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Perspectives of Elementary Classroom Teachers About Family Volunteer Presence and Student Performance

Rachel Miller
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Walden University
2018

Abstract

Perspectives of Elementary Classroom Teachers About Family Volunteer Presence and

Student Performance

by

Rachel Elisabeth Miller

MA, University of Cincinnati, 2010

BS, Miami University, 2006

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Leadership, Policy, and Change in Education

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Abstract

While researchers have explored various aspects of the family volunteer presence in the classroom, little is known pertaining to the perceptions of teachers regarding this phenomenon, specifically as it relates to fifth grade student reading comprehension. The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' perceptions of family volunteers' presence and its influence on fifth grade student reading comprehension. The works of Patton and of Epstein informed this study. The research questions explored teachers' perception of benefits and challenges of the family volunteers' presence. Data were collected via interviews with 8 experienced fifth grade teachers who have worked with a family volunteers in the classroom for at least 1 school year. Interpretive phenomenological analysis of these data revealed that despite some challenges teachers perceived the family volunteer presence positively. Teachers indicated they wanted additional professional development regarding family volunteers and how to enhance relationships with them. Teachers expressed interest in orientations with family volunteers and suggested targeting older members of the families, perhaps grandparents, because these members were more available to be in the classrooms. They recommended more preparation for new teachers about working with classroom volunteers. These findings are relevant to positive social change as they can inform better practices and decisions regarding the use of family volunteers in the classroom to support student reading comprehension goals.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

In many schools, family volunteers are used to supplement regular classroom instruction (Liu, Black, Algina, Cavanaugh, & Dawson, 2010). The ability of teachers to effectively use family volunteers in the classroom can be affected by their preexisting attitudes towards family volunteers. Other barriers affecting teacher connections with families include large classroom size or cultural differences (Crea, Reynolds, & Degnan, 2015). While family involvement has been substantiated as having a positive impact upon a student's educational performance, research indicates that teachers play a vital role in the success of family involvement in the classroom (Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salina, Jansom, & Voorhis, 2002; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Fan & Chen, 2001). Dor (2012) found in a qualitative interview study exploring counselor and teacher perceptions of parent involvement that teachers expressed more challenges associated with working with families. Dor concluded that students ultimately may benefit from an improved educational relationship between family volunteers and classroom teachers. Student achievement benefits from the coordinated efforts of family and teachers to set and support positive expectations for student performance (Bagby & Sulak, 2015). This, then, suggests that an investment in working together from both family volunteers and teachers may present multiple opportunities to support student achievement. The teacher and their perceptions of the family classroom volunteer play a key role as to overall effectiveness of this collaboration. Therefore, effective family involvement in the classroom is dependent upon the professional ability of teachers to interact successfully with family volunteers to promote their participation (Lemmer, 2011).

When families participate in classroom activity as volunteers there are numerous chances for constructive communication with teachers, which allows families to better understand the academic expectations placed upon students (Abdullah, Seedee, Alzaidiyeen, Al-Shabatat, Alzeydeen, & Al-Awabdeh, 2011). In this study I explored and expanded knowledge of teacher perceptions regarding the family volunteer presence in the classroom, specifically as this presence relates to fifth grade student reading comprehension achievement. Fifth grade student reading comprehension was used because this grade level features levels of family volunteer classroom involvement necessary for this study. The potential social implications of the study include the possibility of better supporting the efficacy of family classroom volunteers to improve student learning outcomes. Additionally, data from this study may be used to inform better practices regarding the successful incorporation of family volunteers into the classroom.

More can be learned about the specific potential of family volunteers to support student learning goals in the classroom. While many studies exist that point to the potential positive impact of families in the classroom, often the majority of interaction between the family and the teacher is confined to disciplinary interactions of a negative nature (Dor, 2012). If a student is not the subject of disciplinary action, communication between the family and the teacher may be seldom or even nonexistent. Family volunteers in the classroom present an important opportunity for communication regarding the academic welfare of students between families and teachers. This area of interaction presents an opportunity for exploration specifically to better understand the

potential of family classroom volunteers to enhance student performance as well as further bridge the gap between the home and school learning environment.

In this chapter I explore aspects of effectively involving family volunteers in the classroom, the role of the teacher in this interaction, and the possible relationship between the family volunteer presence and student outcomes specifically in the area of fifth grade reading comprehension. In order to reach the full positive potential of involving family volunteers in the educational environment it is important for teachers to feel more prepared and empowered when interfacing with families (Dor & Rucker-Naidu, 2012). In this study I sought to further understand the role of teacher perceptions in their ability to effectively interact with family volunteers in the classroom in order to support fifth grade student reading achievement. In this chapter I also provide additional information pertaining to the historical context of family volunteers in the classroom, the potential of the family volunteer presence to enhance student learning, and the complex interactions that take place between family volunteers and teachers in the classroom. A better understanding of teacher perceptions of the family classroom volunteer presence may help to improve this interaction, further supporting student learning.

Background

Although many teachers involve family volunteers in the classroom, many do not know how to use them effectively. There appears to be an uneven approach to teacher invitations for families to participate in the school setting, and the actual effect of teachers upon the likelihood of families to participate in the classroom is profound (Haines, Gross, Blue-Banning, Francis, & Turnbull, 2015; Collier, Keefe, & Hirrel,

2015). This is evidenced by a study by Anderson and Minke (2007) who found a relationship between specific invitations to participate at school from teachers and the perceived involvement of families. A strong correlation was shown between individual invitations from teachers to participate with increases in family involvement (Anderson & Minke, 2007). Anderson and Minke found from 351 surveys of families that specific invitations from teachers had the most influential effect upon parental involvement across three parent involvement components involving both home and school participation in educational endeavors. These findings indicated that despite cultural and economic variances, families were more likely to participate at the school when they were specifically invited by the teacher. While standing opportunities to participate in daily school operations exist in many schools, the study demonstrated a specific invitation from their student's teacher was able to spur a noticeable amount of families to become involved in their student's education.

Despite the prevalence of family volunteers in the classroom, the perceptions of teachers regarding this presence is still not fully understood. While research indicates there is a positive impact on student learning with family volunteers in the classroom, little research has been conducted to explore the role of teachers in facilitating this interaction. Flanigan (2005) referred to a focus group of teachers who revealed the concern that teaching is still very much perceived as delivering lessons to the class, with all other aspects of teaching being seen as secondary, including successful family involvement strategies. It is important to understand the existing perceptions of teachers regarding family volunteer involvement in order to incorporate their presence into the

learning environment to promote classroom efficacy and learning specifically in the area of student reading comprehension.

In the study conducted by Karabay, Kayrian, and Işık (2015), reading comprehension has been shown to have a far reaching impact on a students' academic and social wellbeing. In addition to academic and social wellbeing, reading comprehension skills impact other facets of a students' educational development such as problem solving and communication. According to Rintaningrum (2009), reading is a fundamental skill that is needed in order to attain proficiency and mastery across all subjects. Rintaningrum maintained that reading is not only essential for students' academic success but has many far reaching professional and social effects.

Additionally, according to Rintaningrum (2009), reading is a fundamental aspect of virtually every academic subject and is an integral aspect of any job search or the pursuit of higher education. Taub and Benson (2013) substantiated Rintaningrum's point that reading is among the most essential skills for success in college education. In order to excel at the primary, secondary, and higher education levels, reading proves to be an important skill to navigating many subjects. Beyond academics, reading is essential for many aspects of employment. Therefore, this research is important to further explore aspects of student reading comprehension in order to provide data related to supporting student outcomes (Taub & Benson, 2013).

Bagby and Sulak (2015) found that noticeable improvement in student achievement is made possible by a collaborative and supportive environment with enough structure to foster student growth but not too much structure as to suppress or

ignore student need. Part of cultivating this unique balance of educational factors is including families in the process of educational decisions made in the classroom. This provides the reasoning and justification behind educational efforts in order to support academic growth in students. Better understanding of teacher perceptions may contribute to a greater understanding of educational coordination with families and family volunteers.

Working in small collaborative groups, as is the case with family volunteers, has been shown to have a positive impact on student higher cognitive learning (Valls & Kyriakides, 2013). Existing studies demonstrate the positive impact of a low adult to student ratio upon reading comprehension scores (Schwartz, Schmitt, & Lose, 2012). The resulting data from the research of Schwartz et al. (2012) indicated that students who studied in the 1:1 teacher to student condition in small groups scored significantly higher than the students in larger study groups. The findings of these studies indicated the potential for family volunteers to be utilized in the classroom to improve the student to adult ratio in support of classroom reading goals.

Schwartz et al. (2012) indicated a negative impact on literacy performance as student to teacher ratios increased. Proficiency test results at the conclusion of the study revealed student groups that received one-on-one instruction scored significantly higher than student groups with a larger student to teacher ratio. Therefore, having family volunteers in the classroom may enable teachers to use them to make the teacher–student ratio smaller than can be accomplished by the teachers themselves. An increased adult presence in the classroom such is the case when a family volunteer is used may improve

student reading comprehension outcomes by providing for a lower student to adult ratio in the learning environment. This is also substantiated by the findings of Valls and Kyriakides (2013), whose study indicated interactions between students and family volunteers in small groups positively impacted overall achievement. The results demonstrated inclusion in these smaller learning groups contributed to improved student achievement.

Schwartz et al. (2012) demonstrated a positive relationship between one to one instruction and positive literacy and reading comprehension performance. Family volunteers in the classroom provide an important additional adult presence to contribute to overall classroom effectiveness by offering positive reinforcement of existing educational goals. Family volunteers bring instructional assistance to the teacher as well. Núñez, Suárez, Rosário, Vallejo, Valle, and Epstein (2014) found that a positive correlation existed between the perceived level of family involvement in the completion of assignments by students and their academic outcomes. Therefore, the family volunteer presence presents a valuable opportunity to use family interest in the support of overall learning outcomes. When used effectively, family volunteers offer teachers an opportunity to enhance classroom goals.

Families have an important role to play in the overall academic success of their children (Ferrara, 2015). Involving families in classroom learning has the potential to informally demonstrate skills and activities that contribute to student learning both at school and at home (Hindman, Skibbe, & Morrison, 2013). For these reasons, in this study I focused on the perceptions of teachers regarding the family volunteer presence as

it relates to student achievement in reading comprehension. Families may adapt school activities and learning practices and gain knowledge of curriculum through the act of classroom volunteering. For example, in the classroom environment, the family volunteer may emulate the instruction practices of the teacher when assisting students. In the home environment, the family volunteer may choose to employ an activity that they observed performed in the classroom. As a result of volunteering in the classroom, there is the potential for the family volunteer to further employ what is observed as part of classroom learning at home in support of student outcomes.

Teacher perspective is vital to understanding how family volunteers can be successfully incorporated into the classroom environment to influence student reading comprehension positively. Further understanding of teacher perspectives regarding the family volunteer presence may be used to promote the efficacy of family involvement initiatives. Bouffard and Weiss (2014) found that family involvement in the learning process and in the development of students is a key factor of consideration during each stage of their growth. Therefore, a greater understanding of teacher perspectives may present multiple opportunities to build upon this important connection.

Goldkind and Farmer (2013) found that successful family involvement in schools continues to be a major issue for stakeholders in the educational profession. While it is noted in this research that family involvement was important, teachers' perceptions regarding this involvement were not explored. A further exploration of teacher perceptions regarding to family volunteers presented an opportunity to add value to the

many interactions that take place between students and family volunteers in the classroom.

Hindman et al. (2013) revealed that teachers employed a variety of practices to connect with the families of students. These were based largely on personal experience. While most teachers noted a positive correlation between promoting family involvement in the classroom and student achievement, their efforts were largely uncoordinated and varied greatly from classroom to classroom. This study demonstrated the need for further information to better coordinate and streamline efforts between teachers and families to promote classroom involvement to improve student achievement. Furthermore, the findings of this study suggested that families vicariously experiencing teaching techniques and methods for further promoting classroom goals at home is an added benefit to their inclusion in the classroom.

Moreover, Reece, Staudt, and Ogle (2013) revealed that family involvement was directly impacted by attitudes toward school personnel. Their research revealed families felt more comfortable increasing their levels of involvement and participating in their schools' activities if they felt that school personnel valued their individual participation and appreciated their involvement. This research indicated that understanding teacher perceptions of family volunteers is important to creating and promoting opportunities to increase family involvement to improve student achievement.

Smith, Wohlstetter, Kuzin, and De Pedro (2011) examined aspects of family involvement and ways to promote family and school interactions to improve student achievement. The authors cited factors such as a lack of communication and

understanding between teachers and families as variables that negatively impacted family involvement. Their findings indicated schools that offered a variety of types of opportunities for families to become involved benefited from a higher percentage of family participation in school and classroom volunteering. Teachers played a key role in facilitating and promoting family involvement.

Smith et al. (2011) also indicated that teachers were able to form more meaningful and lasting productive classroom connections with family volunteers when they were able to offer a variety of activities and options for family volunteers to become involved. Smith et al. expanded upon the crucial link that teachers played in engaging families in education; especially in scenarios when families may be inhibited from traditional volunteering roles by other real-world obstacles such as multiple work shifts, the pressures of being a single parent family, or severe poverty. The results indicated that effective communication and flexible volunteer opportunities were highly regarded by families in addition to the need to affirm and recognize the efforts of volunteers. The findings also indicated more remains to be discovered regarding the complex interactions within the classroom involving family volunteers. These studies supported the importance of further exploring and better understanding teacher perceptions of family volunteer involvement for the potential to support student learning.

Problem Statement

While family volunteerism and involvement have been substantiated as having a positive impact on student achievement (Dor, 2012), the perceptions of teachers regarding family involvement in the classroom are not fully understood (Abdullah et al.,

2011). While there is an emphasis to build partnerships between families and schools, little is known about how teachers perceive the presence of family volunteers in the classroom environment. When asked, teachers will often profess a lack of adequate training when it comes to successfully interacting with families (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005). Also, according to Ferrara and Ferrara (2005), a lack of understanding about how teachers perceive and interface with family volunteers in the classroom can negatively impact the level of involvement and how families feel volunteering in the classroom. Families may be discouraged from participating in the classroom if they feel their student's teacher views them as unknowledgeable or inexperienced. These barriers may prevent students from benefiting academically from additional volunteer involvement and inhibit positive professional and academic relationships between the teacher, the school, and students' families.

Teachers who have preexisting issues with volunteers or a negative attitude toward family involvement may continue to perpetuate behaviors that limit or prevent families from becoming involved in the students' education (Christianakis, 2011). These lingering negative perceptions may limit future opportunities to connect with family volunteers in the classroom. It is important, therefore, to further explore and understand teacher perceptions regarding family involvement in the classroom to improve understanding, communication, and the relationship between the family and the school, ultimately to benefit student academic achievement.

How teachers perceive family involvement plays a vital role in the effectiveness of efforts of schools to further promote family engagement (Crea et al., 2015). In cases

where there is a perceived cultural or socioeconomic separation teachers were found to be even less likely to engage families specifically in groups where family involvement stood to have the most positive impact (Crea et al., 2015). This indicated that in order to serve the students with the greatest needs teachers need to be prepared with the best tools possible to engage with families. Therefore, serving the educationally marginalized to the fullest extent possible is dependent upon the ability of teachers to conquer barriers between the domestic and educational environment as often as is possible by providing opportunities for family engagement such as classroom volunteering. Understanding how teachers perceive their part in this complex endeavor as well as specifically how the presence of the classroom volunteer relates to supporting student reading was the focus of this study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to explore teacher perceptions of family volunteers in the classroom as their presence relates to fifth grade student reading comprehension. This study examined fifth grade classrooms because this grade level had the needed family volunteer involvement to provide data for this study. At this grade level, 75% of families reported being involved in their students' education, including family volunteering and assisting with assignments (Crowe, 2012). With a high level of family involvement at this grade level there remained undiscovered variables that impact the success of endeavors to consistently engage families across societal barriers. Resulting data may be used in coordination with the goals of family volunteers and teachers to support reading comprehension goals.

Research Questions

RQ1: What do teachers perceive as the benefits of the family volunteer presence in the classroom as it pertains to student reading comprehension?

RQ2: What do teachers perceive as the challenges of the family volunteer presence in the classroom as it pertains to student reading comprehension?

These perceptions were based upon the lived professional experiences of teachers in the classroom working with family volunteers. During the interview process teachers were also given the opportunity to reflect upon their perceptions of family volunteers in the classroom and offer practices that may support existing family volunteer and teacher experiences in order to improve student reading comprehension.

Conceptual Framework

This research was based on the work of Epstein et al. (2002). This study focused specifically on the third aspect of family involvement, volunteering. Epstein et al. explored six types of family involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community. These researchers explored both potential benefits and challenges of collaborating with families and community in order to benefit student achievement. This research provided established terms and commonly employed practices in many educational settings. It also informed the current study and guided the conversation resulting from the interview questions to provide insight into the perceptions of teachers regarding the family volunteer in the classroom as it relates to reading comprehension.

Haines et al. (2015) found that educational endeavors designed to create an inclusive environment that promotes family involvement are defined by administrative and faculty support, an inclusive environment, and a clear vision. Wang and Neihart (2015) found that students were likely to experience an improvement in achievement if they perceived support from their families, teachers, and peers. These findings suggest that supporting overall student learning does not occur in isolation, but instead, all the individuals involved in the life of the student have a part to play in supporting their academic well-being.

While ideally the concept of whole family involvement would be a subject of frequent educational discussion, there remains much to be understood regarding the best ways to attract families to classroom volunteering opportunities. These challenges are compounded by factors such as mounting family responsibilities and cultural barriers. While not impossible to overcome, these boundaries present an obstacle to the most efficient and effective use of family volunteers in the classroom to support reading comprehension achievement as well as other academic areas. Poorly understood variables that impact family involvement require further study in order to understand the complex factors affecting this important participation in the educational well-being of students (Malone, 2015). Teacher preparation and instruction related to successful engagement with families may help to bridge the perceived barriers between the domestic and educational environment in order to create a more inviting atmosphere for families in the classroom. However, this inclusion cannot be expected to evolve without intention and scholarly support.

Collier et al. (2015) found that teacher candidates benefited greatly from hearing stories pertaining to the lives of families in their own words and from this experience they were able to cultivate a level of understanding and empathy than they would have otherwise. Likewise the experience of families volunteering in the classroom may present similar opportunities for families and teachers to cultivate beneficial educational relationships in order to support reading goals both in the classroom and at home. The research referenced in this study supported the exploration of family volunteers and teacher perceptions in order to better understand this interaction as it relates to student reading comprehension .

Nature of the Study

A qualitative design was used for this study and was informed by the work of Patton (2015). Patton explored and expanded upon qualitative research methods and composed substantial research detailing different approaches, methodology, and possible types of analysis. This study was an interview study with aspects of phenomenological analysis. It used a semistructured interview methodology. Patton provided established qualitative procedures such as interview protocol, sound qualitative research methods, and organizational strategies to inform this study as it explores teacher perceptions of family volunteers in the classroom.

This interview study utilized the research approach outlined by Moustakas (1994) to explore teacher perceptions of family volunteers through semistructured hour- long interviews. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to analyze the resulting data. Cooper, Fleischer, and Cotton (2012) described IPA as among the best

avenues of academic research to fully explore and understand the lived experiences of participants. This research approach allowed for an accurate picture to be formed concerning teacher perceptions of the family volunteer role in the classroom and how this role impacts daily classroom goals related to student reading comprehension. This paradigm-approach, methodology, and analysis align and provided an accurate description of teacher perceptions of the family volunteer presence as they relate to student reading comprehension.

A group of eight teachers with a minimum of 5 years teaching experience at the fifth grade level were interviewed regarding their perceptions of family volunteer involvement in the classroom. Among the criteria of the study was that teachers interviewed had to have professional experience in the classroom working with family volunteers in order to provide their perception of these experiences. The Epstein model (2002) posits that the addition of a family volunteer in the classroom will have a positive impact on student reading comprehension. The teachers were asked to reflect upon how they felt the family volunteer presence impacted student reading comprehension. The interview questions were enhanced by the Epstein model of community partnership and family involvement.

The research of Patton (2015) guided the research process as this was a qualitative study. The work of Patton described and defined qualitative research methods, approaches, and forms of analysis. This study utilized a phenomenological research approach and semistructured interview methodology. These qualitative research tools provided in depth and detailed procedure to allow for an accurate exploration of the

perceptions of teachers regarding the family volunteer presence in the classroom. Patton provided established qualitative practices to guide the development and implementation of this study.

Definition of Terms

Benefits: A noticeable level of assistance or help in the classroom as is perceived by the teacher (Tekin, 2011).

Challenges: A detectable level of hindrance or obstacles to completing daily classroom goals as perceived by the teacher (Tekin, 2011).

Family volunteer: An adult at least eighteen years of age who has fulltime custody of a student and volunteers in the fifth grade classroom for the length of the school year (Epstein, 2006).

Fifth grade reading comprehension: The ability of students to read, comprehend, understand, and demonstrate mastery of reading material at the fifth grade level (Pittman & Honchell, 2014).

Student achievement: Academic accomplishments of a student that include measurable progress or mastery of a given subject matter to obtain proficient scores needed for academic progress (Peterson & Ackerman, 2015).

Teacher satisfaction: Attitudes and perceptions of teachers regarding the effectiveness of their work environment (Coffey, 2010).

Assumptions

This study was conducted with the following assumptions. Teachers will have perceptions regarding the presence of the family volunteer in the classroom in regards to

fifth grade reading comprehension. Teachers will be willing to share their perceptions and professional insights regarding ways to improve the family volunteer process in their classroom to benefit further student achievement.

Scope and Delimitations

Teacher perceptions of family volunteers are explored within this study through the interview methodology and the phenomenological approach. This topic of study was chosen to bring to light the little explored perceptions of teachers regarding the family volunteer in the classroom and how that presence relates to student reading comprehension. The ability of teachers to successfully interface with families has been shown to have a substantial positive impact on the level of family involvement in the classroom (Christianakis, 2010). While the practice of utilizing family volunteers in the classroom environment is commonplace, very few researchers have explored the integral link between teachers and families as they both interface with students in the classroom combining their efforts to achieve daily classroom goals and fifth grade reading comprehension in particular.

The boundaries of this study were limited to the elementary school as the interviews were conducted with fifth grade teachers in one school environment. The family volunteer as it relates to reading comprehension was chosen as mastery of reading impacts many subject areas. The focus of the interview questions were to seek to explore and understand how teachers perceive the role of family volunteers in the classroom and how it impacts fifth grade student achievement in reading comprehension.

The potential transferability of results of this study could be used to inform better practices utilized by administrators and teachers to incorporate family volunteers into the classroom to aid in achieving classroom goals. This information could be used in a variety of academic settings such as kindergarten through junior high school where family volunteers are utilized. Information gathered in the course of this study can be used to improve how family volunteers interact with teachers and students in the classroom environment.

Family volunteers must have volunteered within a fifth grade classroom for the length of a school year. Teachers interviewed for this study had at least five years of classroom experience and had worked with a family volunteer at least one full school year. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and verified for accuracy prior to the coding of data associated with this study.

Additional grade levels, schools, and school environments could be potentially explored by other researchers at a later time with more readily available resources. The potential transferability of this study could apply to other educational environments or other organizations which use volunteers to support daily operations. This specific study sought to explore the perceptions of school teachers regarding the family volunteer presence. The study could be replicated to apply in the broader sense to other educational environments, grade levels, types of schools, or similar organizations which use volunteers.

Limitations

This study was conducted with full awareness of the following limitations. The interviews which were conducted with teachers took place at only the fifth grade level at one school location in one school district. The study was limited to one grade level and one type of educational environment. The site chosen was from a list of schools with which I had no prior professional association. Interviews were conducted with a minimum of eight fifth grade teachers. The interviews were up to one hour in length and conducted in the span of a month. The budgetary considerations for this study are minimal.

Significance of the Study

The use of family volunteers in the classroom is accepted common educational practice (Fan & Chen, 2001). Reece, Staudt, and Ogle (2013) demonstrated that students with families who demonstrated an increased involvement in their educational development benefited from improved academic outcomes as a result of this increased involvement. The perceptions of teachers remain unexplored in regards to the presence of the family volunteer in the classroom (Flannigan, 2007). While many educational programs and professional opportunities exist to prepare teachers for the demands of daily classroom life many teachers enter the profession with little to no instruction on how to successfully integrate with families in the classroom (Flannigan, 2007). Reading comprehension scores in early grades serve as indicators of later academic success (Kariyan & Karibay, 2012). This study explored the perceptions of teachers regarding the family volunteer presence in the classroom as it relates to reading comprehension.

The findings of this study may be applied to the improvement and development of better practices regarding the involvement of the family volunteer in the classroom to improve student reading comprehension. Families are a vital link between the goals of public education and a students' domestic life (Epstein, 2006). Successfully involving families in their students' education can have a positive impact on learning outcomes (Epstein, 2006). Further exploring and understanding teacher perceptions of the family volunteer in the classroom may be used to better understand how family volunteers interact with teachers and what can be done to promote daily educational objectives through a coordinated effort. This study further delved into and examined the perceptions of teachers regarding the family volunteer in the classroom and provided a needed perspective regarding this commonly accepted educational practice. A better understanding of the practice of using family volunteers in the classroom may yield information pertinent to supporting student learning.

Summary

The framework of Epstein (2006) guided by the qualitative research methods as outlined by Moustakas (1994) and Patton (2015) were used to explore teacher perceptions of family volunteers as they relate to student reading comprehension achievement. This study sought to explore and understand how teachers perceive the family volunteer presence and how this presence influences student reading comprehension at the fifth grade level. A better understanding of teachers' perceptions of family volunteers and the resulting data from these interviews may be utilized by teachers and administrators to more effectively incorporate family volunteers into the educational environment to

support classroom efficacy. The implications for social change included improving student reading comprehension as well as promoting better practices for improving the coordination of efforts between teacher and family volunteers to support student reading comprehension goals.

In Chapter 2 I reviewed and described literature which substantiated the need for this study. It includes a review of the foundational work of Epstein and others who have contributed to the existing knowledge pertaining to the presence of the family volunteer in the classroom. The review will also provided both a historical and contemporary perspective on the importance of teachers to forging connections with family volunteers for the betterment of student welfare as well as strengthening learning communities to improve student reading comprehension.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

A problem exists that while the use of family volunteers in the classroom environment is commonplace, there remain many facets of teacher perceptions of this presence that require further exploration. A better understanding of teacher perceptions of family volunteers in the classroom may provide important insights regarding the use of family volunteers in the classroom to support reading comprehension. The purpose of this study was to explore teacher perceptions of the family volunteer presence in the classroom and their use as it pertains to fifth grade reading comprehension.

The following literature included in this review demonstrates that there remains much to be explored regarding teacher perceptions of the family volunteer presence in the classroom that is relevant to the support of student reading comprehension. Major sections of this literature review will include related topics such as: family volunteers in the classroom, teachers' use of family volunteers, the importance of reading comprehension, families and student reading comprehension, and family as volunteers in the classroom.

The literature review included research that demonstrates the importance of the family volunteer presence, the integral role of teachers to the success of family volunteers in the classroom, and the connection between the volunteer presence and student reading achievement. The work of Epstein et al. (2002), Smith et al. (2011), Crowe (2012), and other reputable academic researchers that contributed information relevant to the subject matter were reviewed.

Reading instruction and comprehension have traditionally been perceived as school teacher's responsibility. However, there is research that suggests maintaining literacy and satisfactory reading performance requires a comprehensive support network (Galloway & Lesaux, 2014). A better understanding of teacher perceptions of family volunteers may illuminate issues and better practices related to this process. A greater understanding of teacher perceptions of family volunteers in the classroom may prove essential to improving this often-misunderstood relationship, particularly in regard to reading achievement. The potential of family volunteers to support classroom academic goals and reading comprehension is dependent upon the experience of teachers to facilitate a successful classroom family volunteer experience.

The involvement of family members both at school and at home represents a wealth of opportunities to reinforce scholastic goals and support student academic achievement (Semke & Sheridan, 2012). Semke and Sheridan (2012) found a positive correlation existed between increased family involvement in the educational environment and student achievement, yet specifics regarding this involvement remain insufficiently explored. A pervasive theme in the existing literature regarding family involvement is a lack of understanding and communication between family volunteers and school faculty (Smith et al., 2011). This study provided much needed research to explore teacher perceptions of and provide a better understanding of this process. Family volunteer classroom involvement has the potential for many positive effects. Semke and Sheridan found that family involvement in the classroom has positively impacted a variety of variables within the educational environment including improved attendance and

decreased disciplinary issues. Further research is needed to explore family involvement and to what extent this involvement impacts student reading comprehension.

While pressure exists to incorporate family volunteers into the classroom successfully and the practice is pervasive, little research has been conducted that explores the input of teachers regarding this process and the actual impact of family volunteers on student reading comprehension. Much of existing research focuses solely on student outcomes, while exploring teacher perceptions may provide important emergent themes and information regarding the use of volunteers to support student reading comprehension (Tracey, Hornery, Seaton, Craven, & Yeung, 2014). Pressure is evident in the increasing attention paid to the United States educational system and the continuing emergent research efforts that indicate that families play a vital role in supporting student academic achievement (Crowe, 2012). Crowe concluded that student achievement is not affected by only one variable but that family involvement proved to be a vital factor in scholastic wellness in both the academic and domestic environments. Therefore, additional research to better understand teacher perceptions of family volunteers may prove useful to understanding the complex connection between the classroom volunteer presence and student reading comprehension. The following literature review provided a synthesis of research from authors such as Smith et al. (2011), Crowe (2012), and others regarding family volunteers in the classroom. It also expanded upon the following topics: teachers' use of family volunteers, importance of reading comprehension, families and student reading comprehension, and family as volunteers in the classroom.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature used in this review was retrieved using a combination of electronic search engines from the electronic library of Walden University. These search engines included ERIC, Education Research Complete, SAGE, Academic Search Complete, and SocIndex. Search parameters were limited to scholarly peer-reviewed publications within the last five years, except theoretical foundation texts, methodology texts, and supplemental sources. The search terms used were *family volunteer*, *parent volunteer*, *classroom volunteer*, *elementary volunteer*, *teachers*, *reading comprehension*, and *families in the classroom*. I also utilized texts obtained from online sellers and texts obtained through the local city library.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was Epstein et al.'s (2002) model for family and community involvement. The theory states that students' educational development and enrichment is not limited to one environment but that the home, community, and school environments all represent different spheres of educational potential. Epstein et al. stated that by intentionally forging stronger connections between all three educational environments, student achievement benefited as a result.

Epstein et al.'s (2002) research explored the factors of family involvement, school community partnerships, and facets of volunteering within schools as they related to student achievement and academic well-being. Epstein et al. provided a theoretical framework to better incorporate the families of students into the educational landscape to

benefit student scholastic performance as well as enhance connections between the school and the community.

Six types of family involvement were described by Epstein et al. (2002). These six types of family involvement included parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community. In this study I examined the third type of involvement described by Epstein et al., volunteering. For this study I focused on teacher perceptions of family volunteers in the classroom as their presence related to student reading comprehension.

The Epstein Community Partnership Model

Family Involvement

Epstein et al. (2002) described the potential positive implications and venues through which increased family involvement in education can improve student academic performance. The community partnership model by these authors detailed the ways in which schools can modify their structure and communication styles to encourage and retain family involvement in various facets of the education process. These ways include (a) emphasizing the shared value of families and schools, (b) improved communication with families, (c) imparting a sense of family ownership, (d) improving student outcomes, and (e) increasing opportunities for family volunteer involvement. Beauregard, Petrakos, and Dupont (2014) used the Epstein model in their research to better understand family involvement among immigrant families. They found the Epstein model an effective basis for their research, which discovered promoting family involvement in schools required educators to invest in learning more about the motivations, both cultural

and personal, behind family involvement. Therefore, the Epstein model provided an important starting point to further explore levels of family involvement. There are many different components that combine to create the complex dialogue between the school and the families of students.

This model is designed to examine the different components of interaction between the school and the community. These components include (a) communication between the school and the family, (b) volunteer opportunities within the school, (c) promoting educational decision making, and (d) enhancing community collaboration to support student outcomes. According to Vance (2015), the research of Epstein et al. (2002) illuminated the importance of family involvement in improving student outcomes. This model showed ways to promote a dialogue concerning the best ways to communicate effectively with families and the local community as well as strengthen networking opportunities between the home, school, and the surrounding community. These ways included communication methods such as flyers, newsletters, notifications, school websites, and direct contact from teachers. Epstein et al. found that schools benefited from being adaptive to the changing needs of the surrounding community to form effective and lasting engagement to strengthen educational partnerships.

Epstein's et al. (2002) model of community and family partnerships with schools is supported by the work of Bower and Griffin (2011) in their research reaffirmed the conclusions of Epstein. Their research indicated that cultivating educational partnerships with families through strengthening connections with the school environment, such as through classroom volunteering, had numerous positive implications for supporting

academic outcomes in a variety of school settings. Bower and Griffin found that positive activity trends emerged, such as an increase in learning activities being performed at home to reinforce classroom learning. The increase in these activities was attributed in their research to the increased involvement of families in the classroom in conjunction with the conscious efforts of teachers to promote family engagement. The following will detail the six categories that Epstein et al. (2002) used to define family involvement.

The Six Categories of Involvement

The Epstein et al. (2002) framework consists of six categories of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community. Because the focus of this study was family volunteering, that category was stressed. All these categories provide valuable information for the discussion of ways to incorporate families into the educational process to ultimately benefit the academic wellness of the student. Epstein et al. provided valuable guidance as to how each of these categories can be used as basic strategies for educational settings to engage families further to provide optimum educational experiences.

Parenting. Epstein et al.'s (2002) first category is that of parenting. This category stressed the needs of every individual family vary dependent on family economic, cultural, and sociological conditions. As a result, to address the diverse needs of every family the school serves, school personnel could benefit from providing customized enrichment and recruitment efforts. This category emphasizes the need to support learning in the domestic environment, which is relevant to each grade level. There is support for this approach. Morrison, Storey, and Zhang (2011) found that teachers and

families who collaborate with one another in the classroom are able to cooperatively develop more enriching curricula. Such a curriculum is supported by efforts on the part of the teacher to further bridge the gap between the classroom and home environment by inviting participation from families as well as offering extra activities that may be brought home and shared to further engage the entire family in the educational process.

Epstein et al. (2002) provided helpful guidelines as to how families can support learning goals at home and detailed strategies for promoting family involvement. These strategies included offering continuing family education, workshops, and educational materials to suggest and guide activities beyond weekly homework to further reinforce classroom learning goals. An aspect of this framework that has contributed to its enduring nature is that Epstein et al. also described for each category potential challenges which are associated with each category of engagement. These researchers provided a comprehensive and realistic starting point for the discussion of how to best attract and retain family involvement.

Epstein et al. (2002) also mentioned areas of potential challenges for each category of family involvement. For example, as with the category of parenting, the authors pointed to the potential challenges of disseminating information because many parents are not active in the educational environment. This is supported by Bower and Griffin (2011) and Lemmer (2011) who found numerous obstacles inhibiting family involvement in nontraditional settings such as urban environments or isolated rural environments where families face mounting pressures to meet daily needs. This may conflict with their ability to become further involved in the educational environment.

Their research reaffirms the importance of the work of Epstein et al. (2002) that efforts made by teachers to connect with families through a variety of methods of communication as well as flexible volunteer opportunities are important to forging connections with all families, not just a select few, in order to support academic endeavors.

Communication. The second category of the Epstein et al. (2002) model deals with communication between families and schools. This can be challenging for schools since one method of communication does not address the needs of every family. Methods which prove successful reaching one family may not meet the needs of the next. The work of these researchers is supported by Lemmer (2011) posits the element of communication as important when crafting policies and practices to strengthen the partnership between families and the school to support student achievement. Lemmer, Lareau and Muñoz (2012), and Crowe (2012) concluded that while many assumptions exist regarding the interactions between teachers and family volunteers, more can be done to ensure a productive working relationship to support the educational goals of students through effective communication. Lemmer et al. and Muñoz concluded that while families unanimously shared the goal with the classroom teacher of seeking and supporting what is best for the growth of the student, often a lack of clear communication and differing priorities posed challenges. Additionally, there was a general lack of structured preparation for teachers on how to relate to, communicate with, and engage families. This conclusion is consistent with Epstein et al.'s research that the starting point for forging family and school relationships is often reliant upon school-based endeavors,

which must consider that what works to engage one family volunteer may not work for the next. In this way Epstein et al. emphasized communication required an adaptive approach to strengthening ties between families and schools.

The Epstein model stressed the importance of effective communication with families. Torrez (2014) reaffirmed the concepts of Epstein in her research in rural Michigan schools. Torrez found that ineffective communication with student families due a language barrier had a stratifying effect which marginalized many students and their families. Torrez echoed the conclusions of Epstein that effectively supporting student learning meant increasing overlap between the home and school environment for example through effective communication.

Epstein et al. (2002) detailed sample practices for promoting and encouraging communication between the school, teacher, and families of students to promote student achievement. These researchers stressed the need for clear and concise approachable language when communicating with families. In addition, providing multiple lines of contact in addition to what is considered traditional means may not be feasible for every family and their varied scheduling needs. Epstein et al. pointed to the challenges associated with this category specifically the need for clear and readable information for families who may not be familiar with educational terminology. Effective communication between the school and the family is one way to encourage involvement in the educational process. Another way of promoting family engagement is through volunteer opportunities.

Volunteering. Although the focus of this research is on Epstein's (2002) third category volunteering it is important to understand all aspects of the partnership model and how they relate to each other. This topic was the central focus of this study. Epstein defined three basic modes of volunteering. According to Epstein, the family volunteer takes one of three routes of participation: "first, volunteering in the school classroom, second, they may volunteer for the school, finally, they may volunteer as an audience member or attendee to school events" (Epstein et al., 2002, p.2). Epstein et al. described family volunteering as promoting recruitment and training to involve families in education in support of both the student and the school.

Epstein et al. (2002) described sample practices for promoting family involvement in the educational process through volunteering opportunities. These included structured school activities, assisting in the classroom, participating in annual surveys, and pooling volunteers to assist with a variety of school functions such as classroom activities and lessons, fairs, dismissal, field trips, among other school activities. This study focused specifically on the presence of the family volunteer in the classroom as it relates to fifth grade student reading comprehension.

Epstein et al. (2002) explored the importance of imparting a sense of ownership to the success of not only individual students but the school as a whole to promote volunteerism among families. These researchers emphasized the importance of daily classroom tasks and the flexibility which exists to incorporate families into many school functions. These authors pointed to the challenges of creating flexible scheduling and

being inclusive to all families not just those which already have an established presence within the school.

There is support for an inclusive approach to the presence of family volunteers within the school environment and importance given to the teacher acknowledging the potential use of family volunteers in the classroom. Lemmer (2011) found that the success of endeavors to promote family involvement in school activities were closely linked to teacher attitudes towards families. This was considered significant since the efficiency of family volunteers in the classroom and their willingness to continue to contribute to classroom endeavors were found to be largely dependent on the attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of the classroom teacher. While teacher attitudes have been shown by Lemmer to influence the success of volunteer efforts, likewise it is important to offer a variety of ways for families to become involved.

Radzi, Razak, and Sukor (2010) emphasized the importance of creating multiple avenues of involvement for families to diminish the perceived barriers between supporting education at home and within the classroom environment. This research reinforced the importance of the connection between family support, classroom goals, and student achievement. By furthering and promoting family involvement, overall student achievement and student wellness is improved. Christianakis (2011) reaffirmed Epstein et al.'s (2002) research that an individualized approach to family involvement is important. Christianakis found that generalizations on the part of teachers regarding what constitutes family involvement and interest in education can distance families for whom volunteering in the classroom during the week is not possible. This research indicated

some families may not be able to volunteer in the classroom. Their lack of availability should not be perceived as indifference. The authors found that opportunities existed through flexibility and inclusion for families and teachers to work together toward meaningful academic improvement such as activities which could be implemented in the home to reinforce and strengthen student learning. Epstein et al. (2002) concluded that for family involvement and educational growth to be truly successful should not be perceived as static or a one-sided experience but instead something that through conscious engagement teachers could encourage and promote within families as part of daily life. Part of promoting learning habits as part of daily life involved actively developing activities to encourage learning at home.

Learning at home. Epstein et al.'s (2002) fourth category is learning at home. These researchers described the importance of learning goals that began in the classroom being reinforced with home activities. While homework remains a staple of home learning Epstein et al. pointed to ways to promote additional learning and participation. These additional learning activities include: summer learning opportunities and utilizing an organizational tool such as a learning calendar to promote a continuous cycle of learning throughout the school year and through the summer months. Epstein et al. detailed the potential challenges of promoting home learning including student autonomy, the inclusion of several teachers in the planning process, and adapting home activities to meet the individualized learning needs of students.

Liu et al. (2010) also support this notion. The authors found that family support for learning goals at home had a positive impact upon student achievement. Their study

included responses from 938 individuals using a survey that confirmed a connection between family promotion of learning as part of daily life and student achievement. The study found that students who received family support and encouragement for their academic endeavors were more likely to persevere and improve as opposed to students which did not receive family support (Liu et al., 2010). The conclusion of this study provided further evidence in support of the work of Epstein et al. (2002) that family involvement and the promotion of learning at home as a factor in supporting classroom goals.

Volunteering in the classroom also provided opportunities for teachers and families to foster a dialogue regarding students and their educational needs which may prove insightful for both parties. Reece, Staudt, and Ogle (2013) noted in their study of a program intended to promote family involvement that classroom volunteering provided a chance for improving learning at home as well as fostering a greater connection between the family and the school. These authors indicated in an urban school environment that not only did students benefit from increased family involvement but that as a result of increased interaction with school staff families experienced increased comfort interacting with school employees and faculty. In addition, they also developed a higher level of confidence when interfacing with the school to resolve academic and school-based issues. As a result of increased involvement with the academic environment, families obtained a higher level of expertise and ownership of their students' academic experiences. These authors also learned how to better interface with teachers to the benefit of their students. This research indicated that multiple aspects of the school experience including student

learning and various levels of interactions between the family and the school can be streamlined by efforts made to familiarize and include families in the educational environment. Part of adding value to participation in educational enrichment for families is empowering them with choices.

Decision making. Epstein et al.'s (2002) fifth category is decision making. This process is how families can play an active role in the decisions pertaining to their student's education and how to advocate for learning in an informed manner. Epstein et al. promoted the concept of an informed and active family who was able to take an active role in promoting student achievement across the students' varied environments. These researchers described the role of the family as student advocate and how being receptive to communication from family can ultimately benefit the educational experience. These authors pointed to the challenges of this category such as being inclusive to all family members in the decision-making process across potential linguistic, cultural, and economic barriers.

Other research supported this category. Beal and Hendry (2012) found that factors such as ethnic origin and economic access still play a deciding role in the educational options and decision-making power available to students and their families. They found that while terms such as "equal access" and "equal opportunity" (p.542) were freely employed, the reality of these terms left much to be desired. This research demonstrated the continuing need described by Epstein et al. (2002) for schools to continue to develop programs and opportunities for participation which are accessible to all families in a variety of social, cultural, and economic settings. This is important to extending the

ability to take great part in the educational setting through decision making to all families. Family involvement and informed decision making can be crucial especially to those facing economic hardship because it promotes competence, resilience, and emotional stability which are key factors to student success (Waanders, Mendez, & Downer, 2007). By providing varied types of activities teachers can help families become more involved in their children's education. This increased involvement can lead to more informed decision making and active collaboration with teachers for the support of student outcomes.

Collaborating with Community. The final category in Epstein et al.'s (2002) framework is collaborating with community. This category addressed the importance of communication to support the health of the whole student and family unit. This goes beyond supporting academic achievement, but the importance of linking families with existing community services and expanding school offerings to include additional services to meet the specific needs of the community as a whole.

Epstein and Sanders (2006) as well as Epstein and Voorhis (2010) discussed the potential challenges of encouraging collaboration between families, educators, staff, and community organizations to better serve the needs of students. Their research emphasized that the school is responsible for initiating family involvement across potential barriers such as ethnicity, language differences, socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as differing work schedules. Donnell and Kirkner (2014) found in their research regarding family involvement among Latino families that other challenges can also include a lack of access to childcare, transportation, or inconvenient school meeting times which conflict

demanding work schedules. While these organizations and individuals share the common goal of benefiting the student, the potential issue remains of collaborating with individuals and organizations beyond perceived lines of territory to combine and align goals for the betterment of families.

The Relevance of the Research of Epstein in Today's Schools

Educational authors and researchers such as Tekin (2011), Hornby and Witte (2010), and Radzi, Razak, and Sukor (2010) continue to refer to the framework of Epstein et al. (2002) when describing methods by which to engage, retain, and promote family involvement in their child's education. Many aspects of this framework contribute to its enduring quality in the continuing dialogue of family volunteer involvement including the broad and applicable terms used by Epstein et al. to describe potential practices for strengthening connections between educational environments and their surrounding communities. These researchers accounted for the differing needs of varying educational environments which are evident in the writing of the framework itself as terms are broad and general, not intended to be the final definition but a starting point for the conversation on how to actively engage the families of students in order to benefit student achievement. Epstein and Sanders (2006) as well as Epstein and Voorhis (2010) found that student achievement is not the result of any one set of single actions or the intentions of one individual but instead that well rounded successful students are born from comprehensive learning communities with an educational support system that engages the whole family as much as is possible in the learning goals of the classroom. These authors stressed, however, that learning is not confined to the classroom and that

both family and community play an important role in supporting student achievement. These authors explained that despite the varying challenges, increasing connections and avenues of communication between the families of students, the school, and the community ultimately benefited student achievement by creating a comprehensive network of individuals with aligned goals and activities intended to support educational endeavors.

Therefore, family volunteering in the classroom may provide multiple opportunities to create, strengthen, and reinforce the learning communities described by Epstein et al. (2002). When families are successfully incorporated into the classroom environment there is the potential for their presence to contribute to improved student outcomes such as those in the area of reading comprehension. Effectively incorporating family volunteers into the classroom environment may prove beneficial across multiple spheres of learning as well as support connections between the school and the family.

The work of Epstein et al. (2002) continues to resonate in the existing outreach practices of schools today. According to Vance (2015) the work of Epstein et al. can be noted in many facets of school operations in existing community outreach programs which seek to further incorporate family volunteer involvement. The work of Epstein et al. relates directly to forming and maintaining outreach efforts to promote family involvement.

Epstein et al. (2002) provided a useful starting point for school administrators to begin the dialogue between the school and the families within the local community. In addition, to encouraging traditional modes of outreach and communication, these

researchers encouraged administrators to develop customized plans to connect with their local community in order to be as inclusive as possible to not only students but to their families as a whole. Epstein stressed the model for community involvement was not a comprehensive source but rather a basic guideline meant to be improved upon and customized to address the specific needs of the students and the families by schools within their own local communities.

This work is not tailored to the specific needs of a particular school or community but instead provides overarching basic principles which can be utilized by administrators, staff, and faculty to improve and promote relationships with the local community and families in order to better support student achievement. Epstein et al. (2002) demonstrated the many positive potential benefits such as improved communication and improved student achievement as a result of strengthening these relationships. According to Lindberg (2014), the six categories of family involvement as described by Epstein et al. remain relevant today as the basis for a productive and proactive planning point to promote family involvement. The impact of this foundational work is far reaching as it has accurately described the complex spheres of family involvement and how the role of the family of the student overlaps with existing school goals. This theory can be seen applied to the structure and terminology of existing school programs which seek to promote and retain family partnerships and family volunteering in particular.

Epstein et al. (2002) described how schools do not function in isolation but as part of the community. Also examined was how families play a key role in supporting educational goals both in the school environment and at home. Sheldon, Epstein, and

Galindo (2010) found in their survey study that activities which promoted active family partnerships were linked with consistent satisfactory performance on student proficiency assessments. “56.2 percent of students were at or above proficient in 2001, compared to 46.7 percent of students in secondary schools. These percentages increased in 2002 to 59.6 percent for elementary schools and 54 percent in secondary schools” (Sheldon, Epstein, & Galindo, 2010, p.35). According to this study, schools which employed more activities to engage families and who prioritized family involvement consistently met student performance indicators. This research described the pivotal role that families play in supporting a school’s overall academic mission and detailed that their increased involvement has a positive effect upon student achievement. While the research of Sheldon et al. demonstrated a connection between student achievement and family involvement, the actions required by schools to consistently enlist the participation of families can sometimes present challenges.

The challenges of encouraging family involvement are detailed in the Epstein et al.’s (2002) model. Challenges of including families through volunteer opportunities may include obstacles such as socioeconomic challenges, language barriers, and inadequate or outdated communication methods, among others. Epstein et al. stated that communication methods and opportunities which serve as an effective means to incorporate one demographic of families may not serve the needs of all student families. According to Vance (2015) the impact of Epstein et al.’s partnership model is seen in many facets of contemporary education specifically in the language used by schools to describe and promote their partnerships with the local community. This work provided key

information on how family volunteers are utilized within the school environment as well as the potential advantages and challenges this presence may bring.

With increasingly complex lives and schedules as well as many variations of the traditional family model, schools today continue to strive to find new and relevant ways to incorporate and encourage family involvement. Families who come from other countries with varied cultural backgrounds, who have limited transportation, or who are navigating language barriers may struggle to find ways to connect with the school environment and the volunteer opportunities which are available there (Shu-Yuan, Isernhagen, Scherz, & Denner, 2014). Family involvement in economically challenged school environments can present challenges not seen in other school environments with plentiful resources (Bower & Griffin, 2011). Challenges associated with family involvement in the educational experience in economically challenged areas include issues like language barriers, transportation availability, lack of accessible childcare, and work schedule conflicts.

Situations that may prove effective for promoting family volunteerism in middle class or economically-disadvantaged areas do not always apply in every circumstance to every school environment. Epstein et al.'s (2002) work does not consider economic or cultural differences but instead posits a set of general guidelines to promote an active dialogue between the school, the community, and the families of students. Despite the fact that Epstein et al.'s work provides general guidelines, a study conducted by Bower and Griffin (2011) revealed that many aspects of this framework are still applicable in urban environments but may require some modification to address the individual needs of

schools and families. Those families with the highest economic risk may also stand to have the most to gain academically from increased family involvement (Crowe, 2012). Epstein et al.'s model for community partnerships remains an important tool of the modern educational dialogue concerning ways to promote and continue to involve families in the educational experience.

Epstein et al.'s (2002) work relates to this current study because it described and explored the integral role that families play in supporting student achievement goals. Family involvement is considered a working approach to promote and further student success in many areas (Bower & Griffin, 2011). This is reiterated in Epstein et al.'s work which described the multiple potential benefits to student achievement as a result of successful family involvement. These include such potential improvements as partnerships between the school and the family. In order to improve the students' domestic environment to support learning, improved communication between the school and the family is important. In order to support academic improvement, promoting family involvement to impart autonomy helps to impart a sense of empowerment to families. Epstein et al. presented the concept through the partnership model that as families became more invested in education, student achievement benefited as well as other factors including social adjustment and classroom discipline.

Epstein et al.'s (2002) work demonstrated how family volunteerism can be a powerful tool for positive change in the academic achievement of students. These researchers also described the role of the family volunteer within the classroom. Epstein et al. detailed in the partnership model how the classroom volunteer may be used to help

with daily classroom activities or to tutor individuals or small groups of students. Epstein et al. found a connection between promoting family involvement and overall student success. Among Epstein's most relevant discoveries was that student learning did not take place in isolation but instead that learning was impacted by variables in every sphere of the students learning world, including both the educational and domestic environments. These included such variables as the level of overall family engagement, the extent to which learning was promoted in the home, and existing family attitudes education. Epstein et al.'s model posited that schools were responsible for strengthening connections across sphere of learning in order to support student academic wellness. This differed from previous concepts that suggested learning was limited to the classroom environment.

Among Epstein et al.'s (2002) many important concepts were the idea of educational environments overlapping. Previously the world of the student's home and the educational environment were thought primarily to work in complete isolation from one another without either environment having much influence over the other. Epstein et al. proposed that in fact there was a great deal of overlap between the home and the educational environment and that by intentionally forging these relationships student achievement as well as the learning community as a whole could benefit.

Capitalizing on family involvement is essential to accomplishing academic goals according to Goldkind and Farmer (2013). Epstein et al. (2002) pointed out an important element to supporting existing academic achievement is the effectiveness of the school to incorporate family involvement. The methods by which the various elements of students'

learning communities are woven together are through the intentional forging of a home and school partnership for the benefit of the student is also supported by Shu-Yuan, Isernhagen, Scherz, and Denner, (2014), Crowe (2012), as well as Lemmer (2011).

Epstein and Sanders (2006) pointed to the important role that the teacher played in forging and fostering the initial learning relationship between the school and the family. The success of any program designed to engage families at the school level is deeply reliant on the expertise and willingness of the individual teacher (Lemmer, 2011). In this sense, teachers as agents of change and representatives of the school environment they serve as a pivotal point of contact between the family of the student and the school environment.

Epstein et al. (2002) elaborated on the importance of this learning community, that is, teacher and family. According to this foundational work, there is a great deal of overlap in influence between the home and the educational environment upon student learning. By intentionally strengthening those connections there is the potential to create stronger communities and support student learning. Epstein et al.'s research indicated that both spheres of learning had the potential to improve and support student achievement and that by forging a stronger connection between the home and the school overall that students benefited in multiple ways from learning concepts being reiterated and supported. This research reinforced the concepts that student learning does not transpire in isolation but that instead it is the result of the combined spheres of learning.

Bower and Griffin (2011) noted where teachers actively encouraged families in both formal and informal school communications to translate current curriculum into the

home environment helped reinforce classroom concepts to the benefit of the student. For example, they detailed a case in which a math teacher encouraged families to have students look in their refrigerator at home to apply what they were learning about in the classroom which was measurements. Through this inclusive activity they could then see how this knowledge had practical applications for daily life. Bower and Griffin concluded that increased family involvement contributed to overall academic success, and that an investment in cultivating active communication between the home and school benefited both teachers and families.

Epstein et al. (2002) also explored the influence of the teacher supporting a connection between the school and the home learning environment. In this research Epstein et al. elaborated upon the potential of classroom volunteer opportunities as a chance for collaborative learning. These researchers explained that when working with a family volunteer, teachers had opportunities to impart learning methods and activities to support student learning at home. When volunteering in the classroom, families are passively exposed to professional teaching activities. Through this exposure and with some adaptation these activities can be adapted for the home environment.

Epstein et al.'s (2002) work continues to have influence upon how schools form working relationships with families and communities. According to the research of Shu-Yuan, Isernhagen, Scherz, and Denner, (2014), Bower and Griffin (2011), Crowe (2012), and Lemmer (2011) the family and community partnership as defined by Epstein et al. continues to prove to be an important starting point for the family engagement dialogue. It remains influential today since it presented broad and applicable guidelines to begin a

productive dialogue about strengthening the bonds of the educational community. As is the case with family volunteering in the classroom, increased comfort with the educational environment may impart a sense of ownership to families which ultimately promotes a greater sense of involvement in their students' education to the benefit of their student outcomes.

According to Bower and Griffin (2011) the work of Epstein et al. remains of high importance today because of the practicality of the models of family and community involvement. Bower and Griffin posed that the work of Epstein et al. emphasized the importance of the connection between the school and the home to both strengthening communities and supporting educational endeavors. Lemmer (2012) pointed out that the foundational work of Epstein et al. continues to contribute to many current theories today and emphasizes the potentially limitless opportunities to forge deeper connections between student families, communities, and schools in order to support the endeavors. These researchers proved vital and useful to educators to both labeling and providing guidelines to the practical means by which administrators and teachers can forge working partnerships with the families of students and their local communities to better support student academic goals. Epstein et al. provided teachers with a starting point from which to base many productive working relationships to support educational endeavors.

Effective assessments and early intervention remain crucial for providing effective reading instruction (Hosp & Suchey, 2014 and Tindal, Nese, Farley, Saven, & Elliott, 2016). Family volunteers may prove to be an important part of the intervention and assessment process. Understanding how these interactions affect the learning process

may prove important to supporting reading comprehension goals in the classroom. Hosp and Suchey in their overview of the purpose and challenges associated with reading assessments concluded that because of the inherently complex nature of reading assessments in general that both professionals and those supporting student reading, such as classroom family volunteers, would benefit greatly from clear and understandable and accurate assessments. They also pointed to the growing emphasis placed upon schools to provide both effective reading instruction and assessment and that a transparency is necessary to ensure that the instruction and intervention being imparted aligns with current research to empirically support efforts to improve reading instruction and education. Hosp and Suchey discussed supporting struggling readers can be frustrating for every party involved, and that this frustration is compounded by the often-convoluted nature of reading assessments. Tindal et al. (2016) found in their study which examined the reading assessment results of 1,061 students through a transition matrix and multi-linear growth model that customized assessment was able to more accurately document an improvement in student outcomes. Improving reading assessment and intervention methods may benefit student reading comprehension as well as contribute to the improved utilization of family volunteers in the classroom as active contributing members of the educational team aligned behind the goal of improving student reading comprehension.

As more schools face ever diminishing budgets and reduced staff numbers, the utilization of family volunteers has become ever more common in an effort to support daily classroom goals. The intense years following economic recession and schools

facing the loss of both local support and federal dollars has led to rash budgetary downsizing in many educational environments (Trump, 2010). School administrators face difficult economic times because of increasing pressure to spend as little as possible while still providing quality education. Result, many have had to look inward for ways to decrease spending including eliminating additional classes or any positions seen as duplicated teaching efforts (Kennedy, 2010). Therefore, while pressure exists in the educational environment to spend as little as possible while still providing quality education, the use of family volunteers is doubly advantageous, both from the standpoint of budgetary concerns and overall family involvement. However, few schools have a defined or well-organized system for the use of family volunteers.

Lemmer (2011) found that very few schools have any existing organizational system or set of policies regarding the use of family volunteers beyond requiring a background check to determine whether or not the family volunteer is suitable to be in the school environment. Dissatisfaction, lack of information, and frustration are often the result of poorly coordinated family volunteer endeavors. The concept of further encouraging families to take a larger role in school-based endeavors is largely dependent upon the efforts of the school itself and it assumes that both administrators and teachers have a positive attitude toward the concept of this increased involvement. A lack of organized preparation to successfully incorporate family volunteers may compound challenges associated with this educational relationship.

Therefore, there continues to be a need to better understand the decisions, factors, and influences which impact the decision of families to become involved in the

educational environment (Goldkind & Farmer, 2013). Many of the details which affect the level of family involvement can be affected by the extent to which teachers, administrators, and staff all work to extend a welcome to families upon their initial inquiries to become involved. While encouraging family involvement at the school level has been noted as having a positive impact there remains a decisive lack of structure in many school environments as to how to best organize, attract, retain, and properly allocate family volunteers.

Teacher's perceptions proved insightful to understanding how this presence in the classroom affects student learning and how this potential may be better harnessed to support existing classroom goals. Training to prepare teachers to successfully work with the families of students remains uncommon (Lemmer, 2011). Therefore, how teachers use family volunteers in the classroom has the potential to impact both classroom learning and the relationship between the home and the school environment.

Epstein et al. (2002) demonstrated that there is potential to support student achievement goals by strengthening existing school bonds with the surrounding community. This included the families of students who might otherwise feel distant from the learning environment. Epstein et al. proposed in addition to clear, concise, active communication that families be encouraged to volunteer within the school. Through volunteering, Epstein and fellow researchers demonstrated that families were able to participate actively in the educational process and support learning goals.

Smith et al. (2011) cited a decade of literature which supports increased family involvement in the educational environment that results in a positive impact upon student

indicators including achievement as well as behavior. For example, Smith et al., in their study regarding family involvement in urban environments concluded that despite negative stereotypes which may impact teachers' perceptions of non-traditional and minority families, given opportunities suited to their family needs families often welcomed the chance to become involved in the educational environment. It was discovered during the course of this study that often families have a desire to become more involved and support their students' educational goals but a lack of understanding of the expectations placed upon them as families can inhibit their opportunities to volunteer within the school. This study demonstrated that indifference toward family involvement can at times in fact be the impracticality of expecting all families to participate in the same way. This further exemplifies that a variety of family volunteer opportunities and active communication are important to involving families with mounting modern-day obligations in and outside of the home. The work of Smith et al. reinforces the concepts proposed by Epstein et al. (2002) that volunteering within the school environment is an opportunity to form valuable connections with all families which the school serves. While one type of volunteering style or participation may not be feasible for all families, the data obtained by Smith et al. showed a willingness to participate on the part of families which may have otherwise gone unnoticed if they had not been afforded volunteer opportunities which were designed to accommodate the needs of their families. Families volunteering within the classroom may become a platform from which the school can build a positive report with students and their families as well as strengthen community bonds.

Epstein et al.'s (2002) work also described some of the potential challenges and pitfalls of involving families and community. Schools which enlist the principles described in the work of Epstein et al. may use this knowledge to improve and augment their existing family involvement strategies. Epstein et al.'s research detailed how well intentioned but poorly coordinated efforts can prove detrimental to further community connections. Epstein et al. expanded upon how essential communication is to maintaining and promoting educational involvement on the part of families.

If communication from the school is absent, many families may never reach out to connect with teachers or faculty as they perceive this as the schools' responsibility (Christianakis, 2012). This being understood, it is essential for schools to construct productive means of communication between the educational environment and families in order to support student achievement by aligning the goals of both environments behind the shared objective of promoting student academic success. A negative interaction with the school environment by either a poorly composed or uninformed communication, or the complete absence of communication, has the potential to damage any endeavors toward future partnerships.

Smith et al. (2011) noted how the expectations of teachers and families regarding communication pertaining to the progress of their students' academic outcomes can vary greatly based upon such factors as cultural expectations and personal experiences. They noted in cases where culturally some families perceived education as the area of expertise of the teacher and therefore offered little involvement as a sign of respect, this lack of involvement was in some cases perceived by the teacher as indifference. There are many

potential instances where a lack of proactive communication or lack of cultural understanding can be potentially detrimental to the development of family and teacher partnership through volunteering to ultimately benefit student reading comprehension as well as other academic goals. Epstein et al.'s (2002) work also demonstrated how essential teachers and school staff are to maintaining a positive community and active family partnership to support school goals.

Family Volunteers in the Classroom

Family volunteer involvement in the classroom has the potential to have many positive effects upon classroom efficacy. A substantial body of literature exists which demonstrated a positive correlation between family involvement in educational endeavors and better academic performance according to the research of Smith et al. (2011). They compiled data from 12 different schools in six states in a variety of urban environments to ascertain if Epstein et al.'s (2002) research regarding family involvement volunteerism applied in an urban setting. Their resulting data revealed the adaptive qualities of schools and school faculties. They demonstrated that many of Epstein et al.'s indicators of family involvement did apply, and in situations where factors related to the urban setting hindered involvement schools offered additional comprehensive services in an attempt to encourage family involvement despite these barriers. Teachers in the study visited the homes of students to conduct family teacher conferences when circumstances made it impossible for families to come to them. More than half of the schools in the study by Smith et al. also had designed small incentive programs to reward family volunteers.

These incentives included items such as small prizes for perfect attendance of all volunteer shifts, thank you cards, and certificates of appreciation.

Epstein et al.'s (2002) school centered approach emphasizes effective communication, the importance of family involvement, and that families can contribute across multiple dimensions of the educational landscape which is relevant to the urban environment. However, as noted by Smith et al. (2011) critics of the Epstein et al.'s framework have stated it is at times clearly biased toward a middle-class perspective, which is not always relevant to migrant, working class, or urban families. For instance, in the case of a working-class family where a single guardian works multiple shifts, a family member may have the desire to volunteer or attend conferences but cannot due to work obligations necessary to provide for the family. As noted in the study by Smith et al. (2011) the work of Epstein (et al., 2002) provided an opening dialogue with families regardless of hardships or circumstances. This dialogue is important to being inclusive toward all family members. This allows administrators and faculty to establish when students are initially enrolled that the participation of family volunteers important to student success and that their presence is welcome in whatever capacity that they can contribute given their circumstances.

Families have a substantial amount of influence upon many facets of their student's education, and an increase in their support of educational endeavors is positively reflected in the scholastic outcomes of the student (Epstein, 2003; Epstein & Sanders, 2006). Efforts to incorporate families into the educational environment yielded positive outcomes which supported educational endeavors including an increased sense of

community and support for overall school goals (Reese, Staudt, & Ogle, 2013). Reese et al. conveyed that school as it is positioned within the context of community. Schools have an influence upon the extent to which families felt comfortable becoming involved with the educational environment. This is a key factor to their comfort when participating in family volunteer opportunities. They found that familiarity heavily influenced their attitudes of family volunteers towards school administrators, teachers, and staff.

According to the research of Reese et al. (2013) in instances when families felt their feedback and participation within the classroom environment was both welcome and valued, were more likely to become involved in family volunteer opportunities despite present barriers including transportation and scheduling conflicts. Promoting meaningful family volunteer involvement in the classroom may prove advantageous in more facets than are previously understood. More remains to be explored regarding how the family volunteer presence may be used to support student learning goals.

Reese et al. (2013) used focus group interviews and concluded the success of efforts to promote collaboration and community involvement were dependent largely upon interactions with school staff and teachers. The resulting data from the focus groups revealed how essential families felt school faculty and staff were to the collaboration process, and with the encouragement and support of school employees, they were more likely to initially become involved and stay involved within the school environment. Therefore, teachers play an integral role in both attracting and retaining effective family volunteer involvement within the classroom.

Teachers play an important role in the design and execution of outreach efforts to attract and retain family volunteers. Hornby and Witte (2010) collected data from 233 schools regarding policies and activities intended to promote family involvement. The research revealed of those 233 schools; only 21 had separate policies in existence which addressed the issues of promoting and retaining family involvement. The resulting data from the 11 question structured interviews conducted with principals of these schools resulted in data which revealed the majority of principals interviewed felt the responsibility to include family volunteers in school activities fell to the teacher or teacher leaders. This study revealed an existing educational attitude that teachers are expected to see to the duties and responsibilities associated with family involvement. The research of Horby and Witte revealed that a vast majority of schools in the study exhibited a lack any specific policies intended to facilitate successful incorporation of family volunteers into the educational landscape. While teachers were portrayed in the study as important members of the educational landscape and held responsible for the successful integration of family volunteers into the classroom, there were in the majority of cases no policies designed to guide or coordinate their efforts.

Teachers prove to be a vital link to promoting family volunteer involvement. A study conducted by Radzi, Radzak, and Sukor (2010) revealed indicated that if teachers have a positive regard for family involvement, it is more likely to be achieved. Findings from the study conducted by Radzi et al. indicated that teachers form a vital bridge to the community and that they are an important factor in determining family volunteer involvement. This study also revealed that families were much more likely to become

involved in the family volunteer experience if they were approached or encouraged by teachers, and they offered possible reasons for this including that families may perceive school as the teachers' "territory" (Radzi et al., 2010, p.261). The study revealed family volunteers may be uncomfortable becoming involved unless their participation is actively encouraged.

Knowing how to best incorporate family volunteers into the educational environment can be challenging for most public-school teachers and administrators. While many families may volunteer within their local school system at some point in their life, there remains a lack of an established structure within public schools to successfully incorporate and capitalize upon the time and talents of volunteers (Merrit, 2015). According to Merrit, among the first organizations to incorporate the use of volunteers to assist with teaching goals was the Peace Corps, which used volunteers beginning in the 1960s to assist with teaching literacy to developing countries. Shortly afterwards the Head Start program, a government sponsored educational support program begun in 1965 for preschool children in economically deprived areas called upon families and community volunteers to assist with implementing and supporting programs to meet educational and literacy goals along with other developmental objectives. Head Start currently serves over one million children each year from economically-disadvantaged families providing a wide array of family support services including early developmental and educational support (Sabol & Chase-Lansdale, 2015). A historical precedence exists which demonstrates that strengthening the network between families and teachers can further and enhance existing educational goals.

The central focus of this study was the perceptions of teachers regarding the family volunteer presence as it relates to student reading comprehension. An understanding of teacher perceptions may be useful in developing better practices and contributing to the overall social good by streamlining and improving the efficiency of the ways in which family volunteers are utilized in the classroom to support student reading comprehension. The use of family volunteers remains of great importance to contemporary educators (Goldkind & Farmer, 2013, Radzi, Razak, & Sukor, 2010). The perceptions of teachers are of importance to understanding this phenomenon.

Reading comprehension is an infinitely complex aspect of learning. Many programs have been developed in recent years focusing on this subject. Emerging educational efforts continue to bring the importance of reading into focus. The National Institute for Literacy (NIFL, 2006) and the International Reading Association (2001) are examples of organizations which formed in answer to the increasing attention by government entities in the regulation and improvement of reading and literacy instruction (Sargent, Smith, Hill, Morrison, & Stephen, 2010). The primary responsibilities of these organizations are to disseminate current and effective knowledge regarding methods and techniques designed to improve and promote student literacy and reading comprehension.

The age of the student and the grade level are the primary factors which determine what kind of reading intervention is appropriate (Suggate, 2010). Additional factors are also considered including which aspect of reading poses difficult for the student. Response to Intervention (RTI) for example is a thorough detective strategy which employs multiple levels of reading comprehension educational methods to identify and

isolate reading difficulties at the first sign of a student struggling to read at their grade level according to Bursuck and Blanks (2010). Strategies such as this are employed by teachers as part of a multi-tiered reading instruction plan to ascertain the progress level of students and whether or not further intervention and assessments are necessary. The presence of the family volunteer in the classroom may provide valuable support to these types of reading interventions by providing an additional adult observer as to the progress and potential struggles of students reading within the classroom environment.

Teachers' Use of Family Volunteers

Teachers serve as an essential link between the domestic environment of students and the educational environment. Teachers are conveyers of knowledge and are the primary means of conveyance of a student's education. Therefore, their attempts to interface with the families of students may have an unprecedented impact on family involvement in the classroom. Often measures which currently exist in schools do not truly incorporate the family presence but instead relegate them to a superfluous role rather than cultivate a scenario of true shared decision making (Bartel, 2010). Improving the potential of the family classroom volunteer to aid classroom goals is dependent upon supporting these efforts from the perspective of the teachers.

Previous decades have seen a substantial increase in the use of volunteers within the educational environment. A study by Merrit (2015) observed that volunteers are increasingly seen as an asset in achieving educational goals. An example is the organization Teach America founded in 1990 which began with 500 graduate volunteers and now encompasses thousands and is currently one of the largest providers of

education to low income families. The research of Smith et al. (2011) revealed that despite facing significant challenges associated with non-traditional environments such as overcoming economic trials, struggling single guardian homes, and working multiple shifts, families in urban settings still sought family volunteer opportunities when they received both support from teachers and additional support services from the school to promote their involvement. Understanding how teachers perceive the family volunteer presence in the classroom is essential to creating an educational environment where the participation of family volunteers is both genuinely advantageous and effective.

The involvement and support of teachers to any school-based initiative is essential for its long-term success. According to research conducted by Galloway and Lesaux (2014) teachers and school leaders must both embrace and customize changes to their environment as the champion of reform in order for it to be effective. Teachers are at the center of any school-based changes, including the increased incorporation of family volunteers into the classroom environment to support student reading comprehension goals (Morrison et al., 2011). The role which teachers play in both developing and initiating plans to incorporate volunteers into the classroom is imperative to ensuring successful implementation. Teachers serve as key agents of change in the school environment. Their support or lack thereof can have a deciding influence in the long-term success of any school-based initiative (Morrison et al., 2011).

Adler and Iorio (2013) suggested that it is important to consider teachers as agents of change when exploring teacher perceptions of family volunteers and their role in response to the academic push-down which results in a test centered culture that does not

adequately examine many of complex and interconnected factors responsible for improving student reading comprehension. Additionally, research of Schwartz et al. (2012) indicated the following: teacher to student ratio, available professional development, targeted curriculum, and early reading intervention all play an essential role in creating an effective classroom environment. This is important to the support of literacy goals. Environmental factors such as these play a role in the development of student reading skills, but these variables are not accounted for in many forms of testing. According to Adler and Iorio, testing and standardization hold increasing weight in the analysis of schools with achievement scores transcending the actual welfare of the student. The effective utilization of family volunteers in a test centered culture could prove to be of vital assistance to teachers already coping with stringent standards and rapidly changing achievement demands.

Achievement data can only serve as one measure of an infinitely complex environment such as the elementary school classroom. According to Hosp and Suchey (2014) reading comprehension and literacy skills are considered a multifaceted construct which can prove difficult to accurately measure and assess. According to these research assessments such as the Standardized Assessment Test, Pearson Assessments, and Iowa Assessment tests rely on normative data which while providing one form of measure does not provide all the key information relevant to a student's reading ability. As revealed in the research of Hosp and Suchey, standardized measures whether state authored or based upon other criteria are not intended to be used diagnostically and therefore while providing some forms of useful data they are not intended to provide teachers with

critical information regarding the needs for individualized reading instruction and support. Teachers acting as agents of positive change play a role in the successful incorporation of family volunteers into the classroom to support learning goals despite these pressures.

Teachers are often tasked with additional tacit responsibilities without receiving adequate professional support or guidance as to how to obtain the desired positive results such is the case with building a working productive relationship with the families of students. Hindman et al. (2013) concluded that methods of outreach to families vary greatly between individual teachers. The conclusion of the study suggested that both administrators and teachers could greatly benefit from time invested in exploring the most effective methods to establish a connection between the families of students and the school.

The Importance of Reading Comprehension

Learning goals such as improving student reading comprehension rely on the expertise of teachers to be executed successfully (McLaughlin, 2012). Reading comprehension skills acquired at the elementary level have a lasting impact on the overall academic welfare and achievement of students. Research supports that reading comprehension is linked to other skill sets essential for student success. In addition, reading instruction at the primary levels has an impact on later reading development (Duke & Pearson, 2009; Hilden & Pressley 2002; McLaughlin, 2003 as cited in McLaughlin, 2012). Therefore, initial acquisition of reading skills, reading

comprehension, and early instruction as well as intervention play an important role in the early development of students' reading skills.

McLaughlin (2012) indicated the role which the teacher plays in assisting students with acquiring skills associated with reading comprehension and increased vocabulary is a multifarious process. According to McLaughlin, teachers facilitate the development of student reading comprehension through a variety of activities including: classroom instruction, reading modeling, and by creating daily classroom learning opportunities. An example of this would be teachers instructing students on how to summarize what they have read, and in the process also imparting skills relevant to applying, demonstrating, and providing examples of what they have read. In this way classroom activities build upon one another to support the development of student reading comprehension.

Teachers play a role in how a student progresses in the acquisition of their reading skills and can serve as a critical individual noting any early signs of frustration or difficulty when mastering grade appropriate reading comprehension material (Sargent, Smith, Hill, Morrison, & Stephen, 2010). It is noted in the research of several authors that students do not acquire reading skills through any one process but instead that skills are imparted through a combination of activities, lessons, and multifaceted processes (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004, 2011; Comber, 2001; McLaughlin, 2012).

Marinak (2013) yielded findings that indicated in response to reading intervention factors such as collaboration, challenge, and choice had a significant influence over the motivation of students to meet reading goals. The study revealed that teachers were able to provide effective reading intervention to challenge and motivate struggling readers

while still meeting the demands of their classroom curriculum. These findings support the conclusion that teachers play a vital role in identifying struggling readers in the classroom environment as well as providing the needed motivation and intervention to support struggling readers.

Hosp and Suchey (2014) posited that reading comprehension has become of increasing importance on the educational landscape as increasingly instructors, administrators, and legislators are noting the far-reaching impact of reading comprehension upon other factors of student success and development. Hosp and Suchey indicated in that with the reauthorization of legislature such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, reading comprehension and classroom assessment remain at the forefront of discussions regarding increasing accountability and raising standards for teachers across the national educational landscape. According to Robb (2013) reading assessment is further complicated by recent shifts in curriculum. This includes examples such as the recently supplanted Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in many states where there remains a significant disparagement between the stated expectations of teacher's abilities to impart reading skills at the rates required by these new forms of testing. In many instances in regard to reading comprehension, teachers have been saddled with increasingly demanding mandates for skill expectations of students. These demands are often given without having also been allocated additional professional development or classroom support needed to reach these goals.

Reading intervention efforts are an important part of supporting reading goals. A growing amount of focus has developed in regard to reading intervention efforts.

Modifications to current teaching methods which support reading comprehension are designed to provide intervention when needed at the early reading levels. Reading skill levels at the early grade levels are often indicative of later difficulties. Addressing these difficulties as early as possible is important to supporting reading comprehension mastery at later grade levels and beyond (Hosp & Suchey, 2014). An increased emphasis on standardized testing measures has led to the increased use of reading interventions that are performance based. According to Hosp and Suchey, the short fall of this change in reference to teaching practices and assessments is that increasingly interventions are migrating away from the use of other forms of reading theory.

Hosp and Suchey (2014) indicated the danger of the trend of increased emphasis on standardized testing measures because potentially over time, less noticeable or hard to recognize reading difficulties could be ignored rendering these types of reading intervention assessments less effective. This research warns that ultimately; this may cause student reading achievement to suffer due to the effectiveness of the intervention measures being compromised. According to Hosp and Suchey, early intervention and providing targeted reading support especially at the elementary level has been recognized as an important practice for supporting later reading development. There exists potential that reading difficulties, if left unrecognized in the elementary school learning environment, may grow and impact other areas of learning over time. The effective use of family classroom volunteers may prove beneficial to support existing reading goals and aid in intervention efforts as additional adult supervision during reading activities may

provide more opportunities for early recognition of reading struggles and proper assessment of student reading abilities.

Families and Student Reading Comprehension

Teachers and families working together have the ability to form an essential network of support and early intervention in regard to student reading comprehension. Both teachers and families working in tandem to support student learning have the ability to have a positive impact upon student reading comprehension. The initial desire of families to support their students learning goals is sometimes tempered by a lack of experience. Lemmer (2014) indicated specific invitations from teachers and the creation of an inviting environment have been shown to have a positive impact upon the presence of families within the educational environment even in situations where families face significant challenges to increasing their levels of involvement. The study produced findings that showed teachers played a vital role in soliciting the increased involvement of families in the educational environment and that this invitation was crucial to inviting increased involvement from families. However, the majority of schools do not have existing policies to streamline the acclamation, training, and placement of volunteers within the school to support student learning. This lack of structure is described in the research of Lindberg (2014).

Many teachers have expressed being inadequately prepared to interface with families. Student teachers nearing the completion of their training when surveyed in a study by Lindberg (2014) revealed they had received little if any preparation for

collaborating with families. This lack of preparation if addressed could potentially improve classroom relations between family volunteers and teachers.

When families and teachers interact in the classroom environment there is the potential for passive learning and the imparting of knowledge pertaining to teaching practices and ways to support student reading comprehension. According to Spencer, Kajian, Petersen, and Bily (2013), when families are able to volunteer in the classroom they gain valuable insight from teaching professionals which can be utilized to support learning goals both in the classroom and at home. Simultaneously, teachers can provide more informed instruction when families collaborate with teachers regarding individual student needs. The family volunteer presence in the classroom may be mutually beneficial when conducted in such a way as the family presence supports classroom goals. Teachers then have the opportunity to plan with families in order to make more enriching classroom activities which are reliant upon an additional adult presence.

Family volunteers in the classroom may provide vital assistance to teachers regarding the reinforcement of reading comprehension. Reglin, Cameron, and Losike-Sedimo (2012) found that indicated family involvement in supporting reading comprehension and literacy development has been shown to have a positive impact. Those participants in the study who had access to family support and participation in their reading intervention showed an improvement of .05 over their peers who did not receive family support. These findings indicate an increased adult presence, such is the case when a family volunteer is used in the classroom, may have great potential to support reading comprehension goals.

An additional value of furthering student achievement is increasing family involvement in the educational environment. Reglin, Cameron, and Losike-Sedimo (2012) found families often cite factors which inhibit their increased involvement in the reading skills of their students. This included being intimidated by the prospect of approaching school personnel. A family member's experiences with education also play a significant factor in their comfort level with approaching and interfacing with school faculty (Reglin et al., 2012). Therefore, family volunteer opportunities in the classroom represent valuable potential connections between the educational and domestic environment to support student reading comprehension.

Teachers have the potential to form valuable bridges between the classroom and the domestic environment of students. Boyer and Hamil (2011) found that teachers represented an essential link between the home and the school. Their willingness and expertise when interfacing with families played a deciding factor in families' comfort level with increased involvement in the educational environment. This research demonstrated families needed to perceive that their feelings and opinions are not only welcome, but also encouraged. If family members felt more comfortable in the educational environment, they were more likely to engage actively in dialogue regarding their students' education. If teachers do not invite and encourage the participation of families often the attitude remained that education is something best left to the experts (Boyer and Hamil, 2011). This then may inhibit families from becoming increasingly involved in the classroom. Therefore, teachers have the potential to combat this attitude and promote further family involvement in the classroom.

Family as Volunteers in the Classroom

Reading comprehension is a valuable asset to the skill set of students. Ulmer, Truett, and Matzen (2010) showed family modeling and continuing to demonstrate an appreciation of reading is a way to inspire students to also reflect a similar appreciation of reading comprehension skills. Their research revealed that if students observed evidence that reading is equally important to both families and teachers alike they are more likely to develop their own interest in reading. This demonstrated that by family members volunteering in the classroom and assisting with reading comprehension activities, they can potentially impart those shared values with students. Their presence may then potentially reinforce the importance of reading comprehension in students.

Family volunteers in the classroom have the potential to support reading comprehension. Sabatini, O'Reilly, Halderman, and Bruce (2014) indicated that the family volunteer presence in the classroom can provide much needed support to reading comprehension goals when this presence is utilized effectively. Reading partnerships between families and teachers proved to be essential to early intervention and to the support of struggling readers. Along with increasing pressure to produce evidence of reading mastery on academic assessments, there is further incentive to effectively incorporate and utilize family volunteers to support classroom reading goals.

When families and teachers work alongside each other they may passively share skills related to promoting reading comprehension. Hindman et al. (2013) noted that when families volunteer in the classroom they are passively exposed to the skill of teachers who are imparting information to students within the structure of the classroom

and that this exposure even if unintentional can support learning goals at home. When families volunteer in the classroom they are able to see how teachers impart instruction and benefit from the ability to observe educational professionals in the act of teaching. In addition to being an additional adult presence in the classroom, families are able to improve their own teaching skills through learning opportunities made possible through being a family volunteer.

Family volunteers in the classroom can support classroom goals. The family volunteer presence has been associated with positive academic and social behaviors in the classroom according (Liu et al., 2010). The family volunteer presence supported learning goals through the improvement of the student to adult ratio as well as provided informal instructional support to students during the learning process. Family volunteers have the potential to further support reading comprehension goals by providing situational support to teachers during instructional time. Family support lends itself to the support of positive learning behaviors in the area of student reading comprehension goals (Liu et al., 2010).

Much of the existing literature assumes that teachers have positive attitudes towards family volunteers as there has been a positive link between the family volunteer presence and academic achievement. Existing literature does not expand upon the realities which teachers face as well as the additional responsibilities associated with training and effectively utilizing family volunteers (Lemmer, 2011). While teachers are likely to embrace efforts which support student achievement, the actual work involved with incorporating a family volunteer into the classroom is not often considered. Lemmer indicated it is often assumed that teachers are simply grateful for the support while in

actuality the presence of a family volunteer can prove to be a complex experience.

Teachers often cite a desire for continued professional development on how to successfully work with family volunteers to support classroom goals.

There is a lack of established educational practices designed to successfully incorporate family volunteers into the classroom. Hornby and Witte (2010) noted a lack of school policies crafted specifically with family input. This being noted, the family volunteer process would likely benefit greatly from a coordinated effort developed by teachers and families to support student reading comprehension goals. The family volunteer experience has many facets and variables which impacted the overall outcome of the experience. These include variables such as the level of comfort interfacing with the teachers in the classroom and the level of organization applied to the acclamation and use of family volunteers. Teachers if given the opportunity would be able to provide valuable input as to how this experience could be modified to more effectively support student learning goals particularly reading comprehension.

Many articles make references to the lack of effective communication between the school and the families of students. Smith et al. (2011) had a recurrent theme of a lack of understanding between family volunteers in the educational environment and school staff. Their research indicated a negative experience in the school office or an unpleasant classroom experience can permanently deter less experienced families from pursuing opportunities to volunteer in the classroom. The implication of this research is that teachers as well as other school employees may have a far-reaching effect upon the

decision of family volunteers to both stay and return to the classroom year after year to contribute their support to academic goals.

The research of Smith et al. (2011) regarding teacher perceptions of family volunteers in the classroom is important to understanding how teachers view the family volunteer presence. This may contribute to the development of better plans with which to allocate, encourage, and retain family volunteers in the classroom to support academic achievement goals among them student reading comprehension. As reform efforts are created it is important to devote some focus to the presence of the family volunteer in the classroom and the opportunities for family and community partnerships to support student learning created from this interaction (Goldkind & Farmer, 2013). All interactions within the educational environment have the potential to impact the further involvement of the family volunteer. In order to adequately support this process, the input of both teachers and families must be considered.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis provided an effective lens with which to view the inherently complex and multifaceted interactions between students, family volunteers, and teachers within the 5th grade classroom environment. The value of this approach is demonstrated in its unique ability to provide data regarding the meaningful lived experiences of study participants (VanScoy & Evenstad, 2015). This approach combined with the research methods outlined in chapter 3 may provide key insight as to the daily classroom experiences of participants. This information when analyzed may in turn provide valuable indicators of possible methods to improve student reading comprehension outcomes.

In Chapter 3 I outlined a detailed research approach through which I explored the perceptions of teachers regarding the family volunteer presence in the classroom. The following chapter will describe the means by which this research was prepared and carried out in a scientific, responsible, and ethical manner to obtain data regarding the perceptions of teachers regarding to this phenomenon. The resulting data may have positive implications for practical use and may contribute to better practices regarding family volunteers in the classroom and their influence on student reading comprehension. In the following chapter I explained in detail my research in order to provide data that contributed to the existing gap in the literature regarding the perceptions of teachers to the family volunteer presence in the classroom and how their presence might relate to student reading comprehension. The following research explored and expanded upon how teachers perceive this presence.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of the study was to explore teacher perceptions of family volunteers in the classroom as their presence relates to student reading comprehension. While many schools and other teaching organizations use family volunteers, there yet remained many potential avenues of inquiry to be explored regarding how teachers perceive this presence in the classroom. Inquiry into how to improve student reading comprehension remains inconclusive (Robb, 2013). In Chapter 3 I explain the specifics of the research and how I further explored this phenomenon.

This chapter includes details pertaining to the research design and the research selections that were made in order to demonstrate the academic validity of the study. I make connections to the historical precedence of the research selections, give examples of their use in previous studies, and discuss the foundational validity of their application in the research as well as their relevance to the exploration of this subject matter. The foundational framework regarding educational community partnerships provided by Epstein et al. (2002) served as the basis for the study. In addition, other works demonstrated the need for further investigation of this subject matter. The study was a qualitative interview study based on data from in-depth interviews with fifth grade teachers.

Research Questions

RQ1: What do teachers perceive as the benefits of the family volunteer presence in the classroom as it pertains to student reading comprehension?

RQ2: What do teachers perceive as the challenges of the family volunteer presence in the classroom as it pertains to student reading comprehension?

The central phenomena explored in the course of this study was teacher perceptions of family volunteers in the classroom as such volunteer presence relates to support of reading comprehension goals. While many educational organizations use family volunteers, there remains a lack of understanding of how to best engage with families in the educational environment (Lemmer, 2011). This study explored how teachers perceived the presence of volunteers related to the completion of reading comprehension goals in the classroom. Whether teachers perceived this presence as a help or hindrance to classroom reading comprehension may impact the extent to which family volunteers can be included effectively in the classroom. Further exploration of this phenomenon yielded information relevant to informing practices regarding the incorporation of family volunteers into the educational environment.

This qualitative study employed the interview study and interpretive phenomenological analysis approach. The interview study consisted of interviews with eight fifth grade teachers. This line of qualitative inquiry has been established as a route of valid academic research as early as 1913 by Husserl. This research tradition as explained by Patton (2015) and Maxwell (2013) demonstrated the effectiveness of this mode of study for exploring phenomena in such a way as to yield potentially useful data applicable to the professional realm of education.

The rationale for this research tradition is that qualitative interview studies are ideally suited to study phenomena that cannot be readily measured or explored by other

means. This research method provides a perspective on how particular phenomena evolve and allows for the examination of many complex factors simultaneously such as to how conditions, environment, and perceptions occur (Patton, 2015). This mode of study allowed for the adequate exploration of teacher perceptions and revealed whether or not preexisting negative or positive assumptions regarding volunteers were present. In addition, this allowed for the open exchange of ideas from teachers regarding ways to improve the family volunteer experience in the classroom. Teachers also had the opportunity to share their perceptions regarding the family volunteer presence as it relates to student reading comprehension. The interview format allowed for the candid and honest exchange of perceptions between the teachers being interviewed and myself. This format was also both time and cost and effective to explore this phenomenon.

Role of the Researcher

The roles of the researcher and participant were defined and explained as follows. As the researcher I gained the appropriate access to the site and participants through administrative channels with all permission and prior waivers completed. I conducted a series of in-depth interviews with fifth grade teachers regarding their perceptions of family volunteers in the classroom as it related to student reading comprehension. The participants were fifth grade teachers who have worked with a family volunteer in the classroom for the length of at least one school year. All participation in every aspect of the study was entirely voluntary.

I had no prior personal or professional affiliation with the participants. All of the participants were volunteers from a school district with which I had no prior professional

affiliation. Any potential researcher bias was addressed by the following: (a) no prior professional affiliation with the district or participants, and (b) the independent review of the findings from the study by at least two professional colleagues to assist in negating any potential bias. This review allowed for a valuable external perspective and provided an opportunity for the preliminary review of the resulting research.

I addressed potential ethical issues by taking the following precautions. There were no minors involved in the study at any point. All participants were consenting, volunteering adults. The participant pool was drawn from a school district with which I had no prior professional relationship. All appropriate administrative permissions at both the district and school level were obtained prior to approaching participants. Participants signed a consent form and were reminded prior to commencing the interviews that they may withdraw from participation at any time. There was no monetary compensation for participation. Ethical compensation is needed as explained by both Patton (2015) and Maxwell (2013) in order to express appreciation to participants in acknowledgement of their time spent assisting with the completion of the study. In lieu of monetary compensation, at the conclusion of the study participants were given restaurant gift cards in the amount of \$5.00. This appreciation gesture in itself did not serve as incentive great enough to elicit bias. Validity as a concept in qualitative research is dependent upon identifying potential threats to the integrity of the resulting data and preemptively addressing these threats (Maxwell, 2013). The resulting data and transcripts were coded to further protect the confidentiality of the participants so as to ensure candid responses in the resulting interviews.

Potential bias or perceived reactivity is minimized by remaining vigilantly conscious of how the interaction with the researcher may impact the data being collected (Maxwell, 2013). The interviews with teachers were strictly voluntary. The reasons and goals behind the study were provided during a staff briefing to explain my presence in the school. Interviews took place either before or after school hours as was convenient for the schedule of the participating teachers.

Participant Selection Logic

The interviewees were eight fifth grade teachers who had worked with a family volunteer for the length of at least one school year. Family volunteers were defined for the purpose of this study as any individual over 18 years of age who had custody of their child. The length of the school year was defined from August to May of a single school year, excluding district holidays, with the frequency of at least one day per week during the school year. The sample size included eight fifth grade teachers, which provided a purposeful sampling of at least two thirds or more of the fifth grade teachers at a single school. The teachers were employed by the same district but had no prior professional affiliation with me.

Sample Size

This sample provided a sizeable perspective of the perceptions of teachers regarding the family volunteer presence as it pertained to student reading comprehension at the fifth grade level. A finite population as defined by Frankfort-Nachimas and Nachimas (2008) is a number suitable to represent a majority of a given population hence eight teachers were used to conduct this study. This grade level was selected because it is

the age group with which I had the most prior professional and educational experience in order to ensure there was an existing familiarity associated with the professional terminology of that educational realm. The intention was to provide a representative sample as defined by Frankfort-Nachimas and Nachimas (2008) of teacher perceptions at the fifth grade level at one school. This study was limited to one school and one district due to time and cost constraints. This number of teachers was chosen in order to provide a sampling larger than a case study that would represent the opinions of fifth grade teachers regarding the family volunteer presence as it related to student reading comprehension. This number was chosen to represent as large of a sampling as was possible given time and financial constraints. Qualitative research sampling as described by Patton (2015) often employs smaller, purposefully selected samples in order to provide an accurate picture of the phenomenon being explored. This potential data obtained from eight participants could provide knowledge expansion and offer incentive for further, larger studies on this subject matter in the future.

Recruitment Procedures

The administration representative for the school district in which the study was conducted verified the employment of the fifth-grade teachers who participated in the study. The principal of the school corroborated that the teachers had worked with a family volunteer for the length of at least one school year. Key factors should be considered to select individuals, or units of analysis, that will provide an accurate depiction of the phenomenon to be studied (Patton, 2015). I verified both of these

experiences through the school office prior to initiating the interviews with the volunteer participants.

I established the necessary permission from the district office and school administrator to present the research proposal to the school faculty. The interview questions that I asked are shown in Appendix A. As detailed by Patton (2015), because the researcher is the instrument of qualitative inquiry, personal experiences and observations were also noted as part of the research analysis as these perceptions played a part in the study outcomes. The method by which I gained access to the participants and site was as follows: Once the required number of participants had volunteered, I verified a second time through the school office that they were indeed employed as fifth grade teachers and had worked with a family volunteer for at least the length of one school year. At the time that the participant list was completed, I scheduled the interviews.

Saturation

This sample size represented a significant proportion of teachers at the fifth grade level at one school in order to represent satisfactory saturation of the given population and a variety of educational backgrounds, experience levels, and perceptions. A minimum of eight participants were interviewed in order to accumulate sufficient data to adequately explore this phenomenon for the purposes of this study. This sample size was appropriate to obtain a sufficient amount of data to inform the exploration of teacher perceptions of the family volunteer in the classroom. A sufficient sample size is often considered at least 5% of the specific group being included in the study (Frankfort-Nachimas & Nachimas, 2013).

Instrumentation

Several data collection instruments were used in the completion of this study. All interviews were preserved using an audio recorder. From this recording a transcript was typed and shared with participants via e-mail to ensure accuracy. In addition to audio recordings I produced hand written field notes which were typed and entered into the record of the study. The software program NVivo was used to organize the resulting transcripts in order to determine the frequency of use of certain terms and to discover emergent themes from the interviews. According to Patton (2015) software provides a convenient means of coding as well as storing massive amounts of qualitative data. The interview protocol was based on the research questions of the study and followed a semistructured format that encouraged participants to elaborate on their answers.

Interviews conducted with the study participants were the primary instrument of data collection for this study. The validity of interviews was an established qualitative research instrument with many historical and current academic uses. According to Frankfort-Nachimas and Nachimas (2013), the interview serves as a structured mode for respondents to freely share their perspective of a given phenomenon. In addition to semistructured interviews and field notes, researcher reflection was also included in the resulting data of the study. Field notes are an important aspect of phenomenological studies and have their roots in an established academic tradition as outlined by Rubin and Rubin (1995). Patton (2015) conveyed that interview questions must be carefully designed to reveal the true perceptions of participants and follow a careful protocol to allow for the consistency of multiple interviews.

Justification of Instrument Selection

The data instruments outlined above were sufficient to explore the phenomenon of teacher perceptions regarding the family volunteer presence in the classroom as it relates to the completion of reading comprehension goals. The semistructured interviews with teachers yielded a significant amount of data pertaining to their perceptions of the family volunteer presence. Teachers were given the opportunity to elaborate upon what they perceived as the advantages and challenges of working with families in the classroom. From these interviews the thematic use of terms and subject matter emerged to provide a more accurate picture of how teachers perceive the family volunteer presence in the classroom. In order to have a sound qualitative study, not only do multiple forms of data need to be used, but there needs to be a coherent link between the research design and what is being studied (Maxwell, 2013). The field notes, audio recordings, transcripts, and coded data which emerged from the study also provided additional information regarding these perceptions.

The instrument of interviewing as a means of collecting data for use as a qualitative instrument were pioneered in the early 19th century and used for a variety of qualitative inquiries. The qualitative tradition has since continued to improve and expand upon the use of interviews with the work of such academics such as Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (1994). Continually interviews remain a reliable means of data collection to provide additional information relevant to qualitative study. Interviews have been an established means of qualitative discovery for many years and have been utilized by many groups of academics seeking to explore the world around them through social

sciences. This among the many varied other instances of the use of interviews in the qualitative tradition establishes the validity of the use of interviews as an instrument of data collection.

The use of interviews was appropriate for this study as this allowed for data collection pertaining to teacher perceptions. Other types of instruments would not have allowed for the amount of personalization, expansion, or level of detail which was made possible through the interviewing process. It is also important within the intentional structure of your qualitative instrument to leave some inherent flexibility in order to be able to respond to emergent changes when on site (Maxwell, 2013). In the context of the culture of the educational profession while given an opportunity to reflect on evaluations, in the professional environment teachers are rarely given the opportunity to reflect honestly without fear of consequence. The questions utilized in the interview process were tailored to give participants adequate opportunities to candidly reflect upon whether or not they viewed the family volunteer presence as a challenging presence or as an advantageous presence.

The validity of the interview questions as an instrument to gather data regarding teacher perceptions has been established in the historical precedence of the qualitative tradition which has affirmed the usefulness of the interview instrument to collect data. As has been established by academics such as Anderson and Minke (2007) in qualitative tradition, this instrument provided a wealth of data regarding teacher perceptions and allowed for these perceptions, terms, and frequent themes to be analyzed in order to produce an accurate picture of how teachers perceive the family volunteer presence in the

classroom. A contextual or culturally specific issue to the interview instrument was that I had to reassure participants that their answers to the interview questions were then coded and entirely confidential. This allowed for a more honest and valid collection of data.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The following procedures for recruitment outline the methods by which the data for the study was collected. The interview data was collected from eight fifth grade teachers who had worked with at least one family volunteer for the length of a school year. Teachers were asked to answer interview questions regarding their perceptions of the volunteer presence.

These data were collected by the doctoral candidate, Rachel Miller. Audio recordings, typed and verified transcripts, and field notes were used in conjunction with the interview protocol to collect data pertaining to teacher perceptions of family volunteers. The data were collected during a series of interviews conducted and scheduled for the convenience of the researcher and the participants. The data collection events took place over the period of time of one month due to the time constraints of the researcher as is determined by necessary academic progress to complete graduation in a timely manner. The interviews were approximately forty minutes long but did not exceed one hour in length in order to allow sufficient time for the participants to answer the interview questions and also to provide time to address any additional comments or suggestions the participants may have had. The resulting data from the interviews were recorded using an audio recorder. In addition to these recordings transcripts were produced and verified via email by the participants to ensure accuracy. Tools such as

these assist in the primary job of the researcher which is to collect sufficient data to accurately represent the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2015). This feedback process allowed participants to provide any additional data related to their transcripts. According to Anyan (2013), further including interview participants in the data collection process contributes to the depth and accuracy of the data. Field notes were taken by the researcher and recorded as part of the data accumulated by the study.

Organizational tools were utilized to maintain the integrity of the data which had been collected. Field notes taken by the researcher during the process of the interviews were used to provide additional information gained during the completion of the teacher interviews. Field notes reflected information collected by the researcher observations which are not reflected in the interview transcripts such as relevant non-verbal indicators which further complimented data related to teacher perceptions. The use of field notes assists with multiple facets of critical reflection by allowing the research to examine data in depth (Maharaj, 2016). Transcripts of the teacher interviews were used to produce coded data. This process protected the confidential nature of the participant responses and allowed for the presentation of recurrent themes which emerged during the completion of the study.

Follow Up Procedures

Participants exited the study after the interview had concluded. They were thanked for their participation. According to Maxwell (2013) proper participant recognition is an important part of concluding any study. They received an email with a transcript of their interview and were asked to make any corrections as well as permitted

to request any corrections to how their perceptions were recorded. They were also offered the opportunity to make additional comments at that time. Once the transcript had been verified as accurate and acceptable by the participant they were once again thanked for their participation and had it once again stated that their participation is entirely voluntary and confidential. The researcher offered them a summary of the study upon its conclusion if they so desired.

Had for any reason any of the interviews become disrupted, the participants were given an opportunity to reschedule a second interview with the researcher to complete the process. If the interview process was however unable to be completed upon a second attempt the researcher then discontinued the line of inquiry and resorted to scheduling an interview with an alternate participant. Given the brief nature of the interview process, the following processing steps required, and the time constraints of the researcher no more than two attempts were allowed to include the data from a single participant. The time requirements and scheduling options were made clear to the participants during the recruitment briefing. Gift cards as thanks for participation to study participants were given at the conclusion of the study, or upon the event of a participant voluntarily withdrew at the time of exit from the study.

Data Analysis Plan

The following data analysis specifics outlined how each mode of data collection was connected to the central phenomenon being studied. The interview data that were collected related directly to the research questions regarding teacher perceptions of the family volunteer presence in the classroom as this presence relates to reading

comprehension goals. The questions asked during the interview process revealed the perceptions of teachers as to whether or not they considered the presence of family volunteers challenging or advantageous to the completion of student reading comprehension classroom goals. Inductive coding was used since the interview questions produced a variety of potentially open ended responses and therefore there was little way of determining prior the specifics of the nature of the data which emerged from the interview process prior to its completion. Inductive coding reveals patterns, themes, and interactions within data (Patton, 2015). Direct data entry was used to enter the transcripts resulting from the interviews into NVivo for processing. NVivo provides useful organizational tools for the collection and organization of data resulting from interview studies (Woods, Paulus, Atkins, & Macklin, 2016). The names of participants were omitted and replaced with numeric values to protect the confidentiality of the participants. Instances where data were collected from an incomplete interview or instances in which a participant voluntarily withdrew from the study prior to its completion were not used in the completion of the study.

Coding of the interview data included initial broad coding, and then was refined into focused coding which assisted with the creation of categories for the data resulting from the interviews. Broad categories which categorize the perceptions of teachers as either positive toward family volunteer involvement or challenged by family volunteer involvement were further refined to address the thematic frequency of specific factors mentioned during the interview process in either category. From this analysis frequently used words or sentiments emerged.

Issues of Trustworthiness

The internal credibility of the resulting research which emerged from the study was maintained and verified using the following methods. Consent forms were used to inform participants of their rights as willing volunteers in the study conducted by the researcher. Participants were drawn from a school district with which the researcher had no prior professional history to ensure personal relationships would not potentially contaminate the data. The software NVivo was used to organize the data resulting from the transcripts of the interview in order to determine the thematic frequency of terms used when teachers describe their perceptions of the family volunteer presence. Saturation was achieved through the interview process which included the participation of eight fifth grade teachers from a single school. In the event there was not at least eight teachers volunteering to participate in the study from a single school additional participants were to be acquired from a neighboring school within the district. The qualifying parameters of study participants were verified independently by the researcher through the school office. Field notes were recorded and noted as part of the study. The finished study prior to completion was reviewed by two professional colleagues to provide additional opportunity for professional review and eliminate the possibility of overt researcher bias.

The transferability of the research was maintained by the observance of strict protocols and qualitative procedures which can be replicated in different circumstances by other future researchers in order to continue to study this phenomenon. Qualitative rigor of this nature is essential to maintaining the accuracy of data collected during qualitative studies (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Due to the limitations of the study the

interview data was collected from only one kind of school environment. Due to the specificity of the research design others researchers will be able to duplicate the study in different kinds of educational settings which use family volunteers.

This study employed a variety of data collection methods in order to strengthen the dependability of the research process. Triangulation as described in Patton (2015) was used to collect interview data from study participants in order to further strengthen the quality of interview data which is obtained regarding teacher perceptions. A combination of multiple interviews, field notes, and transcripts which were used to provide the researcher with a picture of the data revealed through the interview process. A series of approximately forty minute to one hour interviews were held with 8 participants in order to complete the study. The researcher took detailed notes in addition to recording each interview using an audio recorder. The interviews were then transcribed and further analyzed using NVivo software to track the frequency of use of terms and emerging themes.

While conducting qualitative research it is vital to the confirmability of the researcher that observations and analysis of the data remain objective and academically viable. Maintaining credibility according to Patton (2015) requires a combination of high quality field work, a knowledgeable researcher, and the integrity of solid qualitative inquiry. Reflexivity, or a heightened self awareness, was employed during the length of study especially in the aspects of data collection and data analysis. Reflexivity entails a knowledgeable researcher being aware of their own cultural, professional, and personal

bias and diligently working to both acknowledge and transcend these biases in order to produce impartial qualitative research.

Ethical Procedures

Ethical research is essential to not only preserving the rights of the participants and the researcher but also to ensuring the collection of sound and unforced data. A fundamental ethical concern according to Maxwell (2013) is the awareness that even carefully coordinated and consensual research of any kind is still an obtrusion into the lives of participants. Maxwell cautioned researchers to be aware of how they are perceived by participants and to be aware to what extent the research itself is a departure from their normal lives or operating procedures.

There was a multiple step process to gain access to the participants of the study. Firstly, the district was contacted and a meeting arranged with the appropriate individuals to gain access to the school site. Through these individuals, a meeting was also scheduled with the school building administrator. Any certification or verifying documents needed was provided to the district to confirm the valid and academic presence of the researcher in the school district. A binder displaying the interview protocol, research procedures, and consent forms used was prepared and approved by the school district prior to being distributed at the school building to the study participants. Interview Review Board approval was obtained at the university level prior to any school district contact being made. Once the appropriate permission had been obtained from the district and school building administrators, participants were approached during an already scheduled faculty meeting to discuss the research opportunity.

The ethical treatment of study participants was of the utmost concern to the researcher at all times. All participants were over 18 years of age. Participants were provided with consent forms and reminded at multiple points throughout the research process their participation and the subsequent use of their data was entirely voluntary. Participants were made fully aware that their participation in the study would not be monetarily compensated and that their time however was still highly valued by the researcher.

Institutional permissions were obtained prior to the initiation of this study by the researcher. The Institutional Review Board provided official approval at the university level prior to the researcher approaching the school district with the proposed research (Walden IRB approval number 03-22-17-0224075). The district office approved and arranged contact with the school site. The school building administrator approved the presentation of the researcher to the faculty of the school. The school faculty then were able to contact the researcher to offer to participate in the study.

Ethical concerns related to the study included the idea that participants may have felt pressured to participate, that their responses were tailored to perceived pressures, or that participants were in some manner made to feel uncomfortable by the presence of the researcher within the context of the school building. These concerns were be addressed in the following manner. The voluntary nature of the study was reiterated at several times throughout the research process. Volunteer participants were made aware by both the consent form and by verbal confirmation of the researcher that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point. It was

conveyed by the researcher in both the consent form and verbally that the interview data provided by the participants would be coded and entirely confidential to help ensure truthful and candid responses to the interview questions. It was reiterated no names were used and only numeric values were used to represent the participants in the final conclusions presented by the researchers, therefore all data was entirely confidential to protect the identity of the participants. Lastly, during the faculty meeting when the researcher presented the research study, all efforts were made to familiarize the faculty and staff of the school with the reason for the presence of the researcher. Faculty and staff also had an opportunity to approach the researcher at the conclusion of the presentation with any additional concerns or questions.

In the process of addressing the ethical concerns of the study, it was important for the researcher to be vigilantly aware of potential field issues or other complications which may have impacted the overall quality of the study. Should a participant have chosen to withdraw from the study prior to its completion one of the alternate participants would have utilized to ensure that there were no less than eight participants which provided interview data related to the teacher perceptions of the family volunteer in the classroom as it is related to student reading comprehension goals. In the event that there was not at least eight participants from one single school building site to participate in the study, first other schools would have been considered as an additional source of participants, and had it been needed, additional districts. Audio recordings were duplicated electronically to prevent loss of data. This procedure was also used to ensure that there were multiple copies of the researcher's field notes and other resulting data

from the study were duplicated electronically when applicable to protect the research from possible corruption or loss.

Data collected in the process of this study was coded to ensure an entirely confidential presentation and analysis of the resulting data from the study. All reasonable measures were taken to ensure the security and confidentiality of the data collected during the completion of this study. The names of participants were replaced with a numeric value and also pseudonyms were used to ensure the complete confidentiality of all participants and their responses.

These data resulting from the study were stored on the personal computer of the researcher which was password protected. Additional electronic precautions were taken to secure the files themselves on the computer. Electronic duplicates exist in a secure online data storage format. All the resulting data from the study will be preserved for 5 years per the requirements of the Institutional Review Board. The resulting files and their duplicates will be deleted after that time has elapsed. Only the researcher had access to the data resulting from the study prior to coding.

To ensure there was no conflict of interest between the researcher and the participants the study was conducted at a school site with which I had no prior professional involvement. This was to ensure that the first time that participants met the researcher was in the context of the study and therefore they had no prior personal opinions which could have potentially corrupted the study. In choosing a district with which I have not been professionally affiliated prior to the study also helped to dispel any

sense that the study is associated with the administration of the school and therefore elicited more honest responses from the study participants.

The incentive which was provided to participants was restaurant gift cards at the conclusion of the study. Participants also received a thank you note from me thanking them for their and participation within the study. There was no monetary compensation whatsoever for participants in the interest of the preserving the ethical and academic integrity of the study. Demonstrating openness and consideration is an important aspect of qualitative study (Patton, 2015). This incentive was important to provide participants with evidence that their contribution was appreciated and to provide an opportunity for any lingering informal questions on the part of the participants.

Summary

In summary, the previous chapter provided evidence of the connection to the tradition of qualitative study. This phenomenological qualitative study used a series of interviews to explore and expand upon teacher perceptions of the family volunteer presence in the classroom as it relates to student reading comprehension. This study utilized the triangulation of data such as multiple interviews and field notes to ensure the quality of the data being collected. Appropriate permission and administrative access was arranged by the researcher prior to the initiation of the study along with all required Internal Review Board approval. Data resulting from the study was coded to ensure the complete confidentiality of the participants. This study explored how teachers perceived the family volunteer presence as it relates to student reading comprehension in the

classroom and determine to what extent teachers perceived the family volunteer presence as a help or hindrance to their classroom goals.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of the study was to explore teacher perceptions of family volunteers in the classroom as their presence relates to fifth grade student reading comprehension. The aim of the study was to provide teachers with the opportunity share their perceptions of the impact of the family volunteer on student reading comprehension. In this chapter I begin with a description of the study setting. This is followed by the demographics, data collection process, and analysis. I explain the methods employed to ensure trustworthiness of the study, and I describe how the study was completed according to the research plan. A comprehensive review of how the study was implemented and completed is included along with the results. A summary briefly describing the results of the study concludes the chapter.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What do teachers perceive as the benefits of the family volunteer presence in the classroom as it pertains to student reading comprehension?

RQ2: What do teachers perceive as the challenges of the family volunteer presence in the classroom as it pertains to student reading comprehension?

I used semistructured interviews to allow eight fifth grade teachers the opportunity to share their perceptions of the challenges of the family volunteer presence in the classroom as it pertains to student reading comprehension.

Setting

The setting of the study was a rural elementary school located in the Midwest of the United States. The district buildings including the elementary, middle, and high

school are built in proximity to one another sharing one hillside. The school is situated one half-hour drive from the nearest town. The school has long-term staff and employees with many having worked in the district a decade or more.

I interviewed the teachers in an auxiliary classroom at the school that was not in use with the exception of two interviews that were conducted at a local library workroom per the convenience of the participants. While participation was open to all teachers who met the qualifying criteria for the study, those who chose to participate corresponded directly with me to ensure confidentiality. I recorded teachers on both an audio recorder and a phone simultaneously to ensure there was no loss of their interview data while also taking notes regarding particularly relevant information shared during the course of the interview. I scheduled interviews at the convenience of the participants depending upon their planning period or their time availability after work. All interviews with participants were conducted over the span of a month. Variables of interview conditions were minimal to nonexistent, the primary variable being the time of day that was convenient for the participants.

Participants

All teachers who participated in the study had at minimum 3 years teaching experience and at least one school year of experience working with family volunteers in the classroom as well as at other school events. I invited participants to participate in the study if they met the study specifications of being an experienced fifth grade teacher who had taught student reading comprehension and used a family volunteer for the duration of at least one school year. Every participant had experience working with family volunteers

to support student reading comprehension and were willing to share their perceptions of how this presence impacted their respective student reading comprehension teaching goals. There were a total of 32 teachers in the elementary building and 8 teachers who participated in the study.

Table 1

Participant Pseudonym, Teaching Experience, Gender, Education

Participant pseudonym	Teaching experience	Gender	Educational level
Julie Smith	3 years	Female	Bachelor's
Susan Willis	10 years	Female	Master's
Fran Baker	15 years	Female	Bachelor's
Tina Thornton	9 years	Female	Bachelor's
Amy Jones	6 years	Female	Bachelor's
Tammy Peters	6 years	Female	Bachelor's
Joanne Thatcher	3 years	Female	Bachelor's
Diane Luis	17 years	Female	Master's

I interviewed fifth-grade teachers regarding their perceptions of the family volunteer in the classroom. The average age of participants was 40 years old. The participants held at minimum a bachelor's degree as well as taught in the fifth grade per the requirements of the study. Three years of teaching qualified them as experienced in their field.

The school district has a low turnover rate. The teachers serve a high needs rural area that is subject to economic hardship. Due to the economic needs of the area, the school is considered to be in a high needs area with high percentages of economically challenged families. The Midwest Poverty report showed that as many as 19.9% of families of the county in which the school operates live at or below the poverty line. The

average classroom size in the fifth grade is approximately 25 students. The rural school serves not only as an educational center but also as a gathering point for local community sporting events and organizational meetings.

Data Collection

The data collection process included interviews ranging approximately 45 minutes long with eight teachers regarding their perceptions of the family volunteer in the classroom as to how this presence impacted student reading comprehension. The location of the interviews was an auxiliary classroom at the elementary school, with the exception of two interviews that took place off-site per the convenience of the participants at a local library workroom. The interviews were completed at the convenience of the participants and considering the scheduling needs of the participants. The interviews were completed over the course of one month.

During the interviews participants were asked to reflect upon their perceptions of the use of the family volunteer in the classroom as this presence related to student reading comprehension. Participants were asked both to reflect upon their positive perceptions of working with family volunteers in this way as well to describe what aspects of these interactions they found challenging or that possibly hindered student reading comprehension goals. All participants were asked the interview questions listed in Appendix A and given time to respond as they found appropriate. As the final part of the interview, participants were asked to reflect on their personal perceptions of possible professional development measures.

The interviews were recorded using an audio recorder, phone recorder application, and field notes that I took during the interviews. Two forms of recording, audio and phone, were used to maximize the audio quality of the recordings of the interviews. The data collection plan was executed as described in Chapter 3, which was audio recordings, typed and verified transcripts, and field notes. I followed the interview protocol to collect data pertaining to teacher perceptions of family volunteers. All interviews were completed as scheduled and no participants chose to withdraw from the study. The interviews were not subject to any disruptions or otherwise aberrant conditions that may have impacted the study. All data collected were duplicated and password protected as described in the research plan.

Data Analysis

After all the interviews were completed, the recordings were downloaded to my secure, password-protected desktop computer. I listened to the recordings and decided between which version of the interview recording was most clear and easily discernible. I then transcribed the interviews. Once a typed transcript existed, a copy of their interview was shared with each study participant. The participants were given five business days to respond with feedback via e-mail if they felt their interview was not inaccurate or if they had additional feedback. All participants deemed their transcripts a satisfactory representation of their interview experience.

I used the qualitative analysis program NVivo to organize the data. Identities of participants were replaced with numeric values to ensure confidentiality. The frequency of terms, repeated words, and repeated emotional sentiments were charted using the

software to track the recurrence of certain themes the teachers shared during the course of the study. Initial categories included positive sentiments, challenging sentiments, and general feedback regarding professional improvement.

Responses of participants were divided into nodes using NVivo and initially divided into two major categories, positive perceptions and challenging perceptions. Additional resulting categories included positive perceptions related to behavior, general classroom support, and reading comprehension. Likewise, challenging perceptions of these subcategories were also noted. Thematically specific qualities of family volunteers began to emerge as either being qualities that supported classroom student reading comprehension or qualities that diminished the ability of teachers to effectively support student reading comprehension. Word usage queries were also used to discover repeated phrases and themes to identify commonalities in the responses of participants based on the interview transcripts.

As I examined the interviews in greater depth, common themes began to emerge based on the two divergent perceptions of the family volunteer being used to support fifth grade student reading comprehension. The two major themes were perceptions that supported the use of the family volunteer and reflected positively on that experience, and the perceptions that cast the experience as challenging or as a hindrance to student reading comprehension. From these two differing perceptions, beneficial or challenging, further categories were created that isolated what teachers perceived as positive family volunteer interactions and challenging family volunteer interactions. In the process of

analyzing these data, all perceptions shared by teachers were able to be divided into these two categories.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility concerns were addressed to ensure that the data that was collected properly during this study. The results presented convey an accurate account of teacher perceptions of the use of the family volunteer in the classroom to support student reading comprehension. Each of the interviews was conducted in a manner that aligned with the approved research plan. There were no experiences or conditions that caused any deviations to this protocol. All participants were experienced teachers who shared their perceptions voluntarily regarding the use of the family volunteer in the classroom to support fifth grade student reading comprehension. Member checking took place as each participant was given the opportunity to review and approve their transcript prior to data analysis.

The confidentiality of participants was maintained as described in the approved research plan. Credibility of the study was addressed and maintained in the following ways. Triangulation was achieved as multiple interviews were conducted with teachers of various education and experience levels, and these data were combined with my field notes as an added perspective. Triangulation is the process of incorporating multiple perspectives in research to uncover themes (Creswell, 2006). Teachers included in this study had a variety of both professional experience and backgrounds. Their diverse experiences were combined with my reflections to uncover emergent themes in these

data. The interview data were collected using multiple forms of recording to ensure accurate transcripts were produced. NVivo was utilized to organize the data and support my analysis process of these resulting data. The initial findings were reviewed by two professional colleagues to protect against researcher bias. Study participants reviewed and verified transcripts of their interviews to ensure accuracy. The research was conducted in a school environment where I had no prior personal or professional affiliation.

Transferability

Transferability of this study is viable. In order for transferability of the study to be maintained it must be able to be duplicated by other researchers in different environments. According to Maxwell (2013) transferability of a qualitative study is reliant upon many factors, among those which are of paramount importance being provided ample detailed descriptions of how the study was carried out. This study could be recreated in different school environments with varying grade levels and specialties. This study could also be adapted to be implemented in higher educational environments or community colleges.

Additionally, the study could be designed to cater to any organizational environment which regularly uses volunteers to perform key daily functions. It may be beneficial to future organizations to recreate this study at different grade levels, various kinds of community organizations, and other school settings. Findings from this kind of study may provide administrators and stakeholders with key insight as to the most useful

way to engage and utilize volunteers to promote maximum efficiency and organizational support from their volunteers.

Dependability

Dependability contributes to the reliability of the data collected from this study and to the credibility of the findings which result from this study as the result of the analysis of the researcher. Dependability of the study was maintained through consistent research methods. The questions were recited for each of the eight semistructured qualitative interviews. Two locations were used for the interviews, both locations were previously described and approved in the research plan which is detailed in chapter 3. Consistency was maintained to protect and ensure the viability of the data.

Due to both the previously described conditions and record keeping, the confirmability of the results is maintained. This study could be reproduced within the setting guided by the specifications described in the previous chapter. The interview format was reproduced methodically in each instance to ensure the proper collection methods of data were used. Discrepant cases where aberrant responses were given were included and analyzed alongside other accumulated data. However, had additional participants needed to be recruited alternative participants would have been included to ensure the study had sufficient participants to be completed. That was not necessary for the completion of this study.

Results

The results of the study are demonstrated in the following in Table 2as well as described below to further illustrate the findings. The results of the study are presented

that depict both the positive and challenging perceptions of teachers regarding the use of the family volunteer in the classroom to support student reading comprehension. The results are divided for each of the research questions, and then responses explained in further depth as well as supplemented by quotes from study participants.

Research Question 1

RQ1: What do teachers perceive as the benefits of the family volunteer presence in the classroom as it pertains to student reading comprehension?

According to the resulting data, teachers perceived a variety of benefits to the presence of the family volunteer in the classroom specifically in support of fifth grade student reading comprehension. Teachers found that additional assistance from cooperative family volunteers was helpful when working with small groups and allowed the teachers to access and assist more students because of this additional adult presence. Teachers perceived that family volunteers were of assistance with additional classroom goals as well including general academic support, encouraging students, and general classroom management.

Teachers conveyed the sentiment that almost all of their knowledge about how to effectively engage families came from professional experience, experience as a family member, and from their respective teacher mentors. A “positive sentiment” which was echoed by many of the participants was the qualities which were associated with productive family volunteer experiences. Perceptions varied among teachers however, the qualities which teachers identified in a productive family volunteer were universal: timeliness, willingness to follow directions, and reliability. While responses varied based

upon the professional experiences of the teachers there were no aberrant or discrepant cases or instances of note.

Teachers perceived several beneficial aspects of the family volunteer presence in the classroom which emerged as trends within the resulting data. Traits which teachers associated with positive family volunteer experiences were: reliability, a willingness to work with all students (not just their child), and a willingness to support the teacher and support teacher established goals. Teachers consistently identified reliability as a key factor in a successful teacher-family volunteer dynamic. Teachers sited conversely when family volunteers did not meet their classroom commitments, often last minute, that this was a source of significant challenges. Teachers stated it was important for a family volunteer to be willing to work with all of the students in the classroom to support reading comprehension and not to default to helping only their child or relative.

Additionally, teachers expressed that a willingness to follow their lead as the teacher of the classroom was crucial. Among the challenges mentioned was when a family volunteer came to the classroom unprepared or with an agenda of what content they intended to support. This would create an authoritarian dilemma for the teacher as they had to spend additional time convincing the family volunteer to support their established curriculum as opposed to diverging into their own endeavors.

Despite challenges that were perceived, teachers presented an overall receptive and positive attitude towards the presence of family volunteers to support student reading comprehension goals. Specifically, teachers found that the family volunteer presence was especially helpful in reading group work sessions and that this additional adult presence

was useful in that it allowed them to visit with and support more students individually while reading in groups. Teachers perceived that the family volunteer presence in addition to supporting student reading comprehension goals, conveyed a positive attitude on the part of the family volunteer toward educational goals which helped reinforce classroom lessons.

Additional challenges which were perceived by teachers included a disruptive presence or negative attitude towards learning. Teachers described specific examples when family volunteers used their time in the classroom as a social opportunity and did not use their time to support student reading comprehension or other learning goals. Teachers also perceived, on rare occasions, a family volunteer would express a general distrust of the teachers' objectives and cite that their own education had not been beneficial to them, coloring the perspective of the students who observed these interactions.

Notably, teachers perceived the presence of the family volunteer as a benefit to fifth grade student reading comprehension, specifically in the context of group work as well as general attitude conveyed toward education and classroom support. Teachers perceived when a family volunteer was present, they had additional time to work with students on reading comprehension activities. One teacher participant responded as follows.

It helps the teacher to be able to work with the students better. The teacher takes half, the volunteer takes half, and that way they're able to reach more children.

The teacher can only do so much and only has so much time. When there's a volunteer to help, then they can reach twice as many children.

(Julie Smith)

Teachers additionally perceived that when a family volunteer was present that the students responded positively since an additional adult was demonstrating support for their learning efforts. This additional adult presence reaffirmed the importance of student reading comprehension goals as family volunteers worked to support teacher efforts. Working alongside the family volunteer teachers perceived they were able to provide more quality personalized interaction to struggling students in the area of reading comprehension.

Overall teachers perceived a positive influence and additional support for student reading comprehension goals as a result of the family volunteer presence. Teachers expressed this additional adult presence supported their reading comprehension classroom goals specifically in the case of small group reading which allowed them to personally observe and assist more student with the help of the family volunteer. A teacher noted:

The typical things were reading aloud, taking turns reading aloud, and then simply answering the questions and doing the pages in their workbook. That's when I personally went around and worked with them. I'm grateful for all of the assistance, something they are doing now, coming back to the classroom and pulling two or three children out and working with them on their reading skills.

(Tammy Peters, personal communication, April 27, 2017)

Teachers also perceived that the family volunteer presence further supported the continuation of learning goals at home as parents, guardians, and grandparents were able to experience firsthand the lesson content the teachers was conveying. A notable discovery was that regardless of what challenges they may have perceived, teachers conveyed an overall positive perception of the family volunteer in the classroom and viewed it as beneficial to the augmentation of student reading comprehension instruction.

A teacher stated:

My perception is the parent then gets a firsthand view of what is going on in the classroom that way when they go home, they know this is what they did, and they saw it firsthand. That way they know exactly what the child is working with.

Whether they're having a problem, if they're enjoying it, whether they need just a little encouragement or a little additional help you know, that kind of thing.

Firsthand. Seeing what's going on. (Tina Thornton)

Teachers perceived this presence as an advantage when reaching reading comprehension goals and felt supported by this additional adult presence when teaching. While it was perceived that working with family volunteers was not without its challenges, overall teachers perceived that the family volunteer presence was ultimately helpful and of positive benefit. Teachers perceived family volunteers to be of use when reaching student reading comprehension goals, specifically in instances of group reading activities.

Research Question 2

RQ2: What do teachers perceive as the challenges of the family volunteer presence in the classroom as it pertains to student reading comprehension?

According to the data which emerged from the study teachers found similar factors challenging when working family volunteers in the classroom in regard to student reading comprehension. Consistently they found the following challenges: lack of reliability, lack of cooperation, or classroom disruption to be conditions which hindered their ability to effectively see to student needs in reading comprehension. These negative perceptions were typically associated with specific volunteers or instances. The results when examined fell into the two categories described as either positive attributes or challenging attributes associated with the use of the family volunteer in the classroom.

Table 2

Perceived Benefits and Challenges of Family Volunteers in the Classroom as They Relate to Student Reading Comprehension

Perceived benefits of the family volunteer presence	Perceived challenges of the family volunteer presence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Support of group reading activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A lack of reliability on the part of volunteers forcing last minute changes to planned lessons.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Allowed teachers to access more students to support reading individually. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A lack of cooperation or willingness of family volunteers to work with all students not just “their” child.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ General encouragement and support of educational endeavors via an additional adult presence and general classroom management. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ General disruption or distraction from daily classroom activities.

The pervasive challenge to working with family volunteers which teachers perceived was a lack of reliability. Teachers described this as factor as when family

volunteers would commit to assist in the classroom but would not honor their time commitment or did not take their volunteer hours seriously. A teacher said:

Then again last year we had this set time for volunteers when they've said they're coming, and then all at once without any notice they're just not here to help the kids and that's . . . when you depend upon them they don't come. That's hard.

(Amy Jones)

This trait specifically more than others was found to be very disruptive to classroom goals and overall learning.

More so than any of the potential challenges, teachers perceived a lack of dependability in certain family volunteers was counter to their student reading comprehension goals as this lack of dependability created scheduling crisis and other issues which detracted from their overall classroom efficacy. Dependability as perceived and described by teachers was not just the ability to rely upon a family volunteer not only in their timeliness but also in their willingness to support them once they were in the classroom. A teacher noted:

I think really if they just come into the classroom, and they want to work with you. And they are willing to fulfill what you need them to do to help the children, instead of walking in there, well I'm here and I am going to do this with the kids today. You have to say no; no let's get back into the program. You're my assistant, you're my helper, please, work with what I'm doing. (Diane Luis)

In isolated instances teachers perceived the challenge of acquiring cooperation from some family volunteers. In these instances, teachers, perceived that particular

volunteers came to the classroom environment with inaccurate perceptions of what their role would be or misconstrued the solicitation for family participation as a sign of struggle or lack of competency. In these instances, which were challenging to teachers, perceived that certain family volunteers came to the classroom with their own agenda as to what needed to be done to facilitate classroom instruction.

Teacher perceived difficulty in basing classroom learning plans and student reading comprehension activities upon family volunteers who proved to be unreliable. This would create considerable frustration as teachers would depend and plan upon this additional adult presence and then be forced to alter their activities for the day within the classroom with little or no notice. Likewise, it could create considerable disruptions if family volunteers came to classroom considerably late and the teacher was forced to disrupt their lesson in order to acclimate the family volunteer to the present activity. A teacher said:

Whenever she would come in she would be very disruptive and go to all the classrooms and have all the kids and they're running out the door and you know, you're trying to have class. So sometimes I think there's that negative too.

(Joanne Thatcher)

It was notable that teachers attributed the challenges of working with family volunteer to specific individuals or instances and that overall their perceptions tended to be based upon positive reflections of the family volunteer presence. While teachers did not perceive this presence to be entirely without challenges it is clear that overall this

presence was perceived to have a positive impact upon the support of reading comprehension within the classroom.

Teachers perceived that the presence of the family volunteer in order to support fifth grade student reading comprehension may be improved by additional professional support both for them as teachers and also for volunteers. Teachers who participated in the study perceived that they might benefit from additional guidance and instruction on how to best incorporate family volunteers into the classroom especially in the earlier part of their experiences as teachers. They also perceived an orientation process as part of the professional development offered by the school for incoming family volunteers would improve the effectiveness of their use in the classroom.

Teachers offered at the conclusion of the interview their perceptions of potential areas of possible professional development which would further improve and support family volunteer and teacher classroom goals. First, teachers perceived a volunteer incentive program would be a productive tool to assist with recruiting, retaining, and rewarding family volunteers for their efforts in the classroom. Second, teachers perceived that it would be beneficial to gear family volunteer recruitment efforts specifically towards grandparents as these members of the family were often the most active group of family volunteers. Last, in the way of teacher training, teachers perceived that additional professional development either offered by the district or led by veteran teachers would be especially helpful to give incoming teachers direction and additional information to facilitate more successful interactions with family volunteers to further support student outcomes.

Regardless of whether teachers personally perceived a more challenging or positive perception of the family volunteer presence, it is worth noting all participants expressed a desire to incorporate the additional efforts of all stakeholders to the benefit of the student. While not every teacher shared positive perceptions, all participants expressed an interest in further investing and developing strategies to successfully incorporate the family volunteer into the classroom to support student reading comprehension goals. Participants expressed an active desire to improve upon the existing beneficial qualities of family volunteers to better support student reading goals.

Summary

This study explored what teachers perceived as the benefits and challenges of working with a family volunteer in the classroom as it pertains to student reading comprehension. The research questions sought to explore whether teachers perceived the presence of the family volunteer as a help or hindrance to student reading comprehension goals. The answers to the research questions asked were as follows. This study found that while some challenges were inherent to working with family volunteers the overall perceptions of teachers regarding the use of family volunteers to support student reading comprehension is a positive one. While challenges remained present as with any complex classroom interaction, teachers expressed an abundance of willingness and dedication to families in order to work together for the betterment of the students.

Chapter 5 will delve into the interpretation of these data as well as expand upon the implications of these findings. I will also discuss in further detail the limitations of the study and possible means of improving future studies of this nature. Additionally, the

final chapter will suggest possible professional development measures based upon the perceptions of teachers as it relates to the use of the family volunteer in the classroom to support student reading comprehension thus connecting the enactment of this study to possible positive social change.

Chapter 5: Interpretation of Findings, Recommendations, and Implications

The purpose of this qualitative semistructured interview study was to explore teacher perceptions of the family volunteer in the classroom as it related to student reading comprehension goals. In this study teachers discussed their experiences working with family volunteers in the classroom in a semistructured interview to allow the participants to elaborate on their perceptions of this phenomenon. The intention of the study was to further explore how teachers perceived the presence of the family volunteer in the classroom, specifically as to how it impacted student reading comprehension. This study found that despite some inherent challenges to working with family volunteers in the classroom to support student reading comprehension, the teachers perceived this presence positively.

Research has been conducted regarding the potential benefits of the family volunteer presence, but little research had been conducted that specifically explored the perceptions of teachers regarding this phenomenon. Additionally, as part of the study, teachers were given the opportunity to share insights regarding their perceptions of the experience of working with family volunteers to support student learning. Key findings from this study revealed that while teachers perceived the family volunteer presence as having a positive impact on student reading comprehension goals, this endeavor was not without its challenges. Also, it is important to note that all teachers included in this study felt that their initial education and licensure had not adequately prepared them to interface with family volunteers, and they welcomed the idea of additional professional

development to support their professional attempts to successfully work with family volunteers to support and enhance student learning outcomes.

Interpretation of Findings

The findings of this study expand upon the understanding of this field of knowledge by further exploring teacher perceptions of the family volunteer presence. This study relates to the field of knowledge explored by the work of researchers such as Tracey et al. (2014) as it extends the academic enrichment possibilities in the area of student reading. This is possible when investing in building an active partnership between community stakeholders such as family volunteers and classroom teachers. All of the participants in this study felt that more could be done in the area of professional development to better prepare both teachers and family volunteers to work together for the betterment of student reading comprehension.

Tracey et al. (2014) observed that while the family presence in the classroom yielded many positive results such as improved academic performance and increased classroom management, there remained many factors of the volunteer presence that were yet to be understood, such as the perceptions of classroom teachers regarding the family volunteer presence. Many participants noted they had an overall positive perception of the family volunteer presence yet they were actively interested in further guidance and resources for both themselves and the volunteers in order to better assist students with their reading comprehension goals. The research of Wang and Neihart (2015) connected to the current study in a variety of ways. This included the observation that supporting the connection between families and the classroom was a central issue to improving student

performance. This research supports the findings of this study and informed the further exploration of teacher perceptions of the family volunteer presence.

Family Volunteer Presence and Learning Outcomes

The research performed in this study echoed the findings of Beauregard et al. (2014) who found that the family volunteer presence had a positive influence on learning outcomes. Participants perceived that the family volunteer presence allowed them as teachers to provide better individual support to students in the area of student reading comprehension. The family volunteer presence in the classroom offers a variety of support to the classroom teacher in the way of improving the adult to student ratio in order to allow the teacher additional time to focus on individual learning goals. Specifically, in the context of student reading comprehension, this presence was helpful to students in group reading exercises because the additional adult presence provided support to the teacher to allow them to devote additional time to struggling readers.

Communication and the Family Volunteer Presence

Participants in this study perceived more could be done to effectively communicate expectations and guidelines to family volunteers prior to them entering the classroom. The research of Bouffard and Weiss (2014) found that communication issues were central to defining the family volunteer professional relationship to the teacher as a positive or a challenging one. Many of the potential difficulties and challenges faced by teachers when working with a family volunteer in the classroom could be addressed with proactive measures to both communicate with family volunteers and train them. While both stakeholders shared the common goal of supporting student outcomes, it is apparent

that preemptive and clear communication and well-defined expectations are an important part of supporting student reading comprehension goals. When possible, direct communication from the teacher in the form of letters, e-mails, or face-to-face interactions is optimal.

Student Learning Takes Place in Multiple Environments

The findings of the study connect to the historical framework of Epstein et al. (2002) as they confirm that learning does not happen in isolation; rather, all of the environmental spheres experienced by the student are part of the overall learning process. Epstein et al.'s (2002) framework had historical significance because it introduced practical tools for connecting teachers, administrators, and families for the betterment of the school environment and student learning. With this framework, Epstein et al. proposed that student learning did not happen simply in the school environment but that the comprehensive network of interactions outside of school, including those in community and domestic environments, significantly influenced student learning.

The findings of this study confirmed the interconnected nature of the learning process and how teachers perceived that the physical presence of the family volunteer in itself had an impact on how the classroom learning goals were achieved. As was explored in the research of Haines et al. (2015), students may experience tangible benefits to their educational outcomes when intentional connections are forged between the school, the families they serve, and the surrounding community. Participants stated that family attitude toward education as reflected in the family volunteer presence impacted student learning goals in the area of student reading comprehension as well as in other areas.

Participants observed that family perception of the importance of classroom goals likely influenced how students perceived their own learning experience and whether they felt classroom goals were achievable. Teachers shared perceptions in the course of the study that the attitudes of families had an impact on student reading comprehension goals, specifically if families did not value educational endeavors.. It was the perception of the teachers in this study that the family volunteer presence did indeed have the potential to enhance student reading comprehension and that the desire to further learning goals at home could have a positive impact on student learning in the classroom environment.

Teachers and Family Volunteers Working Together

As was observed in the research of Karabay et al. (2015), teachers valued community partnerships with families in order to benefit student outcomes. These findings were reinforced in this study as participants shared a willingness to work beyond challenges when interfacing with family volunteers in order to pursue the potential positive influence of the family volunteer presence on student reading comprehension. Teachers who were included in this study conveyed the desire to improve their ability to work with family volunteers. They perceived that while this presence could at times present challenges, the potential benefits of successfully incorporating family volunteers into the classroom outweighed the possible complications that may occur as a result of this presence.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the study included the factors of time and scope. The study was able to be executed in one school district at one grade level. This study could be

duplicated and the scope widened to include additional grade levels, additional types of subject matter and teachers ,such as university or vocational teachers, additional kinds of family volunteers, such as siblings, and a variety of learning environments, such as private schools. This study could also be expanded to include the perceptions of the family volunteer regarding their experience in the classroom supporting student reading comprehension.

Possible interviewer bias was another limitation of the study. In order to combat this possible factor, professional peers reviewed the initial summary of the study findings. In addition, the semistructured interview questions as outlined in Appendix A were used in each interview to ensure all participants were able to respond to the same line of inquiry. Participants were also given the opportunity to view transcripts of their interviews and suggest any alterations or add additional comments if they felt their transcript did not accurately depict their perceptions. This study could be duplicated and expanded to include additional grade levels and teachers of a variety of subjects in order to further investigate teacher perceptions of the family volunteer presence in the classroom and its impact on student learning.

Recommendations

As a result of the information emergent from this study, the following recommendations may have the potential to enhance and further improve the efficacy of the use of the family volunteer to support student learning goals in the area of reading comprehension. Firstly, perceptions of teachers regarding inadequate preparation to work with families as a part of their educational training and licensure, additional training in

this area in the form of professional development could be advantageous. It was a profound result that every teacher included in this study perceived they had not been adequately prepared by their formal licensure and training to interface with parents and they perceived that additional information about engaging with family volunteers should be part of their college courses. This confirms previous research such as the work of Hornby and Witte (2010), which indicated that teaching is primarily about classroom activity with all manners of support being seen as secondary. Supporting teachers in their efforts to interact with families and family volunteers may also benefit their work in the classroom, which has the potential to support student learning.

Additionally, teachers perceived that volunteer reward programs may be beneficial to recruiting and retaining volunteers for their hard work, therefore benefiting the family volunteer for their service in addition to recognizing their efforts to support student learning. A reward program may be the added incentive needed to promote involvement to family members who may not otherwise participate in school activities. Also, recognizing the efforts of the dedicated family volunteers for their hours of assistance may prove beneficial to expressing gratitude as well as encouraging long term volunteering on the part of family members.

Teachers also perceived that designing volunteer recruitment techniques that were specifically tailored to grandparents could be beneficial as this group of family members display interest in student learning and may have fewer employment or other obligations that would otherwise prevent them from volunteering. During the course of the study, teachers perceived that grandparents were a potentially undervalued educational resource.

It was their perception that slight alterations could be made to volunteer recruitment efforts to encourage more grandparents to become involved in supporting classroom activities as well as student reading comprehension.

Teachers also perceived that a brief training session led by veteran teachers as a part of professional development would prove helpful for learning to work with families, specifically for new and incoming teachers. It was the perceptions of experienced teachers who had worked with family volunteers that these additional measures would benefit student learning outcomes. Teachers perceived that sharing knowledge and experiences of successfully working with family volunteers would provide beneficial knowledge to incoming teachers and augment their official licensure and training. This may better prepare them to successfully work with family volunteers in the classroom to support student learning.

Implications

As echoed in the research of Liu et al. (2010), it is important for both schools and teacher to actively cultivate both lines of communication and opportunities for participation in order to improve and support student outcomes. Specifically as it pertains to reading comprehension, the family volunteer presence presents a wealth of opportunities to reinforce educational goals and continue learning beyond the classroom. The findings of this study support the need for additional professional development to support the effective use of family volunteers in the classroom to support student reading comprehension. Additionally, teachers perceived they would have benefited from college

preparation specifically designed to help them use family volunteers effectively in the classroom.

Positive Social Change at the Family Level

The data resulting from this study indicated tangible ways that administrators, teachers, and family volunteers can work together in order to form lasting and effective educational relationships with increased functionality and forethought to improve student reading comprehension. As family volunteers and teachers learn to work together more effectively student reading comprehension may be supported in a variety of ways with ever increasing effectiveness to improve student performance in the area of reading. The lives of families may be positively impacted as student reading comprehension is improved as a possible result furthering a positive perception of education within the family unit. The lasting impact of an improved educational experience and the further strengthening of educational communities as a result of streamlined interactions has the ability to have far reaching positive impact at the classroom and community level as well as beyond.

Positive Social Change at the Organizational Level

The results of this study indicated that teachers perceived that they were inadequately prepared to interface with families to support student reading comprehension and other subject matter by their initial required training. The potential organizational change which may be supported by this and similar research is that need for additional structures designed by specific school environments to prepare teachers to work with family volunteers in the classroom. Additionally, there could be a positive

potential social outcome from the recommendations produced in the process of exploring teacher perceptions within this study which suggest that training or an introductory class prior to volunteering may increase the effectiveness of family volunteers in the classroom.

Positive Social Change at the Community Level

Communities may be improved by the increased effectiveness of school as a result of the improved usefulness of family volunteers to support student reading comprehension. As educational quality is improved further community ties between families and schools may increase positive perceptions of the potential impact of education and improve the quality of the community through such opportunities as are made possible by a well supported educational organization. Building professional development experiences which increased the efficiency and usefulness of the family volunteer presence has the potential further support student reading comprehension as well as other classroom goals. Professional development efforts based on the recommendations teachers, their perceptions, and the data resulting from this study may have the ability to improve the use of the family volunteer in the classroom. As with all systems no matter how efficient, well designed, or well intentioned there always remains ways to further improve upon the existing system. It is important that decisions to enhance any existing educational system come from strong data driven decisions.

Positive Social Change at the Global Level

Improving reading comprehension and access to literacy has the potential to increase many opportunities for student learning not only locally but nationally as well as

globally. With each student and family whose life is positively impacted by increased access to reading, the resulting knowledge contained therein has the potential for positive impact which is incalculable. The theoretical implications of the study indicate the findings of Epstein (2002) continue to be relevant today by further confirming that learning does not take place in isolation. Every adult which plays a role in the life of a student has the potential to have a positive and supportive impact upon the learning experience however brief their interactions may be. The findings of this study further verify this historical foundation that learning is the result of the efforts of community coming together to support student learning and that as a result of this collaboration student outcomes may be improved.

Conclusion

This study has provided meaningful data relating to the perceptions of the teacher regarding the family volunteer in the classroom. While this study serves as a good preliminary window into this phenomenon more remains to be learned about volunteers can further be used to support student reading comprehension as well as how volunteers can be used to support learning in other subject areas. The perceptions of teachers who experience education everyday on the front lines of learning are crucial to crafting improvement measures and policies which are based in real world action scenarios. Theory is only so functional as it can further enhance and support the goals of daily educational practices. Supporting student reading comprehension goals, improving the family volunteer experience and enhancing the daily lives of teachers who are working tirelessly to help students reach their learning goals is something we can all participate in.

Data such as that uncovered in this study may be used to further enhance student learning goals and improve the family volunteer experience and by doing so, improve the educational experience for families, students, and teachers.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Interview Question 1: What do you perceive as the benefits of the family volunteer presence in the classroom as it pertains to student reading comprehension?

Interview Question 2: What do you perceive as the challenges of the family volunteer presence in the classroom as it pertains to student reading comprehension?

Interview Question 3: How prepared were you to interact with families based on your education and initial licensure?

Interview Question 4: How have your professional development experiences (offered by your district) supported your interactions with families?

Interview Question 5: What further comments related to your perception of the family volunteer in the classroom do you have?