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Educators' and Parents' Perceptions of Family Engagement in a Head Start Program

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Walden University

College of Education

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Sondeania Marie Johnson

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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Walden University
2021

Abstract

Educators' and Parents' Perceptions of Family Engagement in a Head Start Program

by

Sondeania Marie Johnson

MA, Towson University, 2011

BS, Coppin State University, 2007

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

December 2021

Abstract

Family engagement benefits children's development and contributes to student academic success. However, educators feel that they are unprepared to engage families in the educational process, although they are encouraged to do so. The purpose of this basic qualitative study with interviews was to explore educators' and parents' perceptions of family engagement. The conceptual framework for this study was supported by Epstein's ecological framework. A basic qualitative study and purposeful sampling were used to conduct semistructured interviews with 10 educators who were currently employed as teachers and with five parents who had a child enrolled in the Head Start program who were familiar with family engagement. Research questions addressed educators' perceptions of family engagement, ways in which educators engage parents, and parents' perceptions of family engagement. Data were collected through semi structured interviews conducted with educators and parents at a northeastern urban Head Start program serving 3–5-year-old students. The main themes that emerged from the data included supportive learning, educators' attitudes, preparedness, training, communication, home learning activities, parent supportive learning, and challenges. This study has implications for positive social change for all stakeholders, including educators, parents, and children. Parents working collaboratively with educators to increase family engagement practices may influence academic achievement for children and therefore increase opportunities for mastery of early literacy skills. Literacy leads to higher overall quality of life, further decreasing dropout rates and potentially leading to more choice for higher education or trade schools for increased wages, thereby lowering poverty levels.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my late grandfather Ernest L. Webster. A man of integrity, love, and hard work. Your example of what community service embodies to help families is what guided my direction to achieving goals that would help others and create social change involving families. This work is also dedicated to those who will dream big and never give up.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The partnership between families and school is fundamental to children's success in school readiness (Prieto, 2018). A critical component of high-quality early education is supporting family engagement in program activities and supporting family members in their efforts to continue children's learning (Snell et al., 2020). Family engagement is defined as a collaborative and strengths-based process through which early childhood professionals, families, and children build positive and goal-oriented relationships (Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center [ECLKC], 2020). Family engagement is a shared responsibility of families and staff at all levels that requires mutual respect for the roles and strengths that each has to offer (ECLKC, 2020) and plays a major role in children's school readiness, influencing their social-emotional and academic competencies (Administration for Children and Families, 2018). I explored family engagement in a Head Start program to get an understanding of educators' and parents' perceptions of family engagement in the Head Start program. It is hoped that the results of this study will provide insights regarding family engagement in the Head Start program that will prepare educators and increase family engagement to aid in students' educational process. This study addresses a gap in the literature regarding both educators' and parents' perceptions of family engagement. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the background of family engagement in Head Start; the problem upon which this study was based; the purpose, questions, and conceptual frameworks that grounded the research; the nature of the study; and the scope and delimitations of this study on family engagement in the Head Start program.

Background

Family engagement in children's early development and education includes initiating learning activities in the home, building positive relationships, engaging in preschool activities, and communicating with teachers (Marti et al., 2018). Head Start is a national program that aims to promote school readiness by enhancing the social and cognitive development of children through the provision of educational, health, nutritional, social, and other services to enrolled children and families (Aikens et al., 2017). The program provides comprehensive services to low-income preschool children and their families across the United States to "narrow the gap" between disadvantaged children and their more affluent peers (Morris et al., 2018). Head Start was founded as a two-generation program that provides early education for children and encourages parents to participate in the program and learn skills that can extend beyond the classroom (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016). In 2011, the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (PFCE) framework was developed to inspire a renewed spirit of collaboration with families and community partners as programs identify and take next steps to engage families and communities to achieve better outcomes for children and families. Although the experiences and participation of families play a central role in Head Start, recent years have seen a growing emphasis on developing and using strategies to make family engagement activities systematic and integrated within Head Start programs. In fact, family engagement is viewed as more than just parent involvement in program activities; it also emphasizes the ongoing relationship between parents and staff (Aikens et al., 2017). The new developments of this framework lay a

foundation of understanding educators' and parents' perceptions of family engagement at the Head Start level.

In addition to new policies and developments regarding improving family engagement, underlying problems exist that hinder educators and families from engaging students at the Head Start program. Despite policy aspirations, many parents face obstacles to parental involvement, such as a lack of familiarity with the school system or challenges in communicating with school staff (Hamilin & Flessa, 2018). Boonk et al., (2018) identified that despite the widespread belief that family engagement is a critical ingredient for children's academic success, there are some issues related to the research on parental involvement. Ansari and Gershoff (2018) found that given Head Start's importance for parental involvement, programmatic outreach to parents warranted more attention, including the training of teachers in how to engage families. With its two-generation approach, Head Start serves as an ideal setting in which to examine the role of parents' involvement in promoting children's early school success, yet there have been limited attempts to understand the extent to which Head Start programs are successful at involving parents (Ansari & Gershoff, 2018). Families' perceptions of teacher responsiveness are an important aspect of parent-school relationships. Their perceptions are linked to the frequency of their involvement in their children's schools (Administration for Children and Families, 2018). Thus, policies have led to a better understanding of family engagement.

This study explored educators' and parents' perceptions of family engagement in the Head Start program with a deeper understanding of educators' preparedness to engage

families and how parents perceive family engagement in the educational process of students. Educators' and parents' perceptions regarding family engagement may support positive outcomes for both children and families in children's educational process.

Problem Statement

The problem is that some Head Start educators feel unprepared even though they are encouraged to engage families in the educational process. One of the school's educational directors indicated that some of the educators often felt unprepared and untrained to engage families. One of the Head Start classroom educators of the target school felt that she did not fully understand how to conduct family engagement activities in her classroom. In addition, attendance records from activities to enhance school readiness and student achievement, such as the STEAM Fair and Read Across America, confirmed low family engagement. In a recent study, Wood & Bynum (2017) found that families who reported attending school events and activities and communicating with teachers had children who reported fewer social and emotional concerns and had positive academic and behavior scores.

According to Smith & Sheridan (2019), a gap in practice exists in that, despite decades of research supporting family engagement's benefits for children's social, emotional, behavioral, and academic development, educators are not always adequately prepared to consult and work with families. Buchanan & Buchanan (2017) found that this lack of attention to preparedness results in research consistently reporting that educators feel unprepared to do this aspect of their work. In particular, the lack of preparation of educators to promote family engagement has been highlighted as problematic (Willemse

et al., 2018). Educators often enter the field with limited knowledge and skills needed to establish and maintain successful family school involvement (Miller et al., 2018). According to Thompson et al. (2018), a gap in research exists in that few family engagement studies focus on educators' perceptions of family engagement despite evidence that educator ratings of family engagement have strong links to student outcomes. More needs to be done to prepare educators to understand family engagement as part of their professional work and as an essential component of good school organization for student success (Epstein, 2018). Furthermore, Durisic & Bunijevac (2017) suggested examining educators' perceptions of effective family engagement practices promoting student achievement. Therefore, further research is needed to determine how to best prepare educators through ongoing professional development for the important work of engaging families (Hovart, 2016).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore Head Start educators' and parents' perceptions of family engagement in the Head Start program. Teacher preparation to engage families is a persistent and puzzling challenge. Educators, parents, and community members have different opinions regarding effective family engagement practices and the ways in which each can contribute to the educational process (Dursic, 2017). Currently, there is limited information on how educators themselves perceive their preparation and skills for promoting family engagement (D'Haem & Griswold, 2017). An increased understanding of educators' and parents' perceptions of family engagement may provide insight into the use of activities such as science experiments, read alouds,

and technology games to help students' educational development. Still, more research is needed to expand on which methods are most successful in engaging families (Barnes et al., 2016).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

- RQ1. What are Head Start educators' perceptions of family engagement in the Head Start program?
- RQ2. How do Head Start educators engage parents in the Head Start program?
- RQ3. What are parents' perceptions of family engagement in the Head Start program?

Conceptual Framework

The framework that guided this study included Epstein's (1995) ecological framework. Within an ecological framework, family engagement is a shared responsibility, wherein both educators and parents play a vital role (Smith & Sheridan, 2019). Epstein identified a framework containing six important factors with regard to family engagement. These factors involving family engagement descriptions are important for educators to remember when identifying how family members are involved in their children's education (Baker et al., 2016). Epstein's research focused on examining school programs, school climate, and community partnerships as modes to create strong partnerships to aid all children in excelling in school and in life. The construct of this framework is relevant to this study in that Epstein expanded her theory to show, in a concrete way, what educators can do to facilitate various types of family

engagement (Yamauchi et al., 2018). An examination of educators' and parents' perceptions of family engagement activities may translate into practices that encourage Head Start programs to form meaningful connections with educators, communities, and families that support student achievement. This concept is aligned with Epstein's ecological framework of family engagement. Gathering insights to better understand how to engage families in the Head Start program may thus affect children's educational process and student achievement.

Nature of the Study

This basic qualitative study employed interviews that explored the perceptions of both educators and parents concerning family engagement in a Head Start program. Data were collected through interviews with 10 Head Start educators and five parents from the Head Start program. An interview protocol was developed to gather data related to the research questions (see Appendix A). A basic qualitative study was used to gain an understanding of the issue in real-life settings. Outcomes may lead to an in-depth understanding of behaviors, processes, practices, and relationships in context (Harrison et al., 2017). Purposeful sampling and thematic analysis of the data were developed to identify prominent themes. Coding strategies were used to analyze data. Codes were grouped and eventually synthesized into primary themes using thematic coding: This basic qualitative study allowed data to be collected to answer the research questions, which are described in Chapter 2.

Definitions

Family engagement: A collaborative, culturally competent process focused on improving children's learning. Family engagement takes place wherever children learn. (National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement [NAFSCE], 2017).

Family-school partnerships: Child-focused approaches wherein families and professionals cooperate, coordinate, and collaborate to enhance opportunities and success for children and adolescents across social, emotional, behavioral, and academic domains (Smith, 2019).

Head Start: A federally funded national program that aims to promote school readiness by enhancing the social and cognitive development of children through the provision of educational, health, nutritional, social, and other services to enrolled children and families (Aikens et al., 2017).

Home-based involvement: Refers to what parents do at home to promote their children's learning (Boonk et al., 2018).

School-based involvement: Defined by activities and behaviors that parents engage in at school, such as attending parent-teacher conferences and school events (Boonk et al., 2018).

School readiness: The combination of skills that includes preacademic knowledge, such as basic literacy and math foundations, as well as self-regulatory and socioemotional regulation (Marti et al., 2018).

Two-generational approach: A focus on early education for children that encourages parents to participate in the program and learn skills that can extend beyond the classroom (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016).

Assumptions

For this study, it was assumed that the Head Start educators who were interviewed were honest and trustworthy in answering interview questions. It was assumed that parents from the Head Start program accurately depicted their perceptions regarding family engagement in Head Start. For this study of educators' and parents' perceptions of family engagement, it was important that the interview responses were truthful and accurate because participants' answers served as the data for analysis. This was also critical to the integrity of my study. Because I explored and understood the thoughts and experiences of educators and parents regarding family engagement, it was imperative that the data be a clear representation of their perceptions to ensure that the findings were accurately presented according to the research questions.

Scope and Delimitations

The participants in this study were educators and parents of students from the Head Start program. This study addressed their perceptions regarding family engagement. Excluded from this study were educators who were not comfortable with participating in the study. The purpose of this study was to explore each perspective individually. The site, a Head Start program, was selected for a basic qualitative study because it had many educators and parents who attended the Head Start program, where participation in family engagement were low and the context of this setting provided a unique forum for

family engagement. I explored the experiences of parents in their earliest years of involvement. Detailed descriptions of participant experiences and perceptions may allow those outside the study to assess whether the findings are relevant to their setting.

Limitations

This study faced a series of limitations. The first limitation was the time-consuming process of gathering data for a basic qualitative study. Conducting a qualitative study can bring on time restraints while collecting data. The need to allot a time and location to collect data for educators and parents was taken into consideration for participants who worked an 8-hour day or who had personal obligations. Another limitation was the location of interviews. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, data collection was limited to virtual or audio recordings. The Head Start program did not permit onsite visitors during the time of data collection. The location limited the number of accessible participants, but access was sufficient for gathering in-depth data about educators' and parents' perceptions involving family engagement at a Head Start program. Although limitations were present, the findings may suggest valuable insight into strategies that may increase family engagement among Head Start parents and educators.

Significance

This study addressed a gap in research involving educators' and parents' perceptions of family engagement and a gap in practice regarding how to effectively prepare and engage families in the Head Start program. There is significance in meaningful family engagement efforts to promote children's learning and development

(Preito, 2018). Research has consistently indicated that educators feel unprepared to engage families (Buchanan & Buchanan, 2019). This study provides insight on educators' perceptions involving family engagement. It is time for teacher educators to explore the reasons for this challenge and to begin to think differently about this aspect of teacher practice (Buchanan & Buchanan, 2017). This study is significant and original in that it provides insight into educators' and parents' perceptions of their participation, practice, and preparation in relation to engaging families in early childhood settings. Very little is known about educators' perceptions about families and early childhood educators' knowledge of child development and learning (Winder & Corter, 2016). Results from this study identify educators' and parents' perceptions of family engagement activities that determine how to best prepare educators to engage families. This study may have a positive impact on the quality of children's social interactions and may thus promote the development of working citizens who contribute to society through becoming involved and engaged in the community.

Summary

The first chapter of this study included a definition of the problem of educators' and parents' perceptions of low engagement in family engagement activities at the Head Start program as well as a brief description of the history of Head Start's concepts of family engagement. The purpose of the study, nature of the study, conceptual framework, research questions, assumptions, and scope of the study were included. The purpose of this study was to obtain insight on the perceptions of educators and parents regarding family engagement. This study was achieved through qualitative interviews with both

educators and parents to acquire their perceptions of the role of family in students' educational process. In Chapter 2, I present the literature review and themes related to family engagement that emerged from this process.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

There is a rich body of literature indicating that family engagement during the early years is related to children's school success (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016). However, literature persistently reports that teachers feel unprepared to engage with families (Buchanan & Buchanan, 2017). Many educators at the Head Start program indicated that they did not fully understand how to conduct family engagement activities in the classroom. School reports indicate that there is low participation in family engagement activities that enhance school readiness and student achievement. This basic qualitative study explored the perceptions of Head Start educators and parents regarding family engagement in the educational process with the intent of contributing new information to the field on the topic of family engagement.

Family engagement in children's education has long been reported as one way to raise student achievement, narrow achievement differences in school, and improve other student outcomes (Jung & Sheldon, 2020). Policymakers and researchers have agreed that parental involvement is a critical ingredient in children's academic success (Book et al., 2018). It has been well documented that these aspects of family engagement are associated with various parenting skills and child developmental outcomes, especially for children from low-income families (Jeon et al., 2018). When families are engaged in their children's education, the children's academic, behavioral, and social-emotional development is indirectly supported (Smith & Sheridan, 2019). Bridging efforts across these essential systems through family-school engagement practices are instrumental to

optimally support child development (Smith et al., 2020). Family engagement is crucial to both child well-being and academic achievement (Lowenhaupt & Montgomery, 2018).

Although several research reviews have been published in this field, researchers and school leaders are still working to understand how to engage families most effectively, and which family engagement strategies lead to school improvement and increased student achievement, particularly in areas with underserved communities (Wood & Bauman, 2017). There is limited information on how educators themselves perceive their preparation and skills for collaboration with families. Kurtulumus (2016) conducted a study that indicated that parents' involvement level was moderate regarding children's learning at school. Kurtulumus' study found that parents needed support in redirecting children's activities and attending classroom activities with them.

Literature Search Strategy

A search of the literature was conducted regarding family engagement at the Head Start program and related topics to examine peer-reviewed articles and books written in the previous 5 years, as well as seminal resources relating to the topic of family engagement. The following search engines were used to access literature: Walden's academic search engine, Thoreau, Google Scholar, EBSCO, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), SAGE Journals, ProQuest, and Education Research Complete. Specific terms searched in each of these databases were as follows: (a) *family engagement*, (b) *Head Start*, (c) *family school partnerships*, and (d) *home learning activities*. Numerous scholarly articles were reviewed in each of these databases and included variations on parent, involvement, family engagement, family engagement

activities, Head Start, home–school relationships, school involvement, barriers to family engagement, and teacher preparedness.

Conceptual Framework/Theoretical Foundation

Epstein’s Model of Family Involvement

This research was framed using Epstein’s (1995) ecological framework. Within an ecological framework, family engagement is a shared responsibility, wherein both educators and parents play a vital role (Smith & Sheridan, 2019). Epstein (1995) described six types of parental involvement in the education process that educators may use when thinking about parental involvement. These types include parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community. Epstein’s research focused on examining school programs, school climate, and community partnerships as modes to create strong partnerships to aid all children in excelling in school and in life. Epstein’s (1995) framework for parental involvement focuses on the combination of family, school, and community as influencers in a parent’s degree of participation in a child’s learning.

Epstein described six types of parental involvement: parenting, which involves supporting families in their parenting skills; communication between school and home, which encompasses parent–teacher conferences as well as face-to-face and electronic methods of communication; volunteering or parent participation in supporting school activities; learning at home; family participation in decision making in regard to school practices and policies; and collaborating with the community for the benefit of the school and the student (Gestwicki, 2016). These factors involving family engagement

descriptions are important for educators to remember when identifying how family members are involved in their child's education (Baker et al., 2016). The construct of this framework is relevant to this study in that Epstein expanded her theory to show, in a concrete way, what educators can do to facilitate various types of family engagement (Yamauchi et al., 2017).

Social Capital Theory

Social capital theory (Coleman, 1988) and the parent investment model (Foster, 2002) indicate that the more parents invest in their children, the better children's achievement and behavior will be. Such investments are not restricted to money but also include time that parents spend with their children in child-focused activities. When parents spend time reading a book to their children, they are investing in their literacy skills, and when they count blocks while children stack them into a tower, they are investing in their numeracy development. Such behaviors are cumulatively referred to as cognitively stimulating activities and have been linked with children's academic achievement (Crosnoe et al., 2010). An intergenerational perspective on social capital and parent investment implies that if parents were not provided cognitively stimulating environments from their own parents, they might not know how to engage in such activities or be aware of their importance for children's development. It is in both areas that programs like Head Start can provide intervention. Head Start teachers can build parents' social capital by modeling cognitively stimulating activities such as reading books and playing math-related games (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016).

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variables

The History of Head Start

Head Start has a rich history in its foundation to help serve children and families (Hines, 2017). The Economic Opportunity Act was created in 1964 in response to the late President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty. This act addressed inequities and lack of educational opportunities and helped disadvantaged preschoolers (Hines, 2017). Hines (2017) mentioned that the Head Start program is the largest early intervention and prevention program for at-risk low-income preschoolers in the United States.

Comprehensive services provided by the Head Start program include education, social, health, and nutrition interventions for all preschoolers (Hines, 2017). Head Start is administered by the Office of Head Start and falls within the Administration for Children and Families under the supervision of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Head Start began as an 8-week summer program in 1965 serving over half a million children. In its 50 years, Head Start has grown to include year-round part-day and full-day programs for children from birth to age 5, as well as pregnant women (Walter & Liparard, 2017).

Head Start began with a strong commitment to research. Early descriptive studies showed Head Start-related gains on measures of cognitive achievement. Subsequent quasi-experimental studies also generally demonstrated positive impacts on school achievement and attainment in the short and long term, suggesting that the program may be working and cost effective (Morris et al., 2018). The program has adapted over time to shifting policy priorities and goals. Head Start started off small and focused on

comprehensive health services and family economic empowerment. Head Start began increasing its scope in the late 1990s as the program shifted attention to improving child school readiness, which places greater emphasis on cognitive development, including math and reading. In recent years, Head Start has also initiated a push for high-quality services and increased accountability among its centers (Joshi et al., 2016).

Family Engagement History

Research points to the positive effects of family engagement on student achievement, and as a result, many state and federal initiatives over the past 50 years have sought to compel schools to encourage parental involvement. In the United States, recent federal legislation under Every Student Succeeds Act requires schools to engage families in order to support child learning. Coady, 2019; U.S. Department of Education [DOE], 2016). Families play a critical role in helping children prepare for school and a lifetime of academic success. Head Start has a heavy emphasis on parental involvement; its Code of Federal Regulations specifies that parents must be included in all aspects of programs and requires that services be provided directly to parents in order to enhance their parenting skills, knowledge, and understanding of the educational and developmental needs and activities of their children (Anasari & Gershoff, 2016). Most recently, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, recently reauthorized as Every Student Succeeds Act, includes a requirement for meaningful parental participation in school activities (NCLB, 20 U.S.C. 6301, Sec. 1001 [12]), stipulating that schools cannot receive Title 1 funding reserved for disadvantaged students without a written agreement to facilitate the involvement of parents.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), in a position statement on quality Early Childhood Program Standards, emphasized the importance of collaborative family–teacher relationships that are sensitive to all cultures and backgrounds (NAEYC, 2005), supporting the critical importance of authentic, reciprocal school–home relationships. In addition to NAEYC’s position statement on the importance of collaborating with families and teachers, the Office of Head Start, Administration for Children and Families made revisions of the Head Start PFCE Framework. This framework provides programs with a research-based, organizational guide for implementing Head Start Program Performance Standards for parent, family, and community engagement (Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, 2018). In this framework, at the Head Start level, family engagement involves parents’ engagement with their children and with staff as they work together toward the goals that families choose for themselves and their children (Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, 2018).

The Relationship Between Family Engagement and School Readiness

School readiness—the combination of skills that includes preacademic knowledge such as basic literacy and math foundations, as well as self-regulatory skills such as social–emotional regulation, patience, and focus—has become a critical component of early childhood education programs in the United States (Marti et al., 2018). According to Ansari & Geshshoff (2016), earlier research on early education led to increased efforts in recent years to improve access to early care and education programs as a means of improving the school readiness of young children, especially those from low-income

families. Marti et al. (2018) found that family engagement has the potential to bolster school readiness in children from disadvantaged families and reduce the income-achievement gap. In fact, home- and school-based parental involvement facilitate preacademic skills and social competence during preschool. The Administration for Children and Families (2018) found that family engagement in the preschool years builds on the first 3 years and is linked to children's success in kindergarten and beyond. Marti et al. described how a range of different interventions have demonstrated positive impacts on school readiness in preschool children, including those that promote positive parenting practices and parent-child relationships, those that promote home learning activities and effective teaching strategies, and those that strengthen parent-teacher partnerships.

Landry et al. (2017) found that research demonstrates that caregivers in the home environment can facilitate young children's development of cognitive and social skills so that they are better prepared to enter school. Researchers and policy leaders have identified the kindergarten transition as a key time for fostering family educational engagement (Hoffman et al., 2020). When early childhood education programs and schools actively engage families in their children's transition to kindergarten, and when they are responsive to families' efforts to participate in these transitions, families show increased involvement during the kindergarten year (ECLCK, Administration for Children and Families, 2020). Preto (2018) found that the partnership between families and school is fundamental to children's success in school readiness.

Educators' Attitudes Involving Family Engagement

The attitudes that educators maintain about families can have a significant influence on efforts to engage families in their child's learning. Smith & Sheridan (2019) found that researchers and educators are increasingly recognizing that an integral part of family engagement is helping teachers develop positive attitudes, relevant knowledge, and skills needed to work with families. Teachers can sometimes misjudge or misinterpret the practices of families without recognizing the ways in which parents can positively support children's academic skills. D'Haem & Griswold (2017) found that although teachers may have positive attitudes toward parental involvement in schools, the Harvard Family Research Project reported that many teachers feel that they do not know how to reach out to parents and that there are questions about how teachers from middle-class backgrounds can learn to engage poor urban families in partnerships with schools. Baquedano-López et al. (2013) reviewed literature on parental involvement and found that parental participation in schools is strongly shaped by teachers' perceptions of parents' background, by the roles expected of them by school administrators and teachers, and by the organizations that fund parental involvement programs (Coady, 2019). The authors found that what educators think about and expect from parents has a strong impact on actual parental participation. Educators connect their beliefs and knowledge of families to families' strengths, including what they do and know, and their contributions to the community (Coady, 2019). Smith & Sheridan (2019) examined the efficacy of family-engagement teacher-training programs (TTP) related to family engagement outcomes. Outcomes included teacher practices, attitudes, and knowledge

related to family engagement; these have been noted as critical to family engagement, and previous findings have indicated improvements after teachers participate in training. The attitudes of teachers and school personnel toward families can also be a possible barrier to high levels of involvement (Baker et al., 2016).

Barriers to Family Engagement

There are factors that impact levels of family involvement and engagement. According to Liang et al. (2020), research findings have revealed that limited parental involvement in the school was often due to demands on parents' time and attention, including having a schedule that conflicted with the school's activities. Baker et al. (2016) conducted research that highlighted the knowledge gained from data collected from a series of family and staff focus groups regarding parent and staff perceptions of barriers to family involvement and from families' suggestions as to what could be done differently to increase engagement. Family and staff focus groups were held in six schools in one Midwestern state involved in a discipline reform effort. As part of that reform and based on identifying barriers to engagement, research, and a framework developed by PBIS Indiana (2010), the participating schools were to address five areas of culturally responsive family engagement. Findings indicated that while parents and guardians are increasingly expressing the desire to become more involved in their children's education, several barriers hinder parents' ability to be involved, particularly in the more traditional and visible forms of family involvement such as volunteering at school events and attending parent-teacher conferences. Furthermore, findings showed that parents were able to identify both barriers and solutions to these barriers. In addition

to these findings, the authors also showed that staff were able to identify barriers but often posed disconnected solutions that did not directly address the barrier identified.

Soutulo et al. (2016) used Epstein's (2011) framework to understand how teachers perceive barriers to family school partnerships. The authors identified three categories of barriers to engaging this group of parents: Language and culture, family resources, and parent undocumented status. Many of these barriers were a consequence of school policies, such as a screening policy for new volunteers, and ineffective communication strategies. Although this study was small, focusing on only 18 educators, it offers relevant insights into at least one group of teachers and parent leaders and provides an impetus for future research on perspectives of various immigrant groups to the United States.

Hornby & Blackwell (2018) studied an article of the barriers to parental involvement in education that was published in *Educational Review* in 2011. The article was prompted by concern over the apparent gap between the rhetoric and reality of parental involvement evident in preceding years. The article presented a model which discussed four types of barriers to the establishment of effective parental involvement in education: individual parent and family barriers; child factors; parent-teacher factors; and societal factors. To provide an update on the 2011 article and on the current situation regarding parental involvement, a small-scale study was conducted with 11 primary schools in the UK. Findings indicated that, while the above factors were still important, the pressures on parents due to declining support for families from external agencies and services has meant that schools are developing broader roles in supporting parents. This

suggests that a more optimistic pattern of parental involvement in education may be emerging. Findings from this small-scale study suggest while barriers to effective parental involvement identified in the previous article still exist, parental involvement policies and practices in schools remain much the same. There appears to be some progress related to a change in how schools perceive parental involvement.

Garbaz et al. (2018) used a qualitative analysis to identify barriers and facilitators to family engagement in schools implementing positive behavioral interventions and support (PBIS) through a survey of school PBIS teams (i.e., teams that coordinate implementation of PBIS in the school). The study revealed the importance of communication as a key factor that can serve as a barrier or facilitator to family engagement. In addition, partnering with families was identified as a key facilitator. This study identified factors that impede and facilitate home–school connections within a common schoolwide framework to promote children’s behavior success. Communication and relationship-building between families and schools emerged as key factors to support home–school connections in the context of this school wide behavior framework. Findings also suggested the importance of building partnerships with families and noted the utility of implementing PBIS with families for building family school relationships. In addition, implications for training were identified. Training teachers to effectively engage families (i.e., improving teacher attitudes and practices) can help to overcome barriers and create high-quality relationships between families and schools and serve as a foundation for long-standing partnerships.

Teacher Training in Family Engagement

When teachers reach out to families and support their connections with schools, parent-teacher relationships improve, and children ultimately benefit. Unfortunately, teachers indicate minimal training in family engagement. This remains consistent until numerous researchers, teachers, and government agencies identify the need for increased training. A variety of teacher training interventions focused on family engagement have been developed.

Willemse et al. (2018) analyzed a research issue consisting of two parts: Part one looks at research on the state of the art of preparing pre-service teachers for family school partnerships (FSP) in initial teaching education (ITE) programs in England, Switzerland, the Netherlands/Belgium, Spain, and Finland. Part two focuses on research on new approaches to improve teacher preparation regarding family engagement. Despite the importance of preparing pre-service teachers for FSP in ITE being emphasized at least in theory, in practice it appears more difficult. Thompson and colleagues make a comparison between the outcomes of studies in England, Switzerland, Spain, Finland, Norway, Belgium and The Netherlands and the characteristics of country specific ITE policies, or reforms and governmental involvement. They conclude that despite the recognition of the importance of preparing for FSP in each national context at both governmental and ITE institutional levels, no satisfactory picture of FSP provision within ITE or in the preparedness of pre-service teachers to deal with the variety of complex social and cultural issues involved is found.

Early childcare professionals must master the art of communicating with and engaging parents to support positive child development. Yet many educators are underprepared to effectively engage the parents with whom they work. Barnes, Guin, Allen & Joy (2016) conducted research about educators' unpreparedness to effectively engage parents with whom they work with. The authors used a qualitative study to explore the issue of parent engagement and to assess the training needs of early childhood education professionals, this study discusses the perspectives of childcare providers from three North Carolina counties regarding to how providers communicate with parents; how parents respond to these communication strategies; and how providers would like to change their interactions with parents. More professional development trainings and a greater emphasis on parent engagement in teacher preparation programs are needed to address the identified challenges. This need, which emerged through conversations with providers, is documented within previous research as well.

Despite numerous benefits for children, teachers, and families alike, teachers often report being unprepared to work with and engage families in their children's education. Smith (2018) analyzed a current study that explored teacher training programs based on a previous meta-analysis of family engagement. The teacher training programs analyzed more detail by investigating how and for whom these family-school engagement TTPs can be impactful. Of a nationally representative sample, only 7% of teachers reported that they felt prepared to effectively engage families after completing their teacher preparation programs. Results indicate that pre-service (e.g., college courses, seminars) and teacher in-service (e.g Professional development training)

programs simply cannot rely on traditional teaching and preparation methods to adequately train teachers to work effectively with families. highlights the importance of teacher training in family-school engagement and should inform school psychology practitioners' and trainers' roles moving forward.

Summary and Conclusion

Research identifies the benefits of family engagement in a child's education, which can include both home and school-based activities. There are, however, multiple factors that influence the degree to which educators' and parents' elects to become involved, including teacher preparedness, parent efficacy, cultural background, SES, and expectations for involvement. Educators and parents of Head Start programs face numerous barriers to family engagement including time and work constraints, financial difficulties, teacher preparedness and marginalization. It is therefore critical for educators and families to recognize and address the perspectives of families in the school, as school outreach efforts play a significant role in parent engagement. Effective measures include frequent communication, a welcoming school environment, and a belief by school personnel in the capability of parents to support their child's learning. It is unclear, however, how educators perceive the families they wish to engage, as well as if parents perceive teachers and schools as welcoming and inclusive to become actively involved. Understanding educators' and parents' perceptions regarding family engagement as well as their perspectives of what involvement entails, contributes to important knowledge that will assist head start programs in building stronger relationships with families that foster student achievement and prepare children for school. Chapter 3 describes a basic

qualitative study specific to educators' and parents of a Head Start program, to better understand their perceptions of family engagement. The research design and rationale will be described, which will include the methodology, participant selection, instrumentation, and plan for analyzing data.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of Head Start educators and parents involving family engagement in a Head Start program. There is an extensive body of research that upholds the belief that families and school staff partnerships play an integral role in supporting children's academic success (Liang et al., 2020). Furthermore, the effects of family engagement during the early years are also predictive of longer-term academic outcomes (Hoffman et al., 2020). Programs such as Head Start strive to promote family engagement as a mechanism for positive changes in child and parenting outcomes (Jeon et al., 2020). However, efforts to engage parents often fall short (Lowenhaupt & Montgomery, 2020). This chapter will proceed with a discussion of the research design used in this study and will present the rationale for using a basic qualitative study. The role of the researcher in this exploration will also be discussed. The methodology employed in this research will be described, including participant selection and recruitment, instrumentation, and the plan for the analysis of the data. Finally, a discussion of the trustworthiness of the data will be presented.

Research Design and Rationale

Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials—personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts—that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people's patterns or themes (Creswell & Poth,

2016). Qualitative researchers use a variety of designs to gather data, such as the following: phenomenology, case study, and basic qualitative study. A basic qualitative study with interviews was chosen for this study because data collected from interviews provided an opportunity to capture rich, detailed, and descriptive data that were true to the responses of study participants. For this study, this method was more appropriate than quantitative methods because the interviews captured how and why educators and parents understood the way that they felt about family engagement. In contrast, quantitative research paradigms tend to be based on the belief that knowledge is pre-existing, waiting to be discovered (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Researchers who use the basic qualitative method seek to understand the perspectives of a group of people by collecting detailed but descriptive data (Creswell, 2017). This basic qualitative study approach aligned with the purpose of this study because of the intent to attain an in-depth understanding of the perceptions of educators and parents in the Head Start program setting.

A basic qualitative study approach was undertaken to explore Head Start educators' and parents' perceptions of family engagement in the Head Start program. Qualitative research has grown in sophistication and is viewed as a valid form of inquiry to explore a broad scope of complex issues, particularly when human behavior and social interactions are central to understanding topics of interest (Harrison et al., 2017). This basic qualitative study brings attention to the perceptions of family engagement in a Head Start program. Data collection in a basic qualitative study is typically extensive, drawing on multiple sources of information, such as observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials (Creswell, 2007). The fundamental goal of a basic study is to

conduct an in-depth analysis of an issue within its context, with a view toward understanding the issue from the perspective of the participant (Harrison et al., 2017). In this basic qualitative study, the perceptions of educators and parents were researched and analyzed on the issue of family engagement in the Head Start program. As in other forms of qualitative research, I sought to explore, understand, and present the participants' perceptions and get a closer look into their natural setting (Harrison et al., 2017). This current study offers an opportunity to discover the perceptions of a Head Start program by providing an opportunity to explore and understand the complexities of family engagement in the Head Start program.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in qualitative research is to attempt to access the thoughts and feelings of study participants (Sutton & Austin, 2015). As the sole researcher, I sought to understand and record the perceptions of educators and parents at the Head Start program. My services as a mentor coach for the educators did not include directly supervising and or managing the educators and parents at the Head Start program but merely involved providing professional services. During this study, I had no prior acquaintance with the parents at the Head Start program, and all participants took part in the study on a voluntary basis.

Throughout this basic qualitative study, a relationship and rapport with the educators and parents helped in retrieving authentic responses to the interview questions. I was honest and remained professional as data were obtained to ensure that participants were comfortable in their responses to the interview questions. The data collection

process required participants to have a sense of security and trust. A primary responsibility of the researcher is to safeguard participants and their data. Mechanisms for such safeguarding must be clearly articulated to participants (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

Before interviews were conducted, educators and parents were given a brief background on my professional role, as well as an explanation of the nature and purpose of the study and how the results would be conveyed. When qualitative researchers fail to recognize the crucial importance of reliability and validity in qualitative methods, they are also mistakenly supporting the idea that qualitative research is defective and worthless, lacking in thoroughness, and of unempirical value (Amankwaa, 2016). To ensure reliability and credibility, it was crucial to accurately capture and report the experiences of the participants and avoid personal interpretations and bias in the interview responses. Creswell (2013) described the danger of establishing rapport with participants to the point that one loses objectivity and instead sees only the positive side of what participants report, resulting in a skewed depiction of participants' experiences, another reason that an accurate recording of the data was essential for ensuring reliability.

As a previous mentor coach consultant, I understood that my professional relationship with the educators at the Head Start program could have some biases and ethical concerns in collecting data based on educator responses. Therefore, it was essential that data were not misinterpreted and personal attitudes and thoughts in the responses to the interview questions were alleviated. Although researcher bias is an inevitable consequence of one's experiences and values, being reflective and candid in acknowledging biases would lessen its influence on this study.

Methodology

Creswell (2013) outlined a five-step process for conducting qualitative research. Merriam & Tisdell (2016) mentioned that qualitative researchers conducting a basic qualitative study would be interested in how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences. A basic qualitative study was the best approach for acquiring an in-depth understanding of the views of educators and parents at the Head Start program. This basic qualitative study consisted of educators and parents of preschool children at the Head Start program. To collect data to answer the research questions, semistructured interviews were conducted with 10 classroom educators, and five one-on-one interviews were conducted with parents from the same Head Start program (see Appendix A). In determining the sample size, the purpose of the basic qualitative study, which was to gain insight into the Head Start setting, was considered. Educators and parents were invited to participate in the study. A smaller sample size would have been sufficient to get a deeper understanding of participants' perceptions but still large enough to capture the essence of the study. The goal was to recruit approximately 10 educators and five parents from the Head Start program through invitational letters sent out to educators and parents interested in participating in the study. Semi structured interviews with educators and parents enabled me to collect rich data to answer the research questions, which were as follows:

- RQ1. What are Head Start educators' perceptions of family engagement in the Head Start program?
- RQ2. How do Head Start educators engage parents in the Head Start program?

RQ3. What are parents' perceptions of family engagement in the Head Start program?

Participant Selection

Participant selection began after Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from both Walden University and the Head Start program's director in which I planned to conduct research. Criteria for participation in this study for educators indicated that all participating classroom teachers needed to be employed as a teacher or assistant teacher in the Head Start program during the time of the study in addition to devoting some time for the interviews, which would not take away from school instruction or planning time. According to Lodico et al. (2010), "the most important consideration in sampling for any qualitative study is that the individuals have information or experiences related to the research questions that they are willing to share" (p. 163). This study was available to Head Start educators of any gender, ethnic or cultural background, or family configuration. Educator participants were recruited through a letter drafted to educators explaining the descriptions of the intent of the study. The letters invited interested Head Start educators to contact me by phone, text, or email to volunteer for the study. Consent forms were attached to the invitation letters so that educators could read and email them back prior to the interview if they liked. Confirmation that volunteers had met the criteria for participation in the study was delivered through email.

The criteria for participation for parents in this study encompassed parents who had a child enrolled at the research site during the time of the study and were not

educators themselves in the Head Start program. This alleviated any biases that might have affected data interpretation during the time of the study. Invitational letters were drafted and reviewed with permission from the educational director and educators of the program to be given to parents. The letters invited interested Head Start parents to contact me by phone, text, or email to volunteer for the study. Consent forms were attached to the invitation letters so that educators could read and sign them prior to the interview if they wished to do so. Confirmation that educators had met the criteria for participation in the study was sent through email. The study was offered to Head Start parents of any gender, ethnic or cultural background, or family.

Instrumentation

An interview protocol was created and used for data collection (Appendices A & B). Young et al. (2018) mentioned that interviews allow a researcher to focus on the interviewee's perspective on what is important or relevant, thereby potentially highlighting issues that the interviewer might not have considered. Interview questions were aligned with the research questions, which were based on the literature review. The intent was to create questions that participants would understand and to ensure that the data collected would answer the research questions. Aligning the interview questions with the research questions would help to ensure content validity and the extent to answer the research questions (Lodico et al., 2010).

The semistructured format of the interview consisted of a follow-up on responses that were related to the research questions but not specifically included on the protocol, for the collection of deep and meaningful data to answer the research questions. A hard

copy of the informed consent and interview protocol were provided for participants (Appendices A, B, and C). Along with this protocol, I included my contact information, which was distributed to interview participants at the onset of the interview.

Yin (2014) described the following potential weaknesses of interviews as a source of data collection: poorly worded questions that contribute to bias; response bias; inaccuracies in reporting due to poor recall; and interview subjects providing the answers that they believe the researcher wants to hear. To avoid these and other issues of dependability, questions were carefully worded, and there was no need for revision throughout the course of the research. Responses consisted of an oral recording session that was audio recorded using my laptop and Zoom's recording platform. Interviews were transcribed verbatim immediately after each concluded.

Data were collected through semi structured interviews that took place in a private room at my home using the Zoom platform, at the convenience of each participant. Permission was granted by the Head Start program's administrator to collect data for this study (Appendix C). Interviews with educators and parents took place at various times of day due to educator and parent work and school schedules. The location of the interviews was secured and available for privacy. Semistructured interviews were used to facilitate a rich dialogue that provided insight into the views and experiences of the participants to answer the research questions. Interviewed participants were given the utmost respect for their responses to the interview questions. Interviews varied in length but were suitable based upon the participants' accommodations, and each participant was interviewed once.

Interviews were recorded with my personal audio laptop and Zoom equipment and saved on my personal computer hard drive, which was secured in a safe location at my home. Yin (2014) described the importance of receiving information through multiple modalities during the interview process, which involves not only listening and documenting answers without bias, but also capturing the mood and emotions of the interviewee and understanding the context of their experiences as well. The semi structured format of the interviews provided opportunities to use probes to delve into unexpected themes that emerged throughout the process (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007). At the end of the interview process, all participants had the opportunity to ask questions or address any concerns that they might have about the study. At the end of the interviews, participants were presented with a Visa gift card for their participation in the study.

Data Analysis Plan

Data were collected from the interviews to understand the perceptions of educators and parents at the Head Start program regarding family engagement. An interview protocol based on the research questions provided insight into how educators and parents perceived family engagement at the Head Start program. Data analysis involves organizing data into manageable units that can be fully examined, synthesized, and scrutinized (Bogden & Biklin, 2007). Data were analyzed in participant groups based on educators' and parents' status to identify similarities and differences in perceptions. Prior to data analysis, audio recordings and notes were manually transcribed immediately upon completion of each interview.

Data analysis began with a search for patterns and themes through a process of coding. Coding enables the researcher to begin to understand the world from each participant's perspective (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Coding strategies were used to identify themes in research. I began a preliminary exploratory analysis by reading through the interview transcripts to acquire an overall sense of the data that had been collected, making note of potential themes in the transcripts. As data were reviewed, the identification of ideas and concepts related to the research questions took place. All data were examined for accuracy and for evidence of differing perspectives.

Trustworthiness

The value of a research study is strengthened by its trustworthiness (Amankwaa, 2016). Trustworthiness in qualitative research encompasses several factors: credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and authenticity (Connelly, 2016). I ensured credibility, or confidence in the outcomes of the study, with a consistent interview process, framed by an interview protocol, which employed effective interview strategies whereby I delved into the thoughts and experiences of participants and carefully listened to their responses to the interview questions. Accuracy of the data were ensured by emailing each participant a copy of the interview transcript, inviting them to review the transcript for accuracy and clarifying or correcting points as necessary. Transferability in qualitative research is interpreted by the reader (Lodico et al., 2010), who determines the relevance of a study's findings to other sites. Transferability was ensured by providing thick descriptions that depicted a detailed picture of the perceptions of educators and parents in the Head Start program, providing sufficient detail to enable the reader to

determine whether the research is relevant to them. With clear portrayals of the individuals, their responses and reactions, the setting, the climate, and the thoughts and experiences of educators and parents at the Head Start program, readers will be able to evaluate the study's relevance to their own setting (Amankwaa, 2016).

Dependability ensured an audit trail that included detailed note taking and audio recording of my interviews and by establishing uniform interview conditions, ensuring transparency in the research process. Raw data, the analysis process, correspondence, and all other notes related to this study were recorded. Triangulation was achieved by collecting sources of data, providing insights from educators and parents.

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the results of the study reflect the perspectives of the participants, rather than the researcher's interpretation (Amankwaa, 2016). To ensure confirmability, an audit trail was completed which included a detailed description of the research process from data collection to reporting findings. Data was reported based on participants' responses and was not influenced by researcher bias. The coding process, personal thoughts, interpretations of data, and a rationale for determining themes and patterns were documented.

Ethical Procedures

Bias can occur at any phase of research, including study design or data collection, as well as in the process of data analysis and publication (Pannucci & Wilkins, 2010). Burkholder et al. (2016) mentioned that as a researcher, one must be careful to avoid bias, or the tendency to prejudice or unduly influence the process or results of a research project, p. 240). The authors also state that researchers should be constantly aware of

one's feelings, opinions, and prejudices, and or idea of what you might find. To ensure this study was carried out in the most appropriate manner possible, anticipation of any ethical matters, including those related to bias and confidentiality, were addressed beforehand by adhering strictly to clear and consistent research procedures. Qualitative work requires reflection on the part of researchers, both before and during the research process, as a way of providing context and understanding for readers (Sutton & Austin, 2015). While reflecting throughout this study, an organized unified system was set in place in collecting and analyzing data.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection is another area in which ethical procedures are critical. For the beginning stage of collecting data, entering the Head Start program without disrupting the learning environment, and disclosing when there may be a disruption, was a priority throughout the duration of this study. The interview protocol was utilized to ensure that the process was consistent across participants and that probing questions were not asked. Collected data remained secured in a locked location and identifying information was stored in a separate location to which only I had access to. All data will be destroyed after five years from the conclusion of the study and data will be reported anonymously so that participants cannot be identified.

At the end of this study, data may be shared with the staff at the Head Start program in either written or verbal form, but participants will remain anonymous. Data analysis presents another opportunity for researcher bias, and therefore it will be vital to impartially accept all study results, not just those that reflect personal beliefs or

expectations. To avoid biases during analysis and reporting, I will remain open to data or evidence that may be contrary to my expectations based on my review of the research.

Summary

A basic qualitative study at the Head Start program was undertaken to explore the perceptions of educators and parents regarding family engagement. Using Epstein's framework of parent involvement, semi-structured interviews were conducted of educators and parents to acquire thick descriptions of the individuals, school setting, interactions between educators and parents, and other factors that influence family engagement. Understanding the perceptions that may influence family engagement may provide valuable data to head start programs that potentially increase family engagement and foster student achievement. Chapter 4 will describe the findings of this study in detail.

Chapter 4: Results

A basic qualitative study was conducted to explore educators' and parents' perceptions of family engagement in the Head Start program. Ten educators and five parents were interviewed to acquire an understanding of how they perceived family engagement. Exploring educators' and parents' perceptions of family engagement, may help inform ways educators and parents engage in children's learning at a Head Start program to promote student academic achievement. In Chapter 4, I describe the study setting, demographics, data collection, data analysis, and evidence of trustworthiness. I then present results organized by research questions, concluding with a summary of the data. Open-ended interview questions in this study allowed participants to openly express their thoughts. Interview responses were analyzed, organized, and coded for both educators and parents to find themes used for meaning-making purposes.

Setting

Participants were recruited from a Head Start program located in Maryland. The Head Start program served over 300 low-income children and families. The student body was comprised of children ranging in age from 3 to 5 years during the time of data collection. The program operated on a hybrid learning model due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. In-person and virtual learning were being conducted by the educators of the Head Start program. Educators and parents were both at home and at school during the time of data collection. The participants did not report any significant personal issues that were ongoing at the time of the interviews.

Demographics

The sample consisted of 10 Head start educators and five Head Start parents, all of whom were female. As a condition of eligibility for the study, all educators were currently employed as teachers, and all parents had a child enrolled at the Head Start program. Six educators held the position of lead teacher, while four educators were assistants. Participants' years of teaching experience ranged from 3 to 36 years. Within the sample, all parents had a high school diploma, with two parents having some college credits. Detailed demographic information for the sample is presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1*Teachers/Educators*

Participant	Gender	Educator's age	Position	Level of education
T1	Female	50 and older	Lead teacher	MEd—Early Childhood Education
T2	Female	35 and older	Lead teacher	BS—Early Childhood Education
T3	Female	50 and older	Lead teacher	Associate's—Early Childhood Education
T4	Female	50 and older	Lead teacher	BS—Early Childhood Education
T5	Female	50 and older	Assistant teacher	High school diploma
T6	Female	35 and older	Assistant teacher	High school diploma
T7	Female	35 and older	Assistant teacher	BS—Early Childhood Education
T8	Female	21 and older	Lead teacher	BS—Early Childhood Education
T9	Female	35 and older	Lead teacher	Associate's—Early Childhood Education
T10	Female	50 and older	Assistant teacher	High school diploma

Table 2*Parents/Caregivers*

Participants	Parents' age	Single parent	More than one child attending program	Highest level of education
P1	21 and older	No	No	High school diploma— Some college
P2	35 and older	Yes	No	High school diploma
P3	21 and older	Yes	No	High school diploma
P4	21 and older	Yes	No	High school diploma
P5	21 and older	Yes	No	High school diploma— Some college

Data Collection

The Head Start program's director was contacted for permission to conduct the study. After receiving the director's permission and Walden IRB approval (IRB #04-22-21-0762837), I sent emails to educational directors to obtain educators' and parents' email addresses. Once email addresses were obtained, an invitational letter and consent forms were sent to parents and educators by email. Consent emails were received from seven educators to participate in the study. One teacher replied to participate but did not respond to any emails after 2 weeks. The following week, three additional consent forms were received from educators to participate. Educators were contacted via email to schedule interviews. Parents were recruited through a letter that was sent inviting them to contact me via phone or email. Five parents indicated their interest in participating by stating in the email that they consented to participate in the study. It was critical when

contacting potential participants that the parameters of the study were clearly explained to individuals who were contacted to ensure that they understood what they were volunteering for.

Interviews took place from April 29 to June 4, 2021 and ranged in length from 30–60 minutes. An interview protocol was used to ensure that interviews were consistent (see Appendices A and B). Interviews were recorded on my personal laptop with a recording device and through Zoom. Recordings were manually transcribed immediately following each interview, allowing me to acquire an initial sense of the data collected.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and themes for this study. Thematic analysis is the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data (Marguire & Delahaunt, 2017). By reading through the transcriptions of educators' interviews followed by parent interviews, I sought to acquire an overall sense of the data collected, making note of potential themes in the transcript margins. Data were gathered to find relevant potential themes, and initial codes were assigned to the data. A search for meanings from data emerged in the coding process. Codes were then reviewed in comparison to Epstein's parental involvement model, which aided in the search of potential themes based on the responses of the participants regarding how educators and parents perceived family engagement at the Head Start program. A definition and identification of themes were then developed from the review of data. Data from the research questions were used to get a better understanding of the participants' responses during the data collection process. To identify any common issues or concerns, a

description of data were created. Furthermore, thematic coding was used to combine and synthesize these categories, identifying the following primary themes related to family engagement: supportive learning, educators' attitudes, preparedness, training, communication, home learning activities, parent supportive learning, and challenges.

Results

In this section, I present results based on the research questions and describe emerging themes. Themes are discussed in further detail in the following section.

Research Question 1

Educators were asked to define family engagement and to describe the importance of family engagement. T3 defined family engagement as having the parents participate in all aspects of the learning process of their child. Furthermore, T2 mentioned that family engagement consists of educators being involved with the families and building a connection with the families. Educators also described the importance of family engagement; T1 stated that "family engagement is especially important to children's academic progress." All educators mentioned that family engagement was a critical component of a child's academic success and that family engagement is a part of the Head Start performance standards. Several educators indicated that there are numerous family engagement activities that must take place in order for the program to be in compliance. This is consistent with Smith's (2019) research, which indicated that teachers have reported family-school engagement as a priority in their schools. Educators were passionate in expressing that family engagement is essential to building positive relationships and that family engagement is a performance standard required of Head

Start programs. Themes that emerged were supportive learning, educators' attitudes, preparedness, and training.

Supportive Learning

Educators' descriptions of family engagement included their role in supporting students learning at school. All educators mentioned that their role is important and plays an intricate part in preparing students to enter kindergarten. T4 described her role as exposing students to different things such as problem solving and being independent. T4 elaborated on how cultivating prereadiness skills is important because when students leave a particular Head Start program and progress to kindergarten, other educators are expecting them to have learned something. T4 stated, "It's not like it used to be, they are really expecting them to know something especially those prereadiness skills."

Furthermore, educators discussed how to effectively help prepare parents for students to be ready to enter kindergarten and indicated that holding teachers accountable comes by way of working with parents in their role to support student learning. T5 mentioned that to meet children where they are, at their level, is important and described her role as a communicator as a factor in partnering with parents, in that educators play a big role in a child's development.

Some educators described their role as serving as facilitators of learning and teaching students what is expected from the program's curriculum. T6 stated, "my role is to make sure that I teach the kids how to learn their numbers, alphabet, and skills for them to go on in life for them to enter school." T7 said, "it is an important role, it's important for the teachers and parents to come together, the teacher needs to know what

the parents are doing at home and the parents need to know what the teachers are doing so that they can be an assistant.” This discussion led to revealing that both educators and parents need to have some knowledge of what is being taught in the classroom for effective student outcomes. In addition, communication was mentioned as essential and as being used daily among educators and parents to convey what is expected from the program to help support student learning. T9 stated, “I am a facilitator, so I just help the child to bloom and blossom along with helping the child bring out their best selves. By presenting materials and studies, the children can explore their surroundings and environment and learn from whatever we are focusing on.” T10 expressed that her role is to help children learn. She stated, “wherever their level is, you can take them from one level to the next. All children don’t learn alike, so my job is to teach that child on their own individual level.”

In summary, educators defined family engagement as educators and parents working together. Furthermore, educators described family engagement as an important component of student academic achievement and indicated that their role consisted of being supportive of the learning while preparing students for kindergarten. These findings are consistent with Joshi et al.’s (2016) research, which revealed that evidence from rigorous studies had shown that Head Start has a positive average impact on school readiness at kindergarten.

Educators’ Attitudes

In addition to supportive learning as a theme from Research Question 1, educators’ attitudes about family engagement were discovered with this research

question. All educators viewed their motivation as positive in promoting family engagement in the Head Start program. Teachers' attitudes about family engagement ranged from feelings of loving their job to some anxiety because of overwhelming educational tasks. T7 said, "I feel motivated especially if the families are respectful and as long as they are doing good by the teachers, and it seems like they are invested in their child, then I feel very motivated." T10 mentioned that every time she and families came together as a group to do different activities, she was enthused and happy, because without those parents, there would be no Head Start program. She further emphasized that having a positive attitude toward families is important and that without those families, there would be no jobs for educators at a Head Start program. T6 stated, "I think my motivation is very good because I am a people person, I love engaging with the parents even though we are at a standstill because of COVID-19." T6 went on to express that due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, feelings of uncertainty had come about due to the changes in how students were learning, along with parent interactions. Most educators discussed how, despite changes due to the pandemic, they continued to be optimistic while navigating ways to effectively engage students and families in the Head Start program.

There were certain factors that influenced teachers' attitudes toward whether or not educators were able to engage families in the Head Start program. T1 expressed that sometimes she felt frustrated because she needed to convince families to get additional assistance for their child with language concerns, disabilities, and additional learning concepts. T2 said, "I try my best to engage the parents. I try not and make them feel

frustrated especially during COVID-19 pandemic where everyone is learning virtually.”

“I make families feel welcomed and try to help the families by providing resources to the families.”

T4 described paperwork as a big factor in her attitude and position on effectively engaging families. T4 mentioned that Head Start is a paper trail and that teachers must always keep abreast on the documentation of children and progress reports, noting that this obligation had created a hindrance in engaging families in the program due to the time required for writing and organizing reports. Educators indicated that documentation of children’s progress in areas such as attendance, health, and social and emotional components was a major priority for educators. This discussion revealed that keeping abreast of all of the documentation and attending to other program needs can be tedious as educators are trying to engage families.

T5 mentioned that educators must be in a position where they can let parents know what the program and its teachers have to offer their child. She mentioned that supervisors, directors, and family service coordinators must all be involved and that everyone must play a role in engaging these parents, not just the teachers.

T8 noted that having a lot of English language learners (ELLs) in her class made it difficult for her to effectively engage families. She went on to explain that during one school year, she had many ELLs, which made it challenging at times to effectively communicate with parents due to her not being able to speak their language. She mentioned that sometimes she would have to wait for someone to interpret or help parents understand what was going on in the classroom.

Many teachers described the effects of COVID-19 and learning virtually as a major factor in how they felt about engaging families. With online learning and the need to provide families with the appropriate resources to continue student learning, feelings of uncertainty were present, but educators seem to remain positive about continuing to engage parents despite the many changes that the program had faced.

Preparedness

Educators described their preparedness to engage families in the Head Start program that aligned with how they perceive family engagement. I coded each teacher's beliefs about the extent to which they felt they were prepared to engage families at the Head Start program. Educators were asked how prepared they felt in engaging parents involving the learning of Head Start students. Most of the teachers indicated that they were prepared to engage families at the Head Start program. T1- stated she prepares herself at the beginning of the school year to get to know the families. She furthered explained that home visits, back to school nights, and speaking with the families help prepare her to build a relationship with the families. T3- said, "I am always hyped and prepared to engage my families." T5 reiterated that she is prepared to engage the families and once she finds out about an event or activity, she is ready. However, T4- mentioned that she was not as confident to prepare her families to engage in the students' learning due to the new curriculum that has started at the head start program. She went on to explain that the new curriculum has aspects of family engagement and that she is still getting adjusted to how to implement the new curriculum to her students and families which involves family engagement. T8- said, "I was not prepared last year due to it being

my first years as a lead teacher at the Head Start program., but as time moved on during my teaching experience, I felt more confident as a young and new teacher to engage families.” T8- furthered explained that because she was new and young, she could relate to those younger parents but felt at times that she had to prove herself that she could facilitate student learning. She stated, “some parents were a little apprehensive in having a younger teacher but also that some could relate to her being a young teacher.” T7- had a different perspective in her preparedness, she stated, she was somewhat prepared, however revealed that it would be more appropriate for administrators to inform teachers about the different types of family engagement activities that take place at the program ahead of time so that she is more prepared for the activities for families. This is applicable to research by Jung & Sheldon’s (2020), which stated that school leadership could impact ways in which teachers interact with families. T7-further discussed that knowing these activities by Head Start directors and administrators in advance could help her come up with strategies in getting her families to participate or attend the activities focused on student learning.

Training

In addition to preparation as a theme, training was also an emerging theme that aligned with this research question. Some educators indicated that they have training, and workshops focused on family engagement. T3- said, “I think the training/workshops are great, we can obtain knowledge. However, the professional development that they receive could be better.” She emphasized that professional development is only what the administrators give you and not necessarily relevant to the classroom practices that focus

on engaging families. T4- mentioned that she was not impressed with the professional development and training that she receives. She felt that time spent in training is not productive and just a requirement to fulfill for the program. Some teachers expressed they have not received any training on family engagement and that they could receive more training focused on family engagement to help them become more prepared to engage families. This is relevant to Smith's (2019), research which stated that when trained in family-school engagement, teachers often feel more confident and knowledgeable about working with families, in addition to improving the way they interact and work with families. T2- reiterated that she could have more training and the energy at the training could be better like with teachers and administrators attitudes and more training for the families on how they could be engaged. Teachers described the training that they have received about family engagement. Several teachers mentioned that they have received training from programs called Child Care Education Institute, Teaching Strategies, Conscious Discipline, Mindfulness, and Second Step but could not recall any aspects of family engagement. In addition, some educators emphasized that the training and professional development that they receive is tiresome and should be provided with more hands-on activities instead of sitting still for long periods of time.

Research Question 2

Educators described how they engage parents at the Head Start program. Themes that emerged were communication and home learning activities.

Communication

Educators described communication as an important aspect of how to engage parents in the Head Start program. Communication emerged as a theme from the research question of how educators engage families at the Head Start program. Teachers were asked how they engage families at the head start program. Coady (2019), indicated that research on family engagement suggests that teachers and educational leaders communicate with families and ensure that families participate in their child's learning both in school and at home. This is consistent with the findings that all teachers revealed using different forms of communication to engage families at the Head Start program were important to children's learning. T6- said, "we contact families through emails, phone, and through newsletters and because of Covid-19 we use CLASS dojo to inform parents of activities." She described CLASS dojo as an effective tool to get information across to families virtually and hopes to see this being used for future purposes as another means of communicating to families. T7-said, "sometimes I text parents as well." T5 described by talking to families, you can invite them to volunteer. However, T1- stated that it is hard to communicate to all the parents because of different work schedules or other persons dropping off and picking up the children. She went on to discuss how sometimes she does not see parents for long periods of time due to conflicting work schedules and other family obligations and may engage more with family relatives and friends. T3- explained that things have changed due to students learning online but felt that using virtual technology and class dojo have been helpful in engaging families. Most teachers indicated that establishing a good relationship with the parents can contribute to

good communication in engaging them at the Head Start program. T10-said,” that I greet them in the morning and make them feel welcomed. We orally tell them about activities and our newsletters along with our lesson plans are shared on class dojo.” T8- also mentioned that she tells the parents of the different activities that occur in the classroom in addition to asking parents if they had a special talent that they would like to share with the students. Many teachers revealed that getting to know the parents first through communication is a way to get them engaged at the Head Start program.

Home Learning Activities

Educators described the significance of home learning activities as a way of engaging the parents at the head start program. Most teachers indicated the use of home learning activities that are shared with the parents, could support the child with their learning and support student academic achievement among head start students. T1- mentioned that home learning packets are given every week that go with the lesson plans and that we ask parents to help the children with the activities so that they also know what the children are learning. T3- said,” home learning activities and things of this nature is a way we get parents to be engaged.” T4-stated,” home learning activities would be sent home daily. We would know who did them and who did not. If you took home learning activities seriously and everyone did them, you would see fantastic engagement.” T8- described reading, arts and crafts, and tell me about your family home activities were effective in engaging families. T5- stated, “when we send homework home to them and ask the parents to read a book or talk to the child at home, these are things that can help with their critical thinking skills at home.” T6 said, “by giving the

children home learning activities, the parent can do with their child one on one and we can ask parents if they need any support in life that can help them do the assignments at home.” These findings are consistent with Jung & Sheldon’s (2020) research which stated that by supporting and guiding families to discuss homework and activities with their children at home is one way that teachers could partner with families.

Research Question 3

Parents’ described their perceptions of family engagement in the Head Start program. Themes that emerged were parent supportive learning and challenges.

Parent Supportive Learning

Parents being supportive of their child’s learning emerged as a theme for this research question. Joshi et.al (2016) in their study mentioned that a distinctive feature of Head Start’s child services is the emphasis on family involvement, where parents are viewed as partners in service delivery. Parents were asked to define family engagement and to describe the importance of family engagement. P4- described family engagement as attention, talking, and getting an understanding of your child and the teacher. She went on to explain that family engagement makes it better for the child; it involves building a relationship from both parties. P1-said,” family engagement is very important because you have to work together as a team, because when they come home, whatever lessons they learn that day, you have to see them continue to grow and learn.” “My mom says it takes a village and so teachers are a part of that village.” P2- revealed that family engagement was a good thing, and that family engagement is very important especially with children’s learning skills. P3- explained that family engagement is doing stuff

together as a family along with the teachers. P3 emphasized that family engagement is very important to a child's well-being. She expressed some children don't have a secure home life and that school sometimes is the only place where children can be provided with the appropriate resources for student learning. Single parent households, employment, and children's basic needs such as food and clothing were noted factors in determining the effectiveness of family engagement from parents. In addition, P5 said that- family engagement is being with your family and doing activities together. "Family engagement is very important, it is the number one thing, and it is a time where everyone can come together and share any concerns or thoughts they may have."

Parents' Role to Support Learning

Parents from the Head Start program revealed that their role was significant in supporting their child's learning. These responses were aligned with supporting the learning of their child at the Head Start program. Parents from the Head Start program revealed that their role was significant in supporting their child's learning. P1 described her role as being incredibly significant and that she has always been a proponent for education. She explained that her role is to help him with the learning of things and to know what's going on in the program. P2 said, "her role was to support her child's learning in any way she could." P3 revealed that she asks her child what she learned every day from school while P4 said, I am the second teacher. P5 mentioned that she makes sure her child is there every day at school and that they are ready to learn while trying to avoid any stresses and to remain positive. She expressed that her job was to make her child comfortable so that he is ready to learn and is provided with the resources

to help him achieve. All parents mentioned that they were motivated to engage with their children and that they were ready to support their child's learning, despite receiving no training or workshops involving family engagement in the Head Start program. Research by Marti et al. (2018) states that intervention which aims to simultaneously target three main school readiness areas: literacy, math, and self-regulation are based on that children learn best when receiving high-quality, reinforced learning opportunities both at home and in school settings. This is consistent with these findings that all parents mentioned that in supporting their child's learning, family engagement activities that included literacy, science, math, arts and crafts were helpful in being engaged at home and in the Head Start program.

Challenges

COVID-19 Pandemic. Parents revealed some factors that may influence whether or not they are able to engage in the Head Start program. These factors revealed some challenges to how they perceive family engagement. P2, P3, and P5 mentioned they do a lot of family engagement activities with their child and at the program but were limited because of the COVID-19 pandemic and learning virtually. P2 said, "we do a lot of activities together, almost every single day." P5 said, "I cannot physically go into the classroom because of COVID-19 pandemic, which interferes with engaging in the Head Start program." P5 further described how she was prepared to engage in the Head Start program this year but last year she was not due to COVID-19. She explained she was not prepared to be learning with her child virtually. P1 said, "efforts to engage have been harder due to making sure that her child was online learning every day." All parents

explained that the COVID-19 pandemic played a role in how they now engage in the Head Start program. P2 and P5 mentioned helping and volunteering more would be better in engaging at the Head Start program but because of the restrictions set in place from the schools, from the COVID-19 pandemic, made it difficult to engage.

Work Schedules. Head Start parents revealed work schedules were also another challenge to family engagement at the Head Start program. P3 mentioned that there were no factors that influenced whether or not she was able to engage. However, she expressed she would like to drop off her child in the morning more but could not, due to having to be at work at the same time. Shen furthered explained she wished she could change her work schedule so that she could attend some of the activities at school. This is consistent with research by Liang's et al. (2020) that indicated that, research findings have revealed that limited parental involvement in the school was often due to demands on parents' time and attention, including having a schedule that conflicted with the school's activities, P1 and P4 revealed that their work schedules conflicted with being able to engage at the program. P1 said, "Work schedules coincide with some of the activities so it can be kind of crazy." P4 mentioned that she is motivated to engage however, my work schedule is during the same time she attends school and that she could improve in this area, but work makes it difficult to change schedules. Some parents indicated that being the only parent in the household made it difficult to alternate work schedules with another parent. Despite these challenges, all the parents stated that they were prepared and motivated to engage in the Head Start program.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research encompasses several factors: Credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity (Polit & Beck, 2014). Credibility was ensured by employing an interview protocol with research participants. Interviews were recorded and immediately transcribed. Accuracy of data was confirmed by inviting participants to review the transcript for accuracy and clarifying or correcting points as necessary. No participants volunteered any clarifications or corrections to the transcript. Transferability was ensured by providing thick descriptions that depicted a detailed picture of the perceptions of educators' and parents in the Head Start program. These descriptions provide in detail the feelings, actions, and meanings conveyed by the speaker, providing a detailed account of the experiences and perceptions of the interview participants. While interviews were being recorded, notes were taken throughout, to capture the essence of participant responses. Descriptions were individually recorded, then compiled and grouped together to identify major themes. Dependability was attained with an audit trail that included detailed note taking and audio recordings of interviews by establishing uniform interview conditions, ensuring transparency in the research process. Triangulation was achieved by collecting data of educators' and parents' perceptions of family engagement from the Head Start program. Interview questions for all participants were constant for all participants and were compiled and examined to identify themes and patterns from the data (Creswell, 2012). Confirmability was attained by completing an audit trail which included a detailed description of the research process from data collection to reporting findings, confirming that the data reported were based

on participant responses, and not influenced by researcher bias. Documentation of the coding process, personal thoughts, interpretations of the data, and rationale for determining themes and patterns were created. In addition, a reflexivity journal of thoughts and responses were recorded to capture the research process. An on-going reflection of this study as data were being collected, allowed opportunities to recognize and avoid researcher bias based on personal assumptions.

Summary

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore educators and parents' perceptions of family engagement at a Head Start program. Ten educators and five parents were interviewed to acquire insights into their perceptions of family engagement. This study was designed to address the following questions:

- RQ1. What are Head Start educators' perceptions of family engagement in the Head Start program?
- RQ2. How do Head Start educators engage parents in the Head Start program?
- RQ3. What are parents' perceptions of family engagement in the Head Start program?

Data were coded and separated into eight themes from the research questions: Supportive learning, educators' attitudes, preparedness, training, communication, home learning activities, parent supportive learning, and challenges. Educators and parents had similar definitions and descriptions of the importance of family engagement. Both educators and parents described family engagement as an important factor and that their role was to be supportive of their student and child's learning at the Head Start program.

Educators' attitudes about family engagement were positive and they were motivated to engage families at the Head Start program. In addition to educators' attitudes about family engagement, educators described their perceptions of being prepared to engage families. Most educators felt that they were prepared to engage families, however some educators mentioned that as time went on in their teaching career that they felt more prepared and that with early notification of family engagement activities, would help them become more prepared to engage families along with a review and time to implement new curriculum that is aligned with family engagement activities.

Furthermore, educators described their training involving family engagement. Some educators expressed that they have received some training and professional development involving family engagement but could receive more with engaging activities during the training. Educators described how they engage families at the Head Start program.

Educators described communication and home learning activities as a form of engaging families while supporting students' learning.

Parents from the Head Start program defined and described family engagement as being an important factor in supporting their child's learning. Parents emphasized their role to support their child's learning. All parents indicated they have not received any training or workshops that focus on family engagement but are provided with family enrichment activities. Also, parents highlighted that learning activities such as reading, math, science, and arts and crafts were effective family engagement activities that support student academic achievement and a way to be engaged in their child's learning. Parents also addressed some challenges in being engaged in the Head Start program. The

COVID- 19 pandemic and parents' work schedules were noted as challenges to being engaged.

Chapter 5 will address my conclusions and interpretation of study results, implications for social change, and recommendations for further study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

A basic qualitative study was undertaken to examine educator and parent perceptions of family engagement in a Head Start program. Ten educators and five parents were interviewed to acquire insights into their perceptions regarding family engagement in a Head Start program. To discover educator and parent perceptions of family engagement, three research questions were developed:

- RQ1. What are Head Start educators' perceptions of family engagement in the Head Start program?
- RQ2. How do Head Start educators engage parents in the Head Start program?
- RQ3. What are parents' perceptions of family engagement in the Head Start program?

Data were examined and sorted, and eight major themes emerged: supportive learning, educators' attitudes, preparedness, training, communication, home learning activities, parent supportive learning, and challenges. Educators and parents had similar definitions of family engagement, and all described family engagement as an important component of a child's academic success. Educators saw that activities were a way to get families engaged at the Head Start program. Educators expressed that they were prepared and motivated to engage the families. However, the need for more training and professional development involving family engagement was expressed. Parents also revealed that family engagement was important to supporting children's learning and that they were prepared and motivated to engage in the Head Start program. The COVID-19 pandemic and work schedules were identified as challenges to family engagement. This

chapter includes my interpretations of the data, study limitations, recommendations for further study, and implications for social change.

Interpretation of the Findings

This study explored educators' and parents' perceptions of family engagement at a Head Start program. RQ1 was as follows: What are Head Start educators' perceptions of family engagement in the Head Start program? The data analysis for RQ1 revealed four themes: educators' role in supporting students' learning, educators' attitudes, preparedness, and trainings. These findings revealed that there was a significant number of educators who believed that their role was to meet children where they are academically and to hold teachers accountable for providing learning opportunities to support student learning.

The second theme from this research question was educators' attitudes in engaging families at the Head Start program. Findings revealed that having a positive attitude was noted an important contributor to educators' feelings toward engaging families. Contrary to having a positive attitude, workload and educators' busy schedules were identified as barriers to having and maintaining a positive attitude. The third theme from RQ1 was educators' preparedness to engage families in the Head Start program. Educators felt prepared to engage families; however, there were some educators who felt that they were not prepared in the past due to unfamiliarity of new curriculum and the delay of information being relayed to educators regarding family engagement from administration. This is parallel to a research study by Jung & Sheldon (2020), which found that teachers' efforts are reinforced within the context of strong school leadership

driving a robust and well-functioning program of school, family, and community partnerships.

The last theme from RQ1 was training regarding family engagement in the Head Start program. Results indicated that training was an essential part of engaging families in the Head Start program. Despite some training being received, it was found that educators would like more professional development and training regarding ways to help engage families. Further discussion on giving educators a voice in future trainings was prominent in this finding.

RQ2 was as follows: How do Head Start educators engage families in the Head Start program? Two themes that emerged from this research question were communication and home learning activities. Findings revealed that communication was an important method to successfully engage parents in the Head Start program. Phone calls, emails, and volunteering were noted as prominent ways of communicating with parents. These approaches correspond with a research study that found that when teachers reach out to families and support their connections with schools, parent-teacher relationships improve, and children ultimately benefit (Smith, 2019). However, this is contrary to a study that found that teachers may have positive attitudes toward parent involvement in schools but many teachers feel that they do not know how to reach out to parents (D'Haem & Griswold, 2017). Results also indicated that home learning activities were viewed as an effective way to help children learn at home what was being taught at school in addition to preparing students for academic success. One of Epstein's parental involvement types, learning at home, confirms the understanding of how home learning

activities can contribute to effective ways to involve families. This is found to be consistent with Epstein's type of involvement of parenting, in that the educators and parents expressed that Head Start provides opportunities for families in the areas of nutrition, health, and other services for families, which combine with actively being engaged in the program to support student learning.

RQ3 was as follows: How do Head Start parents perceive family engagement in the Head Start program? Two themes that surfaced from the research question were parents' role in supporting learning and challenges. The definition of family engagement from parents revealed that family engagement plays an important role in children's lives and is a collaborative approach that involves participating in activities that assist with children's development and learning. Findings were consistent with a study by Liang et al. (2020), which found that while much of research on parental involvement is based on teachers 'and stakeholders' perspectives, parents' beliefs and practice are important. These results indicated a similar distinction to wanting children to succeed academically from educators and parents.

Contrary to educators and parents playing a supportive role in children's learning, there were challenges noted as barriers to family engagement. The COVID-19 pandemic was found as a challenge to engaging in the Head Start program for parents. Results indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic caused limitations to volunteer and participate in activities involving family engagement. The means to engage virtually was new for all parents, and some noted that they were not prepared to actively be engaged in the Head Start program. Work schedules were also found to be a contributing factor to family

engagement in the Head Start program. Results indicated that conflicting work schedules were a barrier to engaging in the Head Start program. This is parallel to Liang et al.'s (2020) finding that limited parental involvement in the school was often due to demands on parents' time and attention, including having a schedule that conflicted with the school's activities.

Epstein's ecological framework describing the six types of parental involvement in the education process informed the research questions, which were intended to uncover a deeper understanding of family engagement in a Head Start program. Within an ecological framework, family engagement is a shared responsibility, wherein both educators and parents play a vital role (Smith & Sheridan, 2019). This is consistent with the responses from educators and parents who revealed that family engagement was a collaborative approach, and that educators and parents play a vital role in the support of children's academic success. Additional findings revealed that Epstein's six types of parental involvement—parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community—are important components of facilitating family engagement in Head Start programs.

Social capital theory also framed this study. Social capital theory and the parent investment model propose that the more parents invest in their children, the better children's achievement and behavior will be. Findings from this study indicated that educators' and parents' efforts to invest in their child's education correspond with Ansari & Gershoff's (2016) study, which found that Head Start teachers can build parents' social capital by modeling cognitively stimulating activities. This is consistent with educators

and parents' responses to ways that they can implement learning opportunities for children's learning through participating in home learning activities and communicating regularly.

Limitations of the Study

To ensure trustworthiness, a consistent interview process was developed based on an interview protocol. The time-consuming process of conducting a basic qualitative research was a limitation to this study. To prevent burnout from affecting me and the participants, I developed a written schedule and plan to minimize the process of conducting interviews. Interviews were scheduled at the convenience of each study participant. Another limitation was the location of conducting interviews. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, data collection was limited to virtual or audio recordings. The Head Start program did not permit onsite visitors during the time of data collection. Educators and parents were interviewed through the Zoom platform or audio recording to minimize the risk of exposure to COVID-19.

Recommendations

Family engagement is increasingly recognized as a critical link in advancing school reform efforts (Wood & Bauman, 2017). Despite numerous benefits for children, teachers, and families alike, teachers often report being unprepared to work with and engage families in their children's education (Smith, 2019). Though some educators felt prepared and motivated to engage families in the Head Start program, a need for more training and professional development was identified to help educators become more prepared to engage families. An in-depth study that explores the content involving family

engagement from training and professional development may lend valuable knowledge toward understanding family engagement strategies presented at training. The parents from this Head Start program also reiterated that they had not received any training or workshops involving family engagement. Continued studies on content delivered in the parent meetings that involve family engagement may foster stronger parent partnerships at the Head Start program. This Head Start program could begin to offer family engagement training and workshops for both educators and parents to effectively foster family engagement for student academic success.

Educators expressed that administrators could assist with family engagement activities at the Head Start program. Jung & Sheldon (2020) revealed that there are positive connections between school leaders' actions to promote partnerships and the partnership practices of other school actors, including families and teachers. A qualitative study on how Head Start administrators perceive family engagement may provide further insight on how leadership perceives family engagement that impacts educators, children, and families at the Head Start program. In addition, educators emphasized their role in supporting student learning. Many educators mentioned that their role is to be a facilitator of student learning and to help prepare children and families to enter kindergarten.

One of the major ways that educators and parents engage in the Head Start program is through several means of communication. Communication was mentioned as the foundation to help educators and parents participate in student learning and help prepare students to enter kindergarten. Collaboration and communication among everyone involved is the most important part of achieving successful and seamless

transitions. A study that includes examining how different means of communication relate to family engagement practices and its contribution to school readiness may add knowledge to how educators and parents prepare students to enter school through the lens of communication.

Areas for additional research based on this study include exploring the challenges that parents face when engaging in the Head Start program. Parents identified work schedules as a challenge when engaging at the Head Start program; therefore, an increased understanding of how working parents perceive family engagement may provide further insight into how school leaders can understand the relationship between work schedules and family engagement activities in the Head Start program.

Implications for Social Change

This section describes the positive social change implications of this study. This study established a framework for how educators and parents from the Head Start program perceive family engagement. This study adds valuable insight to a limited field of research by addressing how educators support student learning and express their attitude toward family engagement, as well as their experiences with training and preparedness involving family engagement. This study also reflects parents' role in supporting their child's learning and the challenges faced with family engagement at the Head Start program. The information gained from the study may support positive social change, as educators and parents could use these findings to help inform ways to emphasize family engagement as a valuable tool to support children's learning. Moreover, the experiences shared from parents could provide additional knowledge of

how to address some of the challenges that families face involving family engagement that support student academic achievement for low-income children and families.

Furthermore, the results of this study may be used to assist educators and families to prepare children to enter kindergarten beginning at the Head Start level, by providing resources and strategies to increase family engagement that will help foster children's social interactions and support students' academic achievement.

Conclusion

Family engagement plays a vital role in children's academic success. There are positive outcomes for both children and families involving family engagement. This study of educators' and parents' perceptions at a Head Start program found several themes related to family engagement: supportive learning, educators' attitudes, training and preparedness, parent supportive learning, and challenges. Findings from this study revealed that educators 'and parents' role relating to family engagement was to support children's learning. These findings may lead to implementing strategies, resources, and training for both educators and parents that lead to fostering family engagement practices. This study provides educators and parents with an opportunity to use the results as a guide for potentially effective and innovative tools that can be used at Head Start programs involving family engagement.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol—Head Start Educators

QA. What is your gender? Male or Female

QB. What age range do you fall under? Are you between 21-35, 35-50, 50 and older?

QC. What is your current position at the Head Start program?

QD. How long have you been teaching at the Head Start program?

QE. What is your highest level of education?

1. How would you define family engagement in education?
2. How would you describe the importance of family engagement?
3. What do you see as your role in supporting your students learning at school?
4. What types of family engagement activities do you feel are effective in promoting student academic achievement among Head Start students?
5. How would you describe your Head Start programs activities that focus on family engagement?
6. How would you describe your motivation to engage families at your Head Start program?
7. What factors influence whether or not you are able to engage parents' in your students' learning as much as you would like to?
8. What efforts do you make to engage your student's parents at the Head Start program?

9. How prepared do you feel in engaging parents in the learning of Head Start students?
10. How could you as an educator of head start students, improve efforts to engage families at the Head Start program?
11. How would you describe your Head Start program's professional development involving family engagement?
12. What kind of trainings if any, have you received involving family engagement?
13. How does the socioeconomic status of Head Start parents influence family engagement at the Head Start program?
14. How do you think administrators could prepare educators to engage families at the Head Start program?

Appendix B: Interview Protocol—Parents/Caregivers

QA. What is your gender? Male or Female

QB. What age range do you fall under? Are you between 21-35, 35-50, 50 and older?

QC. Are you a single parent?

QD. Do you have more than one child attending the Head Start program?

QE. What is your highest level of education?

1. How would you define family engagement in education?
2. How would you describe the importance of family engagement?
3. What do you see as your role in supporting your students learning at school?
4. What types of family engagement activities do you feel are effective in promoting student academic achievement among Head Start students?
5. How would you describe your Head Start programs activities that focus on family engagement?
6. How would you describe your motivation in being involved at your Head Start program?
7. What factors influence whether or not you are able to engage in your child's learning as much as you would like to?
8. What efforts do you make to engage at the Head Start program that your child attends?

9. How prepared do you feel in being ready to engage in your child's learning at the Head Start program from the beginning of the school year?
10. How could you as parent/guardian of head start students, improve efforts to engage yourself at the Head Start program?
11. What kind of parent trainings or workshops if any, have you received involving family engagement?
12. How does the socioeconomic status of Head Start parents influence family engagement at the Head Start program?
13. How could your child's teacher and director improve efforts to engage you at home and at school in your child's learning?

Appendix C: Letter of Confidentiality

Name of Signer:

During the course of my activity in collecting data for this research: “Educators and Parents Perceptions of Family Engagement in a Head Start Program” I will have access to information, which is confidential and should not be disclosed. I acknowledge that the information must remain confidential, and that improper disclosure of confidential information can be damaging to the participant.

By signing this Confidentiality Agreement, I acknowledge and agree that:

1. I will not disclose or discuss any confidential information with others, including friends or family.
2. I will not in any way divulge, copy, release, sell, loan, alter or destroy any confidential information except as properly authorized.
3. I will not discuss confidential information where others can overhear the conversation. I understand that it is not acceptable to discuss confidential information even if the participant’s name is not used.
4. I will not make any unauthorized transmissions, inquiries, modification or purging of confidential information.
5. I agree that my obligations under this agreement will continue after termination of the job that I will perform.
6. I understand that violation of this agreement will have legal implications.
7. I will only access or use systems or devices I’m officially authorized to access, and I will not demonstrate the operation or function of systems or devices to unauthorized individuals.

Signing this document, I acknowledge that I have read the agreement and I agree to comply with all the terms and conditions stated above.

Signature:

Date:

Appendix D: Permission Letter

Re: Permission Letter

Oct 8 at 10:42 AM

To: sondeania johnson <sondeaniaj@yahoo.com>

Good morning sondeania,
Sure it's not a problem.

Thanks,
Director

From: sondeania johnson <sondeaniaj@yahoo.com>

Sent: Thursday, October 8, 2020 10:14 AM

To: Director

Subject: Re: Permission Letter

Good Morning!

Just a follow up on the request for permission to collect data(interview teachers and a few parents on topics of family engagement) in head start programs. Participation would be voluntary.

If you have any further questions or concerns you can contact me

Thank you!!

Ms. Sondeania Johnson(Ms. Sonny)

sondeaniaj@yahoo.com/(443) 655-6778

On Monday, October 5, 2020, 03:11:28 PM EDT