a culture of respect?
- What structures and processes have the facilitators put into place to help participants feel safe to engage in uncomfortable conversations?
- What do the facilitators do to make the conversations go deeper instead of staying on the surface level?
- How are you feeling about your own facilitation skills at this point?

Study Circles Training PPT

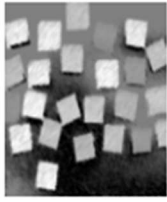

Study Circles
Day 1
Take a Study Circles 3.0
Pre Survey



Welcome! Once settled, think about...

What is the difference between a *dialogue* and a *debate*?

Please write your responses on a sticky note and then post it on the chart paper.

Hello
 my name is

Name
 Position
 Why I am participating in Study Circles...

Goal of the Study Circles Program

The Study Circles Program engages staff, students, parents and district leaders in facilitated dialogue to develop the beliefs, knowledge, skills, and structures necessary to ensure that students' academic success is not predictable by race, culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language or disability.

Study Circles as a Way to Increase Parent Involvement

A Brief Overview

The Research


- The "why" of Study Circles.
- A recent study... "without learning and understanding of racial differences and our racial experiences, we're never going to be successful. And that's been proven over and over and over again!"
- In an Australian study by Povey et al., (2016) certain considerations of leadership within school climate "such as a lack of communication between parents and teachers and a lack of trust in the responsiveness of the school to parent concerns" (p.136) were considered to reduce parent involvement by twenty-five percent, and school leadership was considered impactful.

The Research (cont'd)

- The conditions created by the structures of the Study Circles program provided the foundation for the conversations to be open and honest and for participants to speak truthfully.
- The responses from all participants emphasized the power of the conversation, the level of participant engagement, and importance of culture and translation.
- According to Epstein et al., (2009) schools must consider the areas of communication, decision-making, and collaboration with the community to increase the involvement of parents with their children and their academics.

The Research Finale'

- The Study Circles program provides opportunities for meaningful relationship building among participants, opportunities for all voices to be heard through meaningful dialogue, not debate, and values the culture and experiences that participants bring with them to the circle.
- The framework of the study focuses on the absence of parent involvement and the need for a suite of strategies for outreach to the increased number of diverse families whose children attend the school.



- Different views around race, culture, sexual orientation, gender identity, politics, etc. are impacting relationships, trust, safety, and a sense of community in many of our school district's schools.
- In order to authentically connect and engage with one another, we must build relationships and deepen trust with one another.
- All voices are valued and necessary to address the challenges that exist in our schools.
- Action planning enhances collaboration and ensures sustainability of the work.

By the end of the three sessions, participants will be able to:

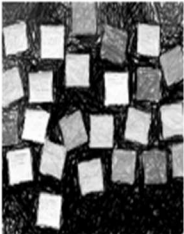
- Create the conditions for safe and productive dialogue in an environment in which racial, cultural, ethnic, etc. issues are discussed openly and honestly
- Build relationships and trust with one another
- Identify and address the structural challenges and barriers that marginalize individuals
- Examine the structures, processes, and strategies required for productive dialogue to occur
- Observe and manage group dynamics



Let's discuss...

What is the difference between a *dialogue* and a *debate*?

Why is it important for us to understand the differences between the two?



Dialogue vs. Debate Review

Dialogue	Debate
• About learning	• About winning
• Exploring common good	• Assumes one right answer
• Collaborative	• Prove others wrong
• Listens & acknowledges others' points	• Finds flaws/weaknesses in others' points
• Sees value in others' positions	• Defend own views
• Open-minded	• Closed-minded
• Seeks new options	• Seeks closure

Community Agreements

We create and agree to these together to ensure that our work is productive.

What do you need from the other participants to engage in a safe, uncomfortable dialogue about race, culture, ethnicity, etc.?



The image shows a piece of paper with handwritten text: "COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS", "PARTICIPATE", "LIBERATED ZONE", "STAY THE LEANING EDGE", "STAY IN THE DISCUSSION", "NO...". Below the paper is a photograph of several people with their hands raised in a meeting.


Why do we avoid talking about race with people from other racial backgrounds?




The image features a large black circle with a diagonal slash over a silhouette of three people. Below it is a smaller sign with the word "AVOID!" written in bold, capital letters.

Why it is so hard to talk about race with people from other racial backgrounds.

- Some people have been socialized to not talk about race or to be "colorblind"
- We talk past each other rather than to one another
 - Personal vs. Systemic
- We focus on intent rather than look at the impact
 - Good intentions don't always equal good outcomes
- We are fearful of offending others
- Some feel a burden to have to educate others
- Power dynamics – the "cost" of speaking up; reprimands or reprisals



The illustration shows two simple stick figures, one slightly taller than the other, standing and facing each other as if in conversation.



The diagram is a compass rose with four quadrants, each with an icon and text:

- Moral**: I believe something is right or wrong. (Icon: Scales of justice)
- Intellectual**: I have some questions. (Icon: Head with gears)
- Emotional**: I have strong feelings about this. I feel... (Icon: Heart)
- Social**: I want to do something about this. (Icon: Hands raised)



Talk about someone who inspires you and why. For example: a relative, friend, teacher, or someone famous.

What will you discuss with your Red Partner?

What will you discuss with your Green Partner?

- What was your neighborhood or community like when you were growing up?
- What were the racial, cultural and ethnic backgrounds of your neighbors?
- Your friends?
- Your teachers?

What are the racial, cultural, & ethnic backgrounds of:

- + The friends you normally have over to your house?
- + The friends you socialize with outside the house?
- + Your current neighbors?
- + Your co-workers?

What will you discuss with your Purple Partner?

What do you hope this Study Circle will accomplish?

What will you discuss with your YELLOW Partner?

Let's Discuss Together!

Talk about someone who inspires you and why? (i.e. relative, teacher, friend, someone famous)

What was your neighborhood or community like when you were growing up? What were the racial, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds of your neighbors? Your friends? Your teachers?

What are the racial, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds of:
Your friends you normally have over to your house? The friends you socialize with outside of your house? Your current neighbors? Your co-workers?

What do you hope this Study Circle will accomplish?

Time to Reflect!

Why did we have you engage in this Reach Out and Make Friend structure?

Talk about someone who inspires you and why? (i.e. relative, teacher, friend, someone famous)

What was your neighborhood or community like when you were growing up? What were the racial, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds of your neighbors? Your friends? Your teachers?

What are the racial, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds of:
Your friends you normally have over to your house? The friends you socialize with outside of your house? Your current neighbors? Your co-workers?

What do you hope this Study Circle will accomplish?



Developing our understanding of other cultures or cultural awareness promotes more meaningful interactions with those around you.

It helps us build our understanding, respect and empathy for other people. We can celebrate our differences as well as our similarities.

This makes us less likely to treat someone differently, just because they are from a different culture or ethnicity than you.

OUR
Making ~~you~~ your own Cultural Timeline

 A simple horizontal line with arrowheads at both ends, indicating a range or timeline.

Cultural Timeline

Think about events that impacted you:

1. An important national or global event
 - Ex: 9/11, war in your country of origin, civil movement, marriage equality, etc.
2. An important personal event
 - i.e: parents divorcing, illness, moving to a new country, "coming out" to friends or family, a major accomplishment
3. An event or experience that impacted the way you think about racism, sexism, homophobia, religious discrimination, etc.

 A whiteboard with a grid and handwritten notes. The notes include "9/11", "Civil Rights", "Marriage Equality", and "Coming Out".

 A horizontal line with three small circles above it, representing a timeline with three key events.



Welcome Back!



TRUST.

"Building trusting relationships takes time, practice, and patience. The rewards are endless!"

Cultural Timeline (Cont'd)

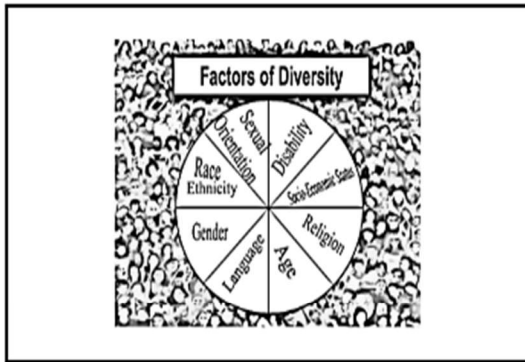
Think about events that impacted you:

1. An important national or global event
 - Ex: 9/11, war in your country of origin, civil movement, marriage equality, etc.
2. An important personal event
 - i.e: parents divorcing, illness, moving to a new country, "coming out" to friends or family, a major accomplishment
3. An event or experience that impacted the way you think about racism, sexism, homophobia, religious discrimination, etc.

Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path.

Brene Brown



Write your group(s) on the top of the piece of paper.

My identity

Write Your Group Here

Now, think about the lies or stereotypes you have heard about your group. Write the lies large on the paper so they can be seen.

Write Your Group Here

Write the lies or stereotypes here.

Read your group(s)

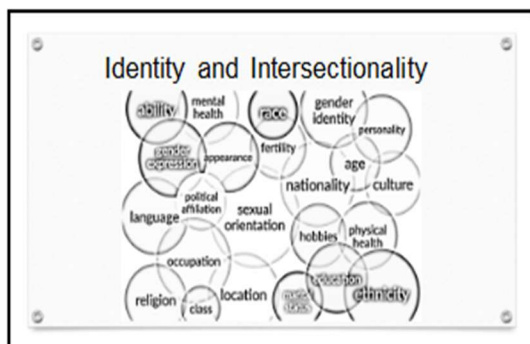
The lies about my group are...

Now, on a different piece of paper, write the truth about **YOU**.

The truth about me is I am...

- What was it like to read/hear what other people wrote about their group(s)?
- What was it like to write the lies about your own group(s)?
- What did you notice about the lies? What patterns did you see?
- Was anyone surprised by the things that you read/heard?

TIME
FOR A
BREAK



Fishbowl Dialogue

- The inner circle will include 6 participants, 1 facilitator, and an empty seat.
- The inner circle will engage in a facilitated dialogue about a specific topic. The rest of the participants will be on the outside observing and listening to the discussion.
- If a participant on the outside wants to join the conversation or respond to what someone said, they can move into the empty seat.
- The 2nd facilitator will be standing on the outside tapping participants in the outer circle to go into the inner circle and tap people from the inner circle to move to the outside circle.

Fishbowl Dialogue

Everyone has identities and how we perceive our various roles in society in relation to others. Whether it is through social position, language, culture, ethnicity, interests, achievements, or beliefs, we derive a sense of pride, self-worth, and consistency from our various social identities.

- What do you think about this statement?
- Do people around you "see" you the same or different from how you "see" yourself?
- What needs to happen in our school/school community for people to feel safe to be who they are?



Fishbowl Dialogue Debrief

I noticed...
I wonder...
I still have questions about...



1. So, what is your mind full of these days?
2. What are you doing for your own self care and mindfulness?



Mindfulness:
The ability to be fully present in the moment, aware of where we are and what we're doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what's going on around us.

Appreciations & Take Aways from Day #1 Session



What are yours?

Our Community Agreements

NOTE: Add community agreements agreed upon in Day #1

Q & A Homework

Know Your Partner

1. What is your name?
2. How old are you?
3. What is your favorite color?
4. What is your favorite food?
5. What is your favorite movie?
6. What is your favorite book?
7. What is your favorite sport?
8. What is your favorite animal?
9. What is your favorite season?
10. What is your favorite time of day?
11. What is your favorite hobby?
12. What is your favorite subject?
13. What is your favorite teacher?
14. What is your favorite class?
15. What is your favorite place?
16. What is your favorite thing to do?
17. What is your favorite animal?
18. What is your favorite color?
19. What is your favorite food?
20. What is your favorite movie?

Partner Connection Cards

<p>Know</p> <p>What is your name? How old are you? What is your favorite color? What is your favorite food? What is your favorite movie? What is your favorite book? What is your favorite sport? What is your favorite animal? What is your favorite season? What is your favorite time of day? What is your favorite hobby? What is your favorite subject? What is your favorite teacher? What is your favorite class? What is your favorite place? What is your favorite thing to do?</p>	<p>Share</p> <p>What is your name? How old are you? What is your favorite color? What is your favorite food? What is your favorite movie? What is your favorite book? What is your favorite sport? What is your favorite animal? What is your favorite season? What is your favorite time of day? What is your favorite hobby? What is your favorite subject? What is your favorite teacher? What is your favorite class? What is your favorite place? What is your favorite thing to do?</p>
---	--

Write Your Partner

Write a short paragraph about your partner. Use the information you gathered from the cards. Be creative and use descriptive words.


Partner Switch Activity

When you hear the signal, get up, find a partner, and share something from your Knowing Yourself Capture Sheet.

Change partners when you hear the signal again.

Return to your seat when you are given the signal. Thanks!

Why is it important to know yourself as you move through this process of learning how to facilitate Study Circles?



Does Skin Color Matter? Survey

Please take time to read the directions and complete the survey.

Does Skin Color Matter?


Directions: Read each statement and check the box that best describes your response.

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. It is important to know someone's skin color before you talk to them.					
2. It is important to know someone's skin color before you date them.					
3. It is important to know someone's skin color before you marry them.					
4. It is important to know someone's skin color before you become friends with them.					
5. It is important to know someone's skin color before you work with them.					
6. It is important to know someone's skin color before you do business with them.					
7. It is important to know someone's skin color before you become a teacher or student.					
8. It is important to know someone's skin color before you become a parent or child.					
9. It is important to know someone's skin color before you become a neighbor.					
10. It is important to know someone's skin color before you become a friend of a friend.					



Directions:


- On a piece of paper, write down the number of TRUE responses you had. Make the number large enough to read.
- When signaled, get up and line yourselves up by the numbers, highest to lowest.



What do you notice?

What patterns do you see?

What do you wonder?



Take a break,
take a breath!



Active Listening



Listening Activity- Partner A

1. When we say, "Go", Partner A will speak for 2 minutes.
2. Partner B cannot say anything, but can show that they are actively listening
3. After Partner A speaks for 2 minutes, Partner B has 1 minute to explain to Partner A what they thought they heard being said.
4. Partner A will then have 30 seconds to say whether they were heard correctly or not.

In what ways do the survey results validate your personal experiences?

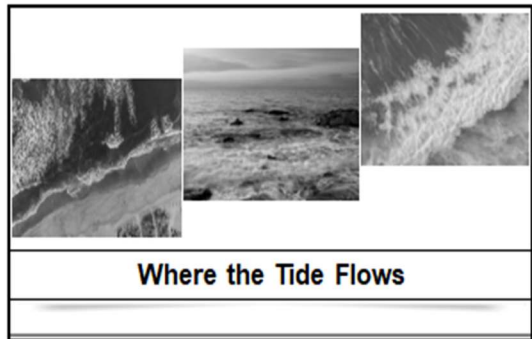
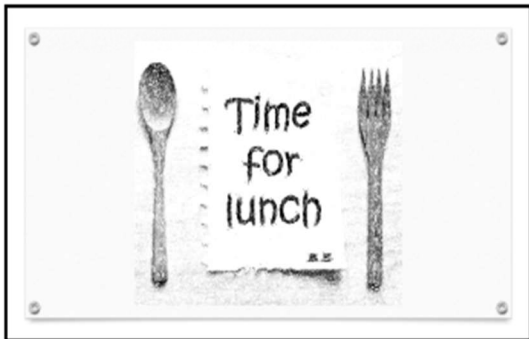
In what ways do the survey results challenge your experiences?

Listening Activity- Partner B

1. When we say, "Go", Partner B will speak for 2 minutes.
2. Partner A cannot say anything, but can show that they are actively listening
3. After Partner B speaks for 2 minutes, Partner A has 1 minute to explain to Partner B what they thought they heard being said.
4. Partner B will then have 30 seconds to say whether they were heard correctly or not.

In what ways do the survey results validate your personal experiences?

In what ways do the survey results challenge your experiences?



Fishbowl Dialogue

- The inner circle will include 6 participants, 2 co-facilitators, and an empty seat.
- The 2 co-facilitators will work together to engage participants in the dialogue.
- The inner circle will engage in a facilitated dialogue about a specific topic. The rest of the participants will be on the outside observing and listening to the discussion.
- If a participant on the outside wants to join the conversation or respond to what someone said, they can move into the empty seat.

Fishbowl Dialogue

"In this society, people with light skin have advantages-or privilege-over people whose skin is darker. This advantage is often invisible and people who benefit from it often do not see it. Some people refer to this as White Privilege."

Remember to use the tools during the dialogues.

Fishbowl Dialogue Debrief

1. Co-facilitators
2. Dialogue participants
3. Observers
4. The process itself
5. Other

Micro Levels	Macro Levels
<p>Interpersonal Racism</p> <p>Interpersonal Racism occurs between individuals. One writing on people beliefs, into one interaction with others, racism is seen in the interpersonal realm.</p> <p>Examples: public expression of racial prejudice, hate, bias, and bigotry between individuals.</p>	<p>Institutional Racism</p> <p>Institutional Racism occurs within institutions. It is discriminatory treatment, unfair policies and practices, and unequal opportunities and rewards, based on race.</p> <p>Examples: A school system that concentrates people of color in the most overcrowded, underfunded schools with the least qualified teachers.</p>
<p>Internalized Racism</p> <p>Internalized Racism lies within individuals and groups. It is a self-generated process of dehumanization that can manifest as internalized identity for people of color and an internalized superiority and prejudice for white people.</p> <p>Examples: stereotypes, self-hatred, internalized prejudice and internalized superiority.</p>	<p>Structural Racism</p> <p>Structural Racism is social law, norms, institutions, and society. It is the cumulative and interconnected effects of a variety of factors that systematically privilege white people and disadvantage people of color.</p> <p>Examples: The social wealth divide between white people have many times the wealth of people of color) results from generations of discrimination, in the areas of generation, of property, education, labor, based and regulated labor, and discriminatory and unequal policies and practices.</p>

- Exit Card Day #2:
1. List 2 Sample Facilitator Questions that resonated with you.
 2. What is one strategy that helps in resolving conflicts but also helps foster a culture of respect?
 3. What structures and processes have the facilitators put into place to help participants feel safe to engage in uncomfortable conversations?
 4. What do the facilitators do to make the conversations go deeper instead of staying on the surface level?
 5. How are you feeling about your own facilitation skills at this point?

HOMEWORK

Please review the following documents:

Document 1: [Title]

[Summary of document 1 content]

Document 2: [Title]

[Summary of document 2 content]


Document 3: [Title]

[Summary of document 3 content]


Please share one appreciation or take away from today's session.


Thank You


Study Circles
Day 3



Activator

With  I would...


My  are the times when I...

When I can  minutes for myself, I...

Why do we begin with an activator?

- As an established routine, it signals that learning is about to begin.
- It helps to center the learner on what is about to be presented.
- It activates the brain!

Appreciations & Take Aways from Day #2 Session



- What are they?

Our Community Agreements

NOTE: Add community agreements agreed upon in Day#1

Goal of the Study Circles Program

The Study Circles Program engages staff, students, parents and district leaders in facilitated dialogue to develop the beliefs, knowledge, skills, and structures necessary to ensure that students' academic success is not predictable by race, culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language or disability.

Review of Day 2

Dialogue vs Debate Review

Does This Color Matter? Survey

Active Listening

Homework

When the Tide Flows

PARADISE JOURNAL ACTIVITY

More Links


More Links

Dialogue vs Debate Review

Dialogue	Debate
• About <i>learning</i>	• About <i>winning</i>
• Exploring common good	• Assumes one right answer
• Collaborative	• Prove others wrong
• Listens & acknowledges others' points	• Finds flaws/weaknesses in others' points
• Sees value in others' positions	• Defend own views
• Open-minded	• Closed-minded
• Seeks new options	• Seeks closure


Review

Moral




I believe something is right or wrong.


Intellectual



I have some questions.




Emotional



I have strong feelings about this. I feel...

Social



I want to do something about this.

HOMEWORK

STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES

Students are expected to complete all assignments on time and to the best of their ability. Students are also expected to participate in class discussions and activities.

ASSIGNMENT DUE DATES

Students should check the calendar for assignment due dates. Assignments are due at the beginning of each class period.

MAKEUP POLICY

Students who miss a class due to illness or other circumstances may be allowed to make up the assignment. Makeup assignments must be completed within one week of the original due date.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Students are expected to be honest and to do their own work. Plagiarism and cheating are strictly prohibited.

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Students should check the calendar for assignment due dates. Assignments are due at the beginning of each class period.

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Suggestions for Handling Challenging Situations

STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES

Students are expected to complete all assignments on time and to the best of their ability. Students are also expected to participate in class discussions and activities.

ASSIGNMENT DUE DATES


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ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

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TURN AND TALK




Important and Sometimes Difficult Conversations

- Our society still struggles to honestly confront and discuss the complex issues that contribute to the predictability of students' academic success by race, culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language or disability.
- We must not remain silent or be silenced. We must provide a "safe space" for shared dialogue to be our best selves and to see the best selves in others.
- Through well-established practices and procedures, we can engage in dialogue and respectful, active listening about challenging topics.



Agenda:

- Planning for Co-Facilitation of a Dialogue in Groups with Scenarios:
 - > 3 Groups (different scenarios)
 - > Support Materials
- Final Large Group Questions/Clarifications
- Conduct the Dialogues & Debriefings
- Final Thoughts


Expectations and Explanations



Each group will plan for 30 minutes (with more time added if needed.)

Any Additional Questions Before We Begin?



Scenario A

At the instructional leadership team (ILT) meeting, the principal shared feedback from families and community members around their issues of concern. Some of the comments were: "I think every issue is around race, equity, and inclusion. I don't think there is one issue in the school district regarding our families and communities that race isn't part of it." Typically, when we are trying to address a problem in the school district, our leaders want to find 'the' answer. They don't want to change the way we do things." The leadership team's job was to discuss this feedback in an open and honest manner.

Dialogue Debriefing

- Co-facilitators
- Dialogue participants
- Observers
- The process itself
- Other



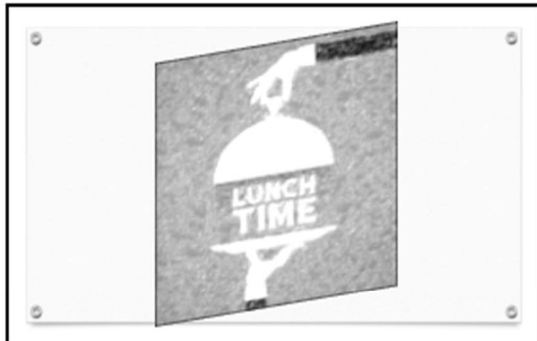
Scenario B

At the School Parent Outreach Committee (SPOC) meeting, the principal shared feedback from a recent parent focus group. Some of the parents' comments were: "It doesn't matter that we put it in Spanish to get parents to come to a meeting, if the school itself and the program itself is literally designed for White families. Even though it is written in Spanish, or Vietnamese, or Korean, or Amharic, it doesn't make any sense when it's not written from a cultural perspective." "Schools do a really terrible job of building relationships with families. The issues of parent engagement are pretty typical...lack of trust...lack of relationships...like real relationships...between parents and school staff." "I think the largest thing is that, when it comes to Parent Engagement in schools we are still doing things based on the way we have done them for 20, 30, 40 years." The committee members must now engage in a dialogue about these concerns.

Dialogue Debriefing

- Co-facilitators
- Dialogue participants
- Observers
- The process itself
- Other





Any Additional Questions Before We Begin?



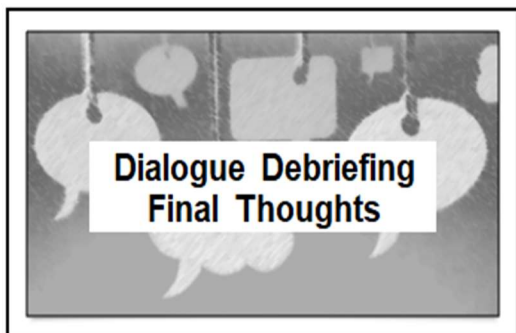
Scenario C

Members of the school leadership team shared some of the recent postings on social media related to StudyCircles and leadership in the school district and in schools. Some of the comments were: "There are a lot of really challenging divisive issues that we need to address in the school district and to do it with our traditional meetings isn't working. It's 'why' we haven't closed the achievement gap and the opportunity gap." "If the principal isn't brought in from the beginning and going through this StudyCircles process with us, actions are probably not going to happen." "So, we took a little step back to try to get more of the leaders involved in learning how to have these conversations, so that they could be more receptive to hearing and making change at a more cultural and ... sort of institutional level." The school leadership team's job is to engage in an open and honest dialogue about these concerns.

Dialogue Debriefing

- Co-facilitators
- Dialogue participants
- Observers
- The process itself
- Other





Exit Card Day #3:

- What is the difference between a dialogue and a debate?
- What are community agreements?
- Give 2 examples of why we avoid talking about race.
- List 2 Sample Facilitator Questions that resonated with you.
- What is one strategy that helps in resolving conflicts but also helps foster a culture of respect?
- What structures and processes have the facilitators put into place to help participants feel safe to engage in uncomfortable conversations?
- What do the facilitators do to make the conversations go deeper instead of staying on the surface level?
- How are you feeling about your own facilitation skills at this point?

This is **your** planning time to discuss any positives and possible barriers that exist in the school and school community that may facilitate or impact engaging in Study Circles.

 An image of several interlocking puzzle pieces. One piece is dark grey with the word "NEXT" written on it, and another is dark grey with the word "STEPS" written on it.

Please Take the Post Survey

References

- The National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (2021). <https://www.NCDD.org/rc/>
- Everyday Democracy Dialogue-to-Change (2021). <https://www.everyday-democracy.org/dialogue-to-change>
- The National Equity Project (2021). <https://www.nationalequityproject.org/>
- Singleton, G. (2014). *Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools*, (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

