

2020

## Principal Leadership for the Establishment of Family-School Partnership

Mickelli Dunn  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Education

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Mickelli Dunn

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Walden University

2020

Abstract

Principal Leadership for the Establishment of Family-School Partnerships

by

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MA, Bowie State University, 2003

BS, University of Florida, 1994

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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## Abstract

The area of family engagement and its benefits to the academic outcomes of students has been well researched. Educators, including practitioners and those who prepare them, and community members need to understand more about the leadership actions of principals, especially in urban, low-income predominantly African American schools, that lead to effective communication and learning at home partnerships. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the leadership actions of principals that support teachers establishing productive communication and learning at-home family engagement practices. Epstein's school, family, and community partnership model was the framework that guided this research. Research questions were designed to explore the perspectives of school principals, teachers, and family members on the effectiveness of the actions of the school principal that led to productive family-school partnerships. Data were collected from interviews with 8 principals with at least 3 years of experience as a school principal, and district personnel supplied archival data from climate surveys. A priori and open coding were used to support interpretive analysis of the data. Results indicated that leadership actions around *establishing a clear vision, monitoring, and accountability* were most useful in supporting teachers in establishing effective communication and learning-at-home partnerships. Recommendations include better preparation and professional development for school leaders. Implications for positive social change include improving services for students in low-income predominately African American schools, for their families, and for their communities.

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## Table of Contents

List of Tables .....	iv
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study.....	1
Background.....	3
Problem Statement.....	6
Purpose of the Study.....	8
Research Questions.....	8
Conceptual Framework for the Study.....	9
Nature of the Study.....	11
Definitions.....	12
Assumptions.....	14
Scope and Delimitations .....	14
Limitations .....	15
Significance.....	16
Summary .....	16
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	18
Literature Search Strategy.....	19
Conceptual Framework.....	19
Literature Review Related to Key Variables and Concepts.....	21
Family, School, and Community Partnership.....	21
Six Types of Involvement.....	21
African American Families and School Involvement.....	29
Achievement Gap.....	31

Role of the School Principal .....	32
Urban Schools .....	34
Summary and Conclusions .....	35
Chapter 3: Research Method.....	37
Research Design and Rationale .....	37
Role of the Researcher .....	40
Methodology .....	41
Participant Selection .....	41
Instrumentation .....	42
Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection .....	45
Data Analysis Plan .....	47
Trustworthiness .....	48
Dependability .....	49
Transferability .....	49
Confirmability .....	50
Ethical Procedures .....	50
Summary .....	51
Chapter 4: Findings.....	53
Setting .....	54
Data Collection .....	55
Data Analysis .....	56
Theme 1: Leadership Actions .....	58
Theme 2: Family Engagement .....	59

Theme 3: Principal Training .....	60
Results .....	61
Research Question 1 .....	61
Research Question 2 .....	67
Evidence of Trustworthiness.....	69
Credibility .....	69
Transferability.....	70
Dependability.....	70
Confirmability.....	71
Summary .....	72
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations .....	73
Interpretation of the Findings.....	73
Limitations of the Study.....	75
Recommendations.....	76
Implications.....	77
Social Change at the Organizational Level.....	77
Conclusion .....	78
References.....	80
Appendix: Interview Guide.....	94



## List of Tables

Table 1. Participant Pseudonym, Principal experience, gender, education .....	54
Table 2. Phrases, Categories and Themes Used in Data Analysis.....	57
Table 3. Climate Survey Responses from Staff (Percent of Favorable Responses) .....	66
Table 4. Climate Survey Responses from Parents (Percent of Favorable Responses) .....	66

## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

In the United States, there continues to be an educational gap between racial and socioeconomic groups, and an essential route for improving outcomes for racially diverse students is through parental involvement. Years of research and policy efforts have consistently linked family involvement with positive academics (Ishimaru et al., 2016). Despite research and policy implementations, schools continue to require support in developing effective family, school, and community partnerships that adequately engage African American families (Epstein et al., 2018). Urban principals have a particular challenge with engaging poor parents of color (African American or Hispanic), who are less likely to participate in school activities based on a perceived view that their culture is seen as lacking the ability to achieve (Watson & Bogotch, 2015). Additionally, principals were found to lack the knowledge and respect of the ethnicities and cultures of the families they served (Watson & Bogotch, 2015).

The authors of the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) highlighted the significance and utility of stakeholder engagement and required districts and schools to create sustainable practices and programs that involved families in the education of their children. To meet these requirements, principals need the knowledge and ability to engage the families of their students effectively. The ownership for developing and maintaining partnerships among home, school, and community rests largely with school staff, mainly principals (Mapp, Carver, & Lander, 2017). Most school principals, however, are underprepared to address the inequities in low-income African American urban communities (Green, 2017). Additionally, more than 80% of teachers in the United

States are not minorities yet are working with a student population that has now become majority-minority (Dawson-McClure, Calzada, & Brotman, 2017). As a result, most teachers are unacquainted with the dynamics of their students' communities (Allen, 2015; Delpit, 2006), may misinterpret cultural norms, and may believe negative stereotypes of minorities (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). Therefore, school principals need strategies and tools to successfully support teachers to create a productive school partnership with the families and communities they serve (Epstein, 2018a; Green, 2017). In this study I explored the leadership actions of principals in urban, predominately African American low-income schools that led to teachers establishing productive communication and learning at home through school partnerships with the families they serve.

Increased family-school partnerships in predominately African American urban schools will lead to increased achievement for students, which supports closing the achievement gap that exists between European American students and African American and Hispanic students (Bowman, Comer, & Johns, 2018). Increased family partnerships will equip parents with the strategies to effectively support learning at home and to partner with the school. The potential social change is in improved educational, social, and emotional outcomes for students. Increased academic achievement will contribute to positive outcomes for students, their families, and their communities.

In this chapter, the problem statement and the purpose of the study are presented as they relate to exploring the leadership actions of principals working in low-income, predominately African American urban schools. Three research questions focusing on

gathering data from interviews and archival data guided this study. I further explain the framework that grounded the study, the nature of the study, definitions of key terms specific to this study, assumptions, limitations, and the significance of this study. In this study I explored the leadership actions of principals in urban, predominately African American low-income schools to lead teachers in establishing productive communication and learning at home through family-school partnerships. Examining principals' and teachers' perceptions and contributions, especially with regard to increasing family engagement, will provide several benefits at the school and district level. It creates an avenue for schools to examine their family engagement practices, and it serves as an impetus for educational leaders to improve home-to-school relationships while fostering a lasting, positive impact on student achievement.

### **Background**

Parent engagement is accepted as a significant contributing factor in improving the quality of education, academically, socially, and emotionally (Epstein, 2010; Robinson, 2017; Vance, 2018). ESSA and corresponding requirements of Title I were developed to support disadvantaged subgroups such as low-socioeconomic African American and Hispanic populations with legislation requiring deliberate partnerships with schools and families around school improvement and student achievement (2015). Title I schools are categorized as high poverty schools, and in these school districts, serving predominantly minority (Hispanic and African American) populations, school principals are often in key positions to enable partnerships between multiple stakeholders (Ishimaru et al., 2016). However, the creation of a high-quality family, school, and

community partnership is often challenging to achieve (Evans, 2018). Evans (2018) states educators are typically not well prepared for engaging with families or communities (Zeichner, Bowman, Guillen, & Napolitan, 2016), and relational power dynamics among educators and families are complicated by issues related to socioeconomic status (Lareau, 2011) and race and ethnicity (Bertrand, Freelon, & Rogers, 2018).

A gap of practice supported by research exists because little is known about how principals in urban, predominately African American low-income schools lead teachers in establishing productive communication and learning at home through school-family relationships. Studies conducted at high poverty schools discovered that parents were unsure how to be active in their child's school and often felt unwelcome, powerless, and marginalized (Ishimaru et al., 2016; Robinson, 2017). This may be exacerbated when predominately white, middle class, and female principals and teachers, (Coopersmith, 2009; Taie & Goldring, 2017), who are less likely to value the parenting styles and cultural views of African American, low-income parents, pathologize the parenting styles of African American parents (Allen & White-Smith, 2018; McGrady & Reynolds, 2013; Toldson & Lemmons, 2013). The principal plays a vital role in bridging the racial, cultural, and linguistic division between schools and low-income African American families (Allen & White-Smith, 2018; Ishimaru et al., 2016).

While research is abundant on the importance of family engagement and the positions of low-income urban families, there is limited research on the leadership actions of principals in low-income predominately African American urban schools that lead to effective family-school partnerships promoting learning at home and school

communication. To address the gap in practice, I studied the leadership actions of principals in urban, predominately African American low-income schools that lead teachers to strengthen family-school partnerships.

This learning is vital to supporting the work of principals at the local level as they develop school-specific processes and programs to build teacher capacity to effectively engage parents in their child's learning and the overall success of the school. Given that the achievement gap between the highest and lowest performing subgroup continues to increase, successfully partnering with urban African American families in supporting learning at home may contribute to gains in closing the achievement gap (Bowman et al., 2018).

Since the achievement gap between whites and African Americans continues to increase, it is necessary that principals develop the staffs' capacity to build home-school partnerships to meet the needs of parents to support learning at home (Bohrnstedt, Kitmitto, Ogut, Sherman, & Chan, 2015). States, districts, and schools need assistance in building broad programs of family, school, and community partnerships (Epstein et al., 2018). In the long term, when minority students fail to achieve their full academic potential, this affects the country as it results in a loss in the availability of qualified individuals joining the workforce, which contributes to a shortfall in the gross domestic product (Karoly, 2015).

The achievement gap is not only a problem for African American students and their families; it impacts the well-being of the entire country (Bowman et al., 2018). Closing the achievement gap provides African American students with access to

opportunity that may have life-changing outcomes. Closing the achievement gap for many students means access to the same quality of instruction and resources of their counterparts, which may end the cycle of poverty. This improved access and the closing of the achievement gap would positively contribute to social change for the families and their communities.

### **Problem Statement**

The study problem is that little is known about the leadership actions of principals in urban, predominately African American low-income schools that lead to teachers establishing productive communication and learning at home family-school partnerships. The authors of ESSA highlighted the importance of stakeholder engagement and required districts and schools to develop and put into action methods to engage all families in their children's education. To meet these requirements, principals need the ability and knowledge to engage the families of their students effectively. The responsibility for developing and implementing lasting partnerships among home, school, and community rests largely with school staff, particularly principals (Mapp et al., 2017). However, urban principals were still found to lack respect and knowledge about the backgrounds and customs of the children in their school, thus influencing their ability to cultivate and sustain partnerships (Watson & Bogotch, 2015).

Standard 8 of the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015) includes engagement of the community and families in ways that are beneficial to both the school and family and promote academic achievement and social well-being for every student. The standard indicates that

principals need to design and sustain productive, collaborative partnerships with families and the community for the benefit of students and to engage in consistent and open two-way communication with families and the community about all aspects of the school. Despite this focus on parent engagement, parents from minority communities often feel unwanted, powerless, and disregarded in their children's schools (Ishimaru et al., 2016). Current course offerings and field practice requirements in most administrator and teacher preparation programs do not prepare graduates to conduct effective and equitable partnership programs (Epstein, 2018a).

Researchers also confirmed the necessity to train teachers, particularly those in African American and poor urban schools, to develop genuine relationships that will support increased family and community engagement and student achievement (Miller, 2019; Quezada, 2014). As an example, in a large urban district where families are predominately African American and low-income, family members have stated they do not receive enough communication from their children's teachers, thus making it difficult for them to provide timely support to their children (A. Brooks; B. Holley; M. Porter; & S. Robinson, personal communication, November 2018). Researchers have concluded that teachers continue to feel unprepared to effectively increase family engagement because teacher education does not address family-school partnerships in a meaningful way (De Bruïne et al., 2014; Thompson, Willemsse, Mutton, Burn, & De Bruïne, 2018). It is thus incumbent upon the principal to lead teachers to build meaningful partnerships with families. To address the gap in practice, I studied the leadership actions of principals



in urban, predominately African American low-income schools to lead teachers to establish communication with families and to support learning at home.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the leadership actions of principals in urban, predominately African American low-income schools that support teachers establishing productive communication and learning at home through family-school partnerships. By acquiring a better understanding of the actions of the principal, district leaders can gain critical insight into ways to provide support to future school principals as well as to identify specific practices to engage urban low-income African American families in meaningful ways. The study provided insight into the specific leadership actions of principals and insight into how they acquired these skills.

The role of the principal is multifaceted. The Wallace Foundation (2013) identified five key responsibilities of the school principal. The deliberate leadership actions of principals shape the climate and culture of the school. From a cultural leadership point of view, identifying the perspectives of effective leadership can provide principals and schools with information to better engage urban, African American low-income families. In this study I sought to explore those leadership actions that are most productive in engaging this specific population.

### **Research Questions**

School principals are faced daily with many challenges and responsibilities. As school principals make decisions, countless factors must be considered before selecting a course of action. Schools located in high poverty communities bring a unique set of

challenges that further complicate the work of the principal. The questions that guided this study focused on the leadership actions of the principals of principals in low-income predominately African American urban schools when determining the appropriate leadership actions related to supporting teachers in building family-school partnerships. The following research questions guided the study.

RQ1: How do principals in low-income, predominantly African American urban schools lead teachers to develop productive communication and learning at home in the development of family-school partnerships as defined by Epstein's school-family-community partnership model?

RQ2: What are the perspectives of principals serving in low-income, predominantly African American urban schools on how administrative training prepared them to lead teachers in establishing communication and learning at home family-school partnerships as defined by Epstein's school-family-community partnership model?

### **Conceptual Framework for the Study**

The conceptual framework for this study was derived from Epstein's school-Family-Community Partnership Model (Epstein et al., 2018). The framework recognizes six types of educational involvement: parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with community. The framework has been useful in research, policy, and practice across school levels and diverse communities. This study was focused on the leadership actions of principals that lead to the development of Type 2: Communication and Type 4: Learning at Home family

engagement practices as well as the supports principals provide to teachers to implement these practices. The exploration of principals' leadership actions to promote family-school partnerships within the context of the school aligns to this framework.

Epstein presented a theoretical model—overlapping spheres of influence—to explain and guide research on family, school, and community partnerships (Epstein, 2010). The theory assumes there are mutual influences of schools and families that can be encouraged by the procedures and programs of the organization and the actions and attitudes of the individuals of the organization (Epstein, 2010). In this study, explored are the leadership actions of the principal to support teachers in implementing the strategies necessary to develop communication and learning at home through school partnerships with families.

Communication and learning at home partnerships align with the overlapping influence of the school with the home. Communication is concerned with the two-way dissemination of information between home and school about school programs and children's progress. Learning at home is concerned with the information and strategies given to families about how to help students with homework and standards-related activities and decisions outside of school (Epstein, 2010). The key theory that underlines this framework is that all interested parties in a child's education have overlapping interests and influences (Epstein, 2010; Vance, 2018). In this study I sought to explore the leadership actions of principals in urban, predominately African American low-income schools that support teachers in developing productive communication and learning at home components of the model.

### **Nature of the Study**

The research design was a qualitative case study. The qualitative approach is concerned with understanding how individuals perceive and make meaning of their experiences (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative researchers attempt to understand phenomena as they occur in their everyday settings in ways that are contextualized and reveal meanings that people make as a result of their experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In this study, the phenomenon explored was the leadership actions of principals in urban, low-income African American schools that support teachers in developing productive family-school partnerships.

Qualitative studies use a variety of sources to explore the phenomena at hand. For this study, data were collected via interviews conducted with principals in low-income schools and archived school climate surveys that were reviewed for information aligned to the principal's leadership actions that foster family engagement practices through communication and learning at home. School district personnel conducted biannual school climate surveys that included participation from parents and teachers on their perceptions of school leadership, school safety, and parental engagement. These data are analyzed at the school and district levels, allowing for disaggregation to the specific schools that fit the parameters of this study. For this study, the focus was on the responses related to school leadership and parent engagement from schools classified as Title I with an 80% or greater African American population. I coded the interviews and archived parent surveys for thematic analysis. Keeping the focus on how educators communicate

with families and support learning at home was consistent with two of Epstein's (2018) six types of parent engagement.

The population was approximately 60 current principals from low-income (Title I) urban elementary schools with an 80% or greater African American population in a large district in a mid-Atlantic state in the United States. A request for participation and an overview of the study was sent to the principals who are at schools matching the desired population. From those who consented to participate in the study, a purposeful sampling of 12 principals was selected. The sampling technique was purposive sampling to ensure the selection of participants who could provide data aligned to the purpose of the study (see Schwandt, 2015). I conducted interviews with participants at a mutually agreed upon time and location. Ethical considerations were observed to protect the rights of participants.

### **Definitions**

For this study, the following terms were defined:

*Archived climate surveys:* Biannually the district conducts a climate survey to be completed by parents, students, and staff. The survey asks questions about parents' engagement at their child's school and how well they feel engaged in the vision and decision-making of the school.

*Communication:* Effective communication is defined as two-way and utilizing multiple channels of communication that connects families, schools, students, and the community (Epstein et al., 2018). Two-way communication is the communication that takes place between the school and home where parents are able to provide information

to the school that will support their child as well as the school sharing information about programs and the student's progress.

*Family engagement:* Family engagement is the positive and goal-oriented relationship built between school staff, families, and their children (Communities in Schools, 2016). It is the commitment the parent makes to actively participate not just at home but also at school in their children's education (Epstein, 2010). ESSA (2015) also defines it as the shared responsibility of the community, family members, schools, and family to work collaboratively to improve academic outcomes for all students.

*Learning at home:* Learning at home is when parents engage in activities outside of school with the students that have them interact with the school curriculum through real-world activities. Examples include helping with homework, trips to the museum, reading to students, and using everyday activities to reinforce math or literacy skills. In work done alone, homework is meant include interactive real-world activities shared with family members or in the community, linking work to real-life (Epstein et al., 2018).

*Low-income schools:* Schools that have been designated as Title I schools based on the percent of students receiving free or reduced lunch as defined by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Nelson, 2016).

*Urban schools:* Urban schools are generally located in highly populated areas, cities with at least 50,000. They have 60% or more students of color (African American or Hispanic), are economically disadvantaged, and have a growing English language learner population (Milner, Murray, Farinde, & Delale-O'Connor, 2015).

### **Assumptions**

An assumption of this study was all that urban, low-income African American schools have similar problems with family and community engagement. For this study I also assumed there are principals at this type of school who are meeting with success in communication and learning at home through family-school partnerships, and those principals were responding honestly.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The study focused on exploring what the principals who are meeting with success do differently to lead teachers in establishing productive family-school partnerships. The research questions explored the actions of the principals that support teachers in the development of productive communication and learning at home partnerships. Data were gathered from teachers, principals, and parents. The focus of the research was on two of the six types of family engagement, communication, and learning at home. Research questions focused on the principal's leadership actions that lead teachers to successfully create two-way communication with families and how they were able to effectively provide families with information and resources to support learning at home.

The population for this study was a subset of a large predominantly African American urban school district located in a Mideastern state. The school district is diverse in its economic and racial composition with average income at \$79,184 while the average for the United States is \$57,617. The subset was the group of schools that have been identified as Title I schools based on the number of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch. Included in the purposeful sample were the principals with at least 3 years

of principal experience who led schools identified as Title I that have a high African American population of 80% or higher. The group excluded from this study was non-Title I schools, signifying they are not a low-income school. Also excluded were Title I schools that did not meet the demographic qualification. These are schools that fell below the 80% African American population.

### **Limitations**

A limitation to the study was not being able to get parents' perspectives on which actions of the leader contributed to improved two-way communication with the school and what specific learning at home supports did they found most useful in supporting their child. This was a limitation of the study due to the timeframe for completion of this study and the accessibility of the parents from the participating principals' schools. To address this limitation to the study, I used archived parent surveys conducted by the school system that captured parent's perspectives on the extent to which they perceived their schools were conducive to learning.

Measures were taken to minimize bias as it related to this study and the population being studied. I have worked in the community under study for over 20 years. To guard against bias in the selection of participating principals, I used a purposive sample selection process to elicit participation in the study. I took measures to mitigate bias in this study by conducting consistently-formatted interviews with the appropriate releases and acknowledgments signed by each participant before interviews. Also, all transcripts were recorded, transcribed, and reviewed by the interviewee before any data analysis took place.



### **Significance**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the leadership actions of principals in urban, predominately African American low-income schools that support teachers establishing productive communication and learning at home through family-school partnerships. The study provided insight into the specific leadership actions of principals who have been successful in engaging low-income, urban African American families.

Potential social contributions of this study are to the practices implemented by principals, the training offered by school districts, identification of gaps in practice between our high performing schools and our lower performing schools, and uncovering potential bias in leaders and schools as it relates to minority families. By improving in these areas, schools improve the educational outcomes for African American students. School personnel who engage families create school cultures where all students are supported through effective home-school partnerships. In the long term, this contributes to positive social change for the students and families working in conjunction with the school.

### **Summary**

Family engagement is a reliable indicator of academic achievement for students. How well families engage with the school and support learning at home is contingent upon the actions of the school principal. I used the framework of Epstein (2018) guided by the qualitative case study research method to explore the leadership actions taken by the principal to support teachers in the development of successful family-school

partnerships. In urban, low-income African American schools, additional factors are at play that impact the work of the school principal. While a great deal of research has been done in terms of the role of race, economics, and equity in education, little research has emerged specifically to the high impact approaches that create effective two-way communication between the home and school and the quality of the information provided from the school to the home to support learning at home, particularly with low-income African American families.

Improving communication and learning at home partnerships have positive implications for social change. Through enhanced communication, families will be provided with specific information on the progress and needs of their children. Parents will also have information to resources they need to support their children's learning. Improved learning at home provides a strong home-school connection. Through two-way communication, schools will also be able to provide parents the resources and support they require to work with their students. This increased academic focus and support positively correlate to increased educational outcomes for students. Enhanced educational outcomes lead to a positive change in the trajectory of their schooling and potentially college and career choices following secondary school. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the literature search strategies with a more detailed explanation of the conceptual framework and literature review of the related research of family engagement in low-income urban African American communities.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

A problem exists that while the importance of family engagement is well accepted, little is known about the strategies and practices that are most effective in the engagement of low-income African American urban families and how principals support teachers in creating productive family-school partnerships with these families. Research has shown that the demographics of the family is a major factor in the amount and type of engagement in their child's education (Fan, Williams, & Wolters, 2012; Fennimore, 2017; Madjar, Shklar, & Moshe, 2016; Murray, McFarland-Piazza, & Harrison, 2015; Watson & Bogotch, 2015). It is the responsibility of the school principal to consider these factors to implement leadership actions that create effective practices that lead to strong home-school partnerships. It is also the responsibility of the principal to build the capacity of the staff to engage with families of diverse backgrounds.

With the implementation of No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 and subsequently ESSA in 2015, schools have moved to increase student academic performance with a lens on the gap that exists between low-income and minority students. Schools have implemented parent engagement goals to meet the mandates of ESSA. The purpose of this study was to explore the leadership actions of principals in urban, predominately African American low-income schools that lead to teachers establishing productive communication and learning at home family-school partnerships and about how principals learned these strategies. This chapter begins with an explanation of the literature search strategy. Then it continues with a detailed description of the conceptual framework based on the theory of Epstein's school-family-community partnership model.

This chapter highlights the importance of establishing effective school-family partnerships and concludes with a literature review related to the key concepts in the study: six types of involvement, African American families and school involvement, the achievement gap, the role of the school principal, and urban schools.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The literature used in this review was retrieved from the Walden Library. The search engines included ERIC, SAGE, and Google Scholar with search parameters of *achievement gap, African American parental engagement, Epstein's six types of parent involvement, low-income, family engagement, family school relationship, overlapping spheres of influence, urban schools, and school leadership preparation*. The search was limited to scholarly peer-reviewed publications within the last 5 years, except for theoretical and methodology texts. I also conducted chain searches to find recent publications to related articles and authors.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study was Epstein's school-family-community partnership model (Epstein et al., 2018). The theory stated that students' educational development and enrichment is not limited to one environment, but that the home, school, and community all represent different spheres of educational influence. By intentionally creating stronger relationships between home, school, and community, student achievement benefits. Epstein (2010) stated that incorporated in this theory are educational, psychological, and sociological views and philosophies on social

organization and relationships. The theory recognized the interdisciplinary nature of the school, family, and community partnerships through overlapping spheres of influence.

The overlapping spheres of influence viewed the schools, families, and communities as sharing similar characteristics. The external model of overlapping spheres of influence recognized the drawing together and pushing a part of the three major environments in which students learn and grow (Epstein et al., 2018). There are actions of the school, family, and community that are conducted collaboratively and separately that contribute to the learning and development of students. The intricate and essential interpersonal interactions and patterns of influence that occur between individuals at school, at home, and in the community are illustrated in the internal model of the overlapping spheres of influence (Epstein et al., 2018). The theory of overlapping spheres suggested that partnerships, which value collaboration to share information, address issues, and guide students, are about joint responsibilities between school, home, and community (Epstein, 2018b; Pavlakis, 2018).

The school-family-community partnership model emphasized the shared characteristics of the schools and families. The model also suggested that the practices and mindset of families and schools can increase the amount of overlap between the families and schools, leading to positive outcomes for students (Epstein et al., 2018). The framework recognized six types of involvement: parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with community, which promotes that schools develop practices that engage families and communities. For this study, two types of involvement were explored: communication and learning at home.

## **Literature Review Related to Key Variables and Concepts**

### **Family, School, and Community Partnership**

The focus of family involvement has shifted over the years to recognize the value of the home and school connections and the potential benefits for students, families, and educators (Epstein et al., 2018; Evans, 2018; Povey et al., 2016). Research indicated that strong family and school relationships could lead to improved outcomes for students (Erdener, 2016; Evans, 2018; Watson & Bogotch, 2015). When families were involved in students' learning as described by Epstein et al. (2018), and when school and home formed respectful and collaborative partnerships, optimal learning outcomes could occur (Povey et al., 2016). To make parent engagement a focus for schools, ESSA (2015) included a policy that required schools to conduct outreach to all parents and families to involve families in school-level decision-making. In addition to being a key factor in students' academic, social, and physical health, families were also vital for the school and community improvement (Epstein, 2010; Galindo, Sanders, & Abel, 2017).

### **Six Types of Involvement**

Epstein's framework consists of six types of involvement: parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaboration with the community (Epstein et al., 2018). These types of involvement provide information for methods schools could use to engage families in the educational process. In a recent study, Erdener (2016) confirmed, after confirmatory factor analysis was applied, the six factors of parent involvement. Recent studies have explored Epstein's six types of involvement to conclude that parent involvement has shifted over the years to a model of

family engagement. The main distinction was that families are seen as partners with the school and should be engaged in making decisions that support the school (Epstein et al., 2018; ESSA, 2015; Ferrara, 2017). The six types of involvement spoke to the actions of the school to foster meaningful levels of engagement. Fundamental to the six types of involvement were two key elements of caring: trusting and respecting (Epstein et al., 2018).

**Parenting.** This type of involvement includes the practices that parents engaged in to raise healthy (mentally and physically) capable students (Epstein, 2018a). School practices that support parenting provide information to parents that helps them with their child's development, health, safety, or conditions of the home that can support student learning. This type of involvement is about understanding the child as a child, that is, understanding child development (Epstein, 2016). This type of involvement also emphasizes the need to support learning in a domestic environment, which is relevant to every grade level.

Family participation in their children's education is critical because it nurtures mental and emotional resilience, especially in the face of life stressors like poverty (Morrison, Storey, & Zhang, 2015). Implementing evidenced-based parenting interventions early in life has the potential to minimize risk associated with poverty and stress (Povey et al., 2016). The school plays a role in providing parents information and support to change parenting behaviors. Epstein et al. (2018) shared detailed strategies for promoting family involvement and how families could support learning goals at home. The strategies included offering continuing family education, workshops, and educational

materials to suggest and guide activities beyond homework and home visits from the school. A potential challenge described for this category was how information is disseminated because some families are not active in the instructional environment (Vance, 2018). Also, families may not have access to technology to receive electronic communications. The model emphasizes that the school must take responsibility for overcoming challenges in involving families (Epstein et al., 2018; Vance, 2018).

Possible results for students are an understanding of the importance of school, good or improved attendance, and positive personal qualities, habits, beliefs, and values as taught by the family. For parents, they would understand and have more confidence about parenting and have a feeling of being supported by the school. For teachers, they would develop an understanding of families' backgrounds, values, concerns, desires, needs, and expectations for their children. Teachers would also develop respect for the families' positive attributes and efforts. These results help to strengthen the sphere of influence by creating a greater overlap between school, home, and the community.

**Communication.** This type of involvement was concerned with the sharing of information from the school-to-home and home-to-school. This two-way communication included the school providing the home with information about school programs and children's progress. This communication can be in the form of newsletters, phone calls, school website, parent-teacher conferences, weekly robo-calls, and clear information on all school policies, programs, reforms, and transitions. The communication from home-to-school could take place during parent-teacher conferences or other methods individual schools and school districts implement to get parent input. The home-school partnership



established an opening to communication where parents can initiate discussions with the schools to obtain information about their children's academic performance, behavior, school programs, course selections, and placement decisions. This aspect of communication is essentially home-to-school communication where parents are empowered and encouraged to share pertinent information with the schools about their concerns, not school-to-home communication where teachers inform parents about school updates or student academic performance (Ma, Shen, Krenn, Hu, & Yuan, 2016).

When two-way exchanges of ideas and opinions are encouraged, and when families receive consistent and transparent information about school-related issues, trust and respect between parents and the school is positively reinforced (Bordalba & Bochaca, 2019). For parents, this two-way communication results in an understanding of school policies and programs, monitoring, and awareness of student progress, responding effectively to student problems and interactions with teachers, and ease of communication with school and teachers. For teachers, communication results in teachers utilizing multiple avenues to communicate with families, an increased confidence in their ability to communicate clearly, appreciation and use of communication networks to reach parents, and increased ability to understand family views on programs and their children's academic achievement.

Despite the observed benefits communicating effectively still continues to present challenges (Bordalba & Bochaca, 2019). Some of the reasons for low-quality communication in many schools are due to differences in language, conflicting schedules, mistrust families have towards the school, cultural differences, and socioeconomic

factors (Murray et al., 2015). Torrez (2014) found that ineffective communication with students' families had a stratifying effect which marginalized many students and their families. School principals, especially in urban schools, must develop a clear communication plan to address the diverse needs of their school community.

**Volunteering.** Epstein et al. (2018) identified three primary ways that individuals can volunteer in education. Volunteering the school or in the classroom as assistants to the teachers or staff is one example. Volunteering on behalf of the school; for example, fundraising for an event is the second way a parent may volunteer. The third way to volunteer is by attending school programs or performances. Low-income families' consistent and continuous engagement in preschool and kindergarten programs is linked with children's increased reading achievement, decreased rates of retention and fewer referrals to special education when children were in eighth grade (Morrison et al., 2015).

Pertinent research has determined that the direct relationship between parent involvement in schools and children's learning outcomes is small. However, parent engagement can help parents to develop support networks with other families, and to develop positive partnerships with teachers and administrators (Park, Stone, & Holloway, 2017; Povey et al., 2016). This involvement is mainly important for parents from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are at greater risk of experiencing challenges to forming partnerships with schools and involvement in their child's learning, to develop an understanding of school norms (Povey et al., 2016). Volunteering at schools may not directly affect a child's assessment data, but it can contribute to making school a more positive place for students (Park et al., 2017)

**Learning at Home.** This type of involvement looked at the information and ideas provided to families about the curriculum and learning expectations for students during the course of the school year. This information is provided to support parents in helping students at home with their homework and other content-related activities. Beyond the necessary skills for the grade, this information would include strategies on how to monitor and discuss schoolwork at home, activities to reinforce math and literacy skills in everyday activities like cooking dinner. Learning at home is about understanding the child as a student and the curricular connections that help students learn subject-specific skills and extra-curricular relationships that extend their abilities (Epstein, 2016).

McQuiggan and Megra (2017) investigated the learning at home model by asking parents if they were satisfied with the homework provided by their children's school. The study found that parents of 83% of students in kindergarten through 2nd grade felt the amount of homework assigned to their child was "about right." For students in 3rd–5th grade this percentage was lower at 75%. Latunde and Clark-Louque (2016) found that while African American parents supported learning at home by reading stories and discussing homework, parents needed additional support that focused on African American families and that provided specific resources and tools. Murray et al. (2015) state the quality of the home learning environment is linked with other socioeconomic factors, such as parental occupation and education level.

While homework remains a staple of home learning, Epstein et al. (2018) pointed to ways to promote additional learning opportunities that include opportunities to extend knowledge to real-world experiences. When parents engage students by reading and

playing math games, expressing high expectations and talking with their children about their learning outcomes have been found to be increased (Madjar et al., 2016; Povey et al., 2016). Families with more financial resources and social networks are often better prepared to create engaging home situations that foster these types of educationally enriching activities for their children.

**Decision Making.** Type 5 of the framework is decision making. The research suggested that parent leadership and involvement in school decision-making benefits schools and was linked to improved academic outcomes and progress toward equity (Geller, 2016; Green, 2015; Welton & Freelon, 2018). When it comes to decision-making at the school it is important that parents' voices be heard. Having family members serve as leaders and representatives on school teams, and as advocates for their children and other children on school decisions is the primary goal of the decision-making type of family involvement. The National Parent Teacher Association (PTA, 2019) stated by getting involved at your child's school, parents become part of the solution and help make positive changes. All parents must receive opportunities to offer ideas and suggestions on ways to improve their schools. Epstein et al. (2018) described the concept of an informed family who can take an active role in advocating for their child's school experience. Research has also highlighted that by participating in the school decision-making process, parents have a greater influence which can also affect students' (Coombe et al., 2017).

The authors pointed out the challenges to decision-making such as being inclusive to all family members across potential linguistic, cultural and economic barriers (Epstein

et al., 2018). Schools that demonstrated strong family-school partnerships used a variety of practices to engage parents in decision-making. Some methods included surveys and parent focus groups. At the district level, the establishment of an Office of Parent Relations to coordinate communication between the school district and parents were effective strategies identified in a Chicago school district (Coombe et al., 2017). The research supported the need described by Epstein et al. (2018) for schools to continue to develop programs and opportunities which are accessible to all families in a variety of cultural and economic settings.

**Collaboration with Community.** Collaborating with the community is the sixth type of involvement. Collaborating with the community addressed the importance of locating and incorporating services and resources from the community to reinforce school practices and to enable students to serve the community. Activities centered on the community had as their main focus community programs and services for students and families that supported the needs of the family and enriched the community (Epstein et al., 2018; Sanders, 2014).

Communities had a key role to play in the education, development, and social well-being of students. Community activities identified and integrated human, economic, social and material resources, to support the needs of the schools, strengthen families, and provide resources to support students' well-being. One significant barrier to productive community partnerships was the views of the educators, as their beliefs shape how they interact with the community (Garcia, Frunzi, Dean, Flores, & Miller, 2016). In the toolkit of resources, Garcia et al. (2016) shared strategies for schools to use to build awareness

of how their beliefs and assumptions influence their interaction with families and the community. Epstein and Sanders (2006) emphasized that the school was responsible for initiating family involvement across potential barriers such as ethnicity, language differences, and socioeconomic backgrounds. By building effective community partners, schools were better able to provide supports that addressed the needs and wellness of the whole family in and out of school. Dawson-McClure et al. (2017) stated having a parenting intervention as a part of the school program was vital for reaching families and providing accessibility for families.

### **African American Families and School Involvement**

While there has been an abundance of research on the benefits of family involvement much of the research implemented a view that valued white middle-class perspectives of family engagement (Allen & White-Smith, 2018). A deficit view existed for African American families and their capacity to support their children's learning (Latunde & Clark-Louque, 2016; Watson & Bogotch, 2015). These misconceptions were tied to issues and beliefs about race, which played an essential part in the engagement strategies of parents (Latunde & Clark-Louque, 2016). These misconceptions were compounded when we have teachers and administrators who do not share the same demographic of the communities they serve.

Schools have not always provided opportunities for African American parents to be involved in programs and activities that would help their children (Latunde, 2018; Purcell-Gates, Lenters, McTavish, & Anderson, 2014). For some time, African American parents have shared their frustration with the interactions and communication between

the school and home (Latunde & Clark-Louque, 2016). These interactions and communications led to families feeling unwelcomed at the school resulting in strained relationships. Schools often employ strategies that focus on rules and procedures when engaging minority families, while leaving out some of the activities and interactions that make minority families feel welcome, appreciated and included (Latunde, 2016; Yull, Wilson, Murray, & Parham, 2018). These exclusionary practices have contributed to African American families' negative perspectives of the school. This has further alienated the African American families.

Compounded with race is socioeconomic status. Low-income African American families are faced with the challenges of poverty that further impeded their ability to be present in the school. This lack of physical presence is often interpreted by educators to mean a lack of concern. Despite minority parents stating that they want to be actively engaged with schools, schools in low-income urban neighborhoods find it challenging to establish partnerships with the families (Epstein, 2010; Mapp et al., 2017; Pavlakis, 2018). It is the families with more education, higher incomes, and more comfort with schools that are found to maintain engagement with the school (Epstein, 2018b).

To support student learning equitably and effectively, educators need to learn how to leverage the culture and cross-cultural differences of their students (Ankrum, 2016; Bottiani, Larson, Debnam, Bischoff, & Bradshaw, 2018). The approaches to engage families should focus more on how the school addresses the racial, cultural and class inequality in the practices of the school and less on discrete family engagement actions (Ishimaru et al., 2016). If real connections with families, parents, and communities are

not established, schools will continue to fail African American (and Hispanic) students (Watson & Bogotch, 2015).

### **Achievement Gap**

Family engagement is of significance for African American families because African American students, particularly those from low-income families, lag behind their peers on major academic indices (Fischer et al., 2016; Latunde & Clark-Louque, 2016). When the academic achievement of students from white and African American students is compared, there is a gap in the performance. White and Asian students are outperforming African American and Hispanic students. When we factor for economic status, the gap between Whites and African Americans is increased. This gap in academic performance between groups of students, namely groups identified by low socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity is the achievement gap (Latunde, 2016). National comprehensive reform efforts such as ESSA and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) were undertaken to ensure measures are put in place to provide equal access to education for all students regardless of race and income to help minimize the gap that exists between students.

While the achievement gap represents concern for African American students, it also affects the financial health of the country (Bowman et al., 2018). Researchers found that the enduring achievement gaps between students of different ethnicities and income levels has contributed to a loss of billions of dollars in potential economic gains (Auguste, Hancock, & Laboissiere, 2009; Bowman et al., 2018). Even when the data is sorted to match social class, the gap in achievement between other groups and African



Americans is significant (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015; Bowman et al., 2018) and despite legislation and school reform, there is still inequality in almost every facet of education (Matthew, Rodrigue, & Reeves, 2016; W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2014).

Jeynes (2015) concluded African American parents had high expectations for their children's academics and the parent's engagement in their children's education contributed positively to student achievement. Latunde and Clark-Louque (2016) discovered that African American families engaged in their children's education by engaging their children in learning activities outside of school and by making sure homework is completed. The authors suggested schools can provide specific resources and tools to reinforce learning at home.

### **Role of the School Principal**

The Wallace Foundation (2013) identified five key functions of principal leadership and multiple research findings have confirmed that school leadership was the second most important school-based factor in a child's academic achievement, second only to teacher effectiveness (Augustine-Shaw, 2015; Krasnoff, 2015). The school leader sets the vision of academic success for all students (Cummins, 2015). It is the actions of the school leader that support the effective implementation of any initiative (Green, 2015; Sanders, 2014). The perspectives of school leaders are critical to the actions taken to engage parents. In a study, Barr and Saltmarsh (2014) determined when looking at the relationship between the school and parents, parents believed the receptiveness, two – way communication, and leadership of school principals to play a crucial role in fostering the development of the relationships between parents and schools. Povey et al. (2016)

supported this finding by also stating that principal leadership was pivotal in building parent-school partnerships.

Urban school leaders held a deficit view that low-income minority families were culturally deficient and chose to not engage in their children's education. It was found that urban school leaders lacked awareness and cultural sensitivity of the ethnicities and values of the children in their schools. (DeMatthews, Carey, Olivarez, & Saeedi, 2017). Many teachers and school leaders were not prepared to understand new approaches for cultivating family and community engagement that increased the academic outcomes of all students (Epstein, 2010; Evans, 2018). Most school leaders were not equipped with current approaches to support and lead their staffs to establish effective school initiatives and classroom practices that engaged all families in their children's educational journey (Epstein, 2010; Galindo et al., 2017; Pushor, 2018).

School personnel who have dedicated time for building relationships see more parents connected to their child's school (Mapp et al., 2017; Pushor, 2018). School principals and school staff must cultivate ways to develop their knowledge of families within their school (Young, Jean, & Mead, 2018). Principals who understood the stories of their families and who concentrated on meeting parents where they were most comfortable will be able to increase partnerships (Young et al., 2018). The stories of the family can differ significantly across cultures and socioeconomic status, thus requiring the school principal to develop approaches that meet the needs of the community they serve.

## **Urban Schools**

Milner's (2012) depiction of "urban" school environments identified low-income, few resources, and high population of English-language learners. The presence of these "urban characteristics" (p. 559) are correlated to academic achievement, even if schools are located physically outside of urban districts. Inside urban communities, Milner (2012) made the distinction between "urban intensive" schools and "urban emergent" based on city density. Free and Reduced Meal (FARM) status for students was used as a marker and identification of poverty in studies on poverty (Milner et al., 2015). These are families who due to income receive a free or reduced price meal. The term "urban" is considered synonymous to thoughts of poverty, limited education, crime, addiction, and dysfunctional families. Overall, most urban schools were viewed from a deficit perspective.

Urban schools were often described by the lows and the highs. The highs included poverty, diverse backgrounds, student with disabilities, suspensions (Kuriloff, Jordan, Sutherland, & Ponnock, 2019), and high teacher turnover (Milner, 2012; Reed & Swaminathan, 2016). The lows included low academic achievement, ineffective teachers, low parental participation, and poor teacher morale (Milner, 2012; Reed & Swaminathan, 2016). As we discuss family engagement, it is important to know that building equitable learning opportunities for children is increasing difficult for communities and families due to poverty, discrimination, and immigration policies (Weiss, Lopez, & Caspe, 2018).

Urban schools must address systemic problems to help students and families realize their fullest potential. An identified barrier contributing to the extent of family

engagement and teacher-parent communication is the families' cultural background. A recent study has shown that for families from low-income and minority backgrounds parental involvement was lower (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018). Research showed that urban schools struggled to engage families with low socio-economic status, limited English and families that belonged to a diverse cultural (Dretzke & Rickers, 2016; Kuriloff et al., 2019).

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Family engagement has progressed beyond bake sales and attending PTO meetings. Family engagement is about the partnerships that schools establish with the families and communities they serve. In urban African American schools, school principals face unique challenges in engaging families that have been marginalized or viewed from a deficit point of view. While research supports family involvement in the academic outcomes of students, there is little research on the specific actions principals in urban, low income predominately African American schools use that have been effective in engaging parents.

The view and mindset of the teachers and school principal are a key part of the approaches taken to connect with families. While there have been many studies conducted examining the perspectives of school principals and teachers on family involvement, little research exists on what actions principals take to support teachers to engage with families effectively. Given that teacher preparation programs do not have components addressing family engagement, this training is part of the leadership requirements of the school principal.

In Chapter 3, the design and methodology guiding this study are discussed. The research approach to explore the leadership actions of principals is outlined in detail. The following chapter will describe how this research was prepared and carried out in a scientific, ethical manner to obtain data regarding the perceptions of leaders and teachers in regard to the phenomena. The resulting data has positive implications for practical use and improved engagement of African American families in urban low-income schools. In the following chapter, the research plan is explained in detail to provide data that contribute to an existing gap in the literature regarding the leadership actions of principals in low-income, predominately African American urban schools that support teachers in developing effective school-family partnerships.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the leadership actions of principals in urban, predominately African American low-income schools that support teachers establishing productive communication and learning at home family-school partnerships. A better understanding of the leadership actions of the principal that support teachers in the development of productive family-school partnerships was discovered. By acquiring a better understanding on the needs of the principal, districts leaders can gain critical insight into ways to provide support to future school principals, as well as, identifying specific practices to engage urban low-income African American families in meaningful ways.

In this chapter, I discuss details about the design of the research. I further explain the qualitative case study research method and make connections to the historical and current research and their relevance to this study. I define the role of the researcher and explore in greater detail the measures I employed to address ethical considerations, trustworthiness, the validity of results, and selection of participants. The school-family-partnership provided by Epstein served as the concept that framed this study.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

School principals are faced with many challenges and responsibilities daily. As school principals make decisions, they consider countless factors before selecting a course of action. Schools located in high poverty communities present a unique set of challenges that further complicate the work of the principal (Milner et al., 2015). The questions that guided this study were focused on the leadership actions of the principals

in low-income predominately African American urban schools supporting teachers in building family-school partnerships. The following research questions guided the study:

RQ1: How do principals in low-income, predominantly African American urban schools lead teachers to develop productive communication and learning at home in the development of family-school partnerships as defined by Epstein's school-family-community partnership model?

RQ2: What are the perspectives of principals serving in low-income, predominantly African American urban schools on how administrative training prepared them to lead teachers in establishing communication and learning at home family-school partnerships as defined by Epstein's school-family-community partnership model?

The central phenomena explored in this study were the leadership actions of principals in low-income predominately African American urban schools as they relate to supporting teachers in developing learning at home and communication partnerships with families. While family engagement is stressed as an essential factor contributing to student academic success, teachers and principals continue to struggle to develop authentic partnerships with families. Teachers are the first line of contact with a family, and in many cases, they may be the only person a family interacts with during a school year. Research showed teachers sometimes lack the knowledge or the confidence to engage with families effectively (Epstein, 2018a), thus increasing the importance of the leadership actions of the principal. In this study I explored the leadership actions of principals in urban, predominately African American low-income schools to support

teachers in establishing productive school-family partnerships. I also explored the perceptions of principals as they identify the efforts they have found most successful in building teacher capacity to improve family engagement.

For this bounded qualitative case study I used interviews and archival documents to acquire the data aligned to the research questions. A bounded qualitative approach best served this study as I gathered data from participants of the study through a specific course of time and location (see Creswell, Hanson, Clark, & Morales, 2007). I captured data that were aligned with the research questions on teacher and principal perspectives on the practices that lead to effective family-school partnerships. Archived climate surveys were the documents that also provided data on the effectiveness of the actions of the principal.

Yin (2009) and Merriam (2009) advocated qualitative studies in the field of education as this approach supports studies in determining how the culture works. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), qualitative inquiry is used to discover and describe what particular people do in their everyday lives and what their actions mean to them. The case study research builds an in-depth, conceptual understanding of the case, relying on multiple data sources (Creswell et al., 2007; Yin, 2009). The study's purpose was to explore the leadership actions school principals in urban, predominately African American low-income schools implement to support teachers in developing family-school partnerships, which was supported by a case study approach.



### **Role of the Researcher**

I am currently a principal at a Title I school in the district in which this study took place. While a professional affiliation exists between the participants in this study and me, I do not have a personal relationship with any member of the sample group. Though my school is in the same district and meets the criteria, I did not collect any data from my teachers, parents, or school. While all elementary schools are grouped for district meetings and support, the schools do not have daily interactions with one another.

I have worked at various levels (classroom teacher, instructional coach, school principal) in this school system for over 15 years, which has created a sense of commitment to the success of the school system. I addressed any potential bias by the purposeful selection of participating school principals, which included excluding any principals with whom I have more than a professional relationship. Additionally, I used a peer reviewer as an additional measure to guard against bias and to ensure alignment to the research questions. I have no personal or professional gain or incentive from the results of the study.

Sharing the scope of the study in advance to participating principals and teachers addressed potential ethical issues. Consent to participate in the study was acquired before providing interview questions to the participants. The appropriate administrative permissions at the district and school level were obtained before approaching participants or beginning any data collection. No compensation was offered to participants for their participation or their responses.

## **Methodology**

The research methodology and design was a qualitative case study. The qualitative approach is concerned with understanding how individuals perceive and make meaning of their experiences (Merriam, 2009). Researchers attempt to understand phenomena in their natural settings in ways that are contextualized and reflect the sense that people make of their own experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In this study, the phenomena explored were the leadership actions of principals in urban, low-income predominately African American schools that support teachers in developing strong school-family partnerships.

### **Participant Selection**

The population of approximately 60 current principals was a subset of a large predominantly African American school district located in a Mideastern state in the United States. The school district is diverse in its economic and racial composition, with an average income of approximately \$79,000 compared to the national average for the United States of \$61,937 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). The setting included the schools identified as Title I schools based on the high number of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch and have 80% or higher African American population.

I used the purposive sampling technique to ensure the selection of participants who could provide data aligned to the purpose of the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Schwandt, 2015). In this study, the sample purposefully selected were the principals with at least 3 years of experience leading schools that are identified as Title I and that have an African American population of 80% or higher. I sent a request for participation and an

overview of the study to the principals who are at schools matching the desired population. As of 2019, there were over 60 elementary schools and eight middle schools in the desired demographic. This overview included a screening question to determine if the principal had been leading the school for at least 3 years. From those who agreed to participate and matched the desired parameters, I selected 12 principals. There were no relationships beyond professional affiliation between me as the researcher and the school principals.

### **Instrumentation**

I used two research instruments in the completion of this study. I collected data via interviews conducted with principals in urban, predominately African American low-income schools using an interview guide (Appendix). I analyzed archived climate surveys for data aligned to the principals' leadership actions in developing family-school partnerships. The data were captured and organized using recording devices and software programs designed for qualitative research.

I developed interview questions in alignment with the research questions creating the interview guide (Appendix). The first question was to identify what supports the school leaders provided teachers, how they determined which support to provide, and how they measured the success of those supports in meeting the goal of increased family-school partnerships. The second set of questions explored the preparation of principals to lead this work and how they developed the skills/knowledge needed. The follow up questions explored the principals' perspective on what training is needed to prepare principals for supporting teachers in developing family-school partnerships. The third set

of questions explored the principals' perspective on the leadership actions they found to be the most successful and whether they used the same approach with all communities. I established clarity and alignment to research questions by sharing the interview guide with a doctoral colleague for review. I used feedback from my reviewer and my committee to edit questions.

An audio recorder connected to my laptop and my cellphone were used to capture all interviews. The recordings were uploaded to the NVivo software where it was transcribed. The transcripts were shared with participants via email to ensure the accuracy of the information collected. A software program, NVivo, was used to organize the transcripts to assist with identifying emerging themes. Software programs provide a convenient means of coding as well as storing large amounts of qualitative data (Patton, 2015). In addition to the audio recordings, I also had notes that I captured during the interview that were also added to the shared transcriptions.

The second source of data was archival climate surveys administered biannually in the surveyed school district. The climate surveys include participation from students, parents, and teachers on their perceptions of school leadership, school safety, and parental involvement. Central office analyzes the surveys by the school and by the district and shares this report on their website. The survey results from the participating principals' schools were reviewed for information aligned to the principals' leadership actions that foster family engagement practices through communication and learning at home, and the teachers and parents perspectives. The archived climate surveys were

coded for thematic analysis. Ethical considerations were made to protect the rights of participants.

The Department of Testing, Research, and Evaluation (DTRE) developed and conducted a biannual climate survey. The specific question answered in the report was: “to what extent do the students, parents, and teachers perceive their schools exhibit characteristics that are conducive to effective teaching and learning?” (Study School District, 2018) Four distinct survey forms were developed, one for elementary students, middle and high school students, one for parents and one for teachers. The survey is not administered to school principals or district leaders.

One of the subscales on the survey is parent involvement where parents are asked questions that align to their engagement in school policy that supports the learning goals for their children. Parents are asked five questions related to this subscale, and teachers are asked three. This subscale aligned to the study’s focus on exploring the leadership actions of the principal that lead to effective family involvement. The parent and teacher perspectives were needed to determine if the actions identified by principals were contributing to an improved family-school partnership that supports two-way communication and learning at home, as defined by Epstein’s framework.

Qualitative interviews are the mainstay of qualitative data collection since they provide a deep, rich, individualized, and contextualized data that are important to qualitative research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Interviews have been an established mean of qualitative study and have been used by many groups of academics seeking to develop holistic descriptions of perspectives, realities, experiences,

and phenomena (Weiss et al., 2018). Interviews have been an established means of qualitative inquiry since the 19th century making this a reliable method and source of data collection. Semistructured interviews were used in this study. In semistructured interviews, the researcher uses an interview guide with specific questions to be asked to all participants, but the order or wording may vary to maintain a conversational path (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Semistructured interviews are useful in allowing for a more conversational flow and allowing for follow-up questions as needed (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Semistructured interviews were the appropriate approach for this study as the researcher explored the perspectives of school principals, teachers, and parents as it relates to the phenomena of family-school partnerships. Open-ended questions were tailored to provide participants adequate opportunity to reflect on the practices implemented and follow-up questions allowed the researcher to gather in-depth data. During in-depth qualitative interviewing, the researcher was looking for vibrant and detailed information, not yes-or-no responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The questions, while preplanned, were flexible, allowing the researcher to pose questions based on each participant. The questions were developed by utilizing the interview guide provided by Walden University and were tested using peer reviewer to ensure questions align to research questions.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

Participants were recruited from the population of principals at Title I schools in the identified school district. A blind copied email (Appendix B) was sent to all

principals within the population, introducing myself, describing the study, and request volunteers to participate in the study. The introduction briefly stated the role of the researcher and my affiliation to the district and the study. The body of the email contained the Leader Interview Consent form (Appendix B) provided by Walden University (2017).

Participants were the principals working at identified Title 1 schools. Participants meet at an off-site location at a mutually agreed upon time. Two participants interviewed via Zoom Conferencing. Before beginning the interview, I reviewed the purpose of the study and allowed the participant to ask any questions before beginning and allowed the participant the opportunity to exit the study before the interview. Following the interview, the research again explained how this information will be used and allowed the participant time for any questions. The participants again had the option of exiting the study and not have their interview included in the findings.

The data were collected during individual interviews. Interviews took place at an off-site mutually agreed upon location to provide confidentiality to the participants. In two cases an in-person interview could not be arranged. Therefore, electronic conferencing was used. Data collection took place over two weeks, and the duration of the interview was approximately 30 minutes. All interviews were electronically recorded and notes were taken on visual observations during the interview.

After the interview, participants were reminded of the purpose of the study. They were provided a copy of the data collected within a week of the interview for their opportunity to conduct a transcript review to ensure what they intended was what was

captured. No additions or modifications to the transcript were required. Participants were also allowed the opportunity to pose any questions to the researcher and the process was concluded.

Archival climate surveys from the case study district from the past three years from the participants' current schools were analyzed for comments related to parent involvement. These data were used to triangulate the data provided by school principals for the effectiveness of their leadership actions. The complete set of data should provide a full picture of the effectiveness of the leadership actions of principals to develop effective communication and learning at home family-school partnerships.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The following data analysis plan outlined how each mode of data collection was connected to the central phenomena being studied. The interview data related directly to the research questions regarding the principal's leadership actions in urban, predominately African American low-income schools to build and to support teachers in developing family-school partnerships. Interview questions were also aligned with the principals' perspectives on their preparation for this type of leadership, particularly at low-income African American schools.

The documents reviewed were archived climate surveys administered by the school district. The particular section of the survey that pertained to family engagement was reviewed for the parent and teacher responses that spoke to the actions of the school principal. The survey was reported in percentages and also provided quotes from respondents. The survey provided data aligned to the perceptions of the families on the



effectiveness of the leadership actions of the principal and if those actions led to positive family-school partnerships.

Coding is the process of assigning meaning to the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This study used an inductive approach to data analysis to reveal patterns of themes and interactions within data (Patton, 2015). The themes were based on those that naturally emerge from the participants' responses and the review of the documents. The data were then sorted into emerging themes or categories. Data that did not fit into one of the emergent themes was reviewed to determine what theme they addressed and were coded accordingly. Discrepant cases were captured and will be considered for future areas of research. Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) are helpful to organize and sort data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This software is a database that holds the source data, transcripts, audio recordings and supports the annotation, coding, sorting, and other manipulations and keeps a record of this activity (Gibbs, 2014 p.281).

### **Trustworthiness**

According to Patton (2015), maintaining credibility requires a combination of high-quality fieldwork, a knowledgeable researcher, and the integrity of solid qualitative inquiry. The internal credibility of the study was maintained by following the established methods and procedures. Consent forms were used to inform participants of the scope of the study and their rights as willing participants in the study being conducted. Participants were drawn from a school district with which I have stated my affiliation and the professional affiliation I have with potential participants in the study. This relationship did not have any possibility to contaminate the data collected. During the participant

selection process, any participants that I had a personal relationship with, was excluded from the study. Data analysis software was used to organize the data resulting from the interviews and the climate survey. Peer review was used to ensure adherence to the process and prevent bias. Saturation is addressed through the interviewing of 8-10 principals as well as the review of the district administered climate survey.

### **Dependability**

Dependability refers to the stability of the data and is described as consistent and stable over time. The methods for achieving dependability were the triangulation and sequencing of methods (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Data were triangulated by utilizing various data sources for the phenomena being examined. In this study, interviews with school leaders were compared with the data gathered from archival data from the parents and teachers. Transcript reviews were used to ensure accuracy of interview data which interviewees were provided the opportunity to review for accuracy. Interviewees also had the opportunity to provide any corrections to information gathered during the interview if their response was not accurately captured. Triangulation, as described by Patton (2015), was addressed by exploring information from multiple sources. In this study, the multiple sources came from the principals through interviews and the parents, and teachers through the review of the climate survey.

### **Transferability**

Transferability of the research was made possible through transparency in research protocols and qualitative procedures, which can be replicated in different circumstances by other researchers to continue to study this phenomenon. The goal of

transferability in qualitative research is how qualitative studies can apply to broader contexts (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Transferability was established by purposeful random selection across the population to provide a rich participant group. The data analysis used an inductive approach which allows for the transfer of certain aspects of the study into different contextual factors (Ravitch & Carl, 2016)

### **Confirmability**

One goal of confirmability is to acknowledge and explore the ways that our biases and prejudices may affect our interpretations of the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Confirmability was established by consistent implementation of triangulation strategies and researcher reflexivity processes. While engaged in data collection, I consistently reflected on my personal bias and captured information as literally as possible without interpretation. By providing the interviewee the opportunity to review the transcripts of interviews, this also helped to establish confirmability. Validity in qualitative research is the ways the researchers can affirm that the findings are faithful to the participants' experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To ensure validity, the researcher used several methods that met the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability criteria of a trustworthy or valid study.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Before beginning data collection, the approval was received from the Walden University Institutional Review Board. Consent from the school district was obtained to use information from the climate surveys and to survey school principals. Additionally, ethical treatment of participants was met by gaining written consent from all participants

permitting the use of their responses in the study. Once IRB approval (10-11-19-0743964) was obtained, the study began. All questions were specifically related to the focus of the study and did not require the participant to provide any information of a personal nature. Questions were also provided to participants in advance, providing an opportunity for review and refusal. No participants were coerced or compensated for participating. All interview questions were submitted as part of the study.

To ensure ethical data collection, all interviews, with participant permission, were recorded. Transcripts were made utilizing a software program, NVivo, and shared with participants for review. Field notes were scanned and uploaded as part of the documentation of the data collected. No fewer than eight participants were interviewed and their identity will remain confidential. Data were coded to ensure an entirely confidential presentation and analysis of the resulting data from the study. All study data were stored on a password protected laptop with only the researcher having access.

All reasonable measures were taken to ensure the security and confidentiality of the data collected while completing the study. The data and software were stored on a personal computer that required a password to access. The software used also had an online storage format where data were backed up. To ensure the confidentiality of participants was maintained, interviews took place at a neutral location like library or coffee shop or online utilizing a real-time conferencing site, Zoom.

### **Summary**

In this chapter I provided evidence of the connection to the tradition of a qualitative study. This qualitative case study used a combination of interviews and

district administered climate surveys to explore the perspectives of school principals on the leadership actions that support teachers in developing a family-school partnership. This study triangulated data by utilizing multiple interviews and utilizing the perspectives of parents and teachers as it related to the studies focus. Appropriate permissions from the IRB, the school district personnel, and the participants were addressed to meet ethical obligations of the study. Confidentiality and trustworthiness of the study were addressed through consent, credibility, and transferability of the study results. Chapter 4 will include results of the study.

## Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the leadership actions of principals in urban, predominately African American low-income schools that support teachers establishing productive communication and learning at home through family-school partnerships. By acquiring a better understanding of the actions of the principal, district leaders gain critical insight into ways to provide support to future school principals as well as identify specific practices to engage urban low-income African American families in meaningful ways. Two research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do principals in low-income, predominantly African American urban schools lead teachers to develop productive communication and learning at home in the development of family-school partnerships as defined by Epstein's -school-family-community partnership model?

RQ2: What are the perspectives of principals serving in low-income, predominantly African American urban schools on how administrative training prepared them to lead teachers in establishing communication and learning at home family-school partnerships as defined by Epstein's school-family-community partnership model?

In this chapter, I begin with a description of the study setting. Next, I discuss the specific information about the collection and analysis of the data, followed by the presentation of the results and the methods used to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. The chapter concludes with a summary of the results.

### **Setting**

The setting for this study was an urban, predominately African American school system located in Mideastern United States. The school system has approximately 130,000 students and just over 200 schools. Of the approximately 200 schools, 80 schools were identified as Title I schools. The schools included in this study were schools identified as Title I that had an 80% or higher African American population. Participation was open to the 35 principals who met the qualifying criteria for the study. Those who consented to participate corresponded with me directly to ensure confidentiality. Participants were principals who had at least 3 years of leadership experience at urban predominately African American schools.

Of the eight participants, six were female, and two were male. Five of the participants led elementary schools Pre-K to 5th grade, two participants led Pre-K to 8th grade schools, and one participant led a middle school. Principals averaged 6 years of leadership experience at their current schools, with 3 years being the least and 10 years the most. Five of the principals have their master's degree in education and three have their Doctorate in education. Six of the principals have been in the same school system for the duration of their career and two participants have been principals in other school districts prior to being a principal in the current school district. The years of experience and the duration at their current schools helped to provide insightful perspectives.

Table 1

*Participant Pseudonym, Principal experience, Gender, Education*

Participant pseudonym	Principal experience	Gender	Education
Angela	8 years	Female	Doctorate
Brenda	6 years	Female	Masters
Carol	6 years	Female	Masters
David	3 years	Male	Masters
Erin	6 years	Female	Masters
Francis	5 years	Female	Doctorate
Greg	10 years	Male	Doctorate
Helen	4 years	Female	Masters

### **Data Collection**

The data collection process included individual semistructured interviews with eight school principals, which lasted approximately 30 minutes, and the review of archival school climate data from each of the eight participants' schools. I held one-to-one interviews either in person at a neutral location (public library and coffee shops) or through video conferencing using the Zoom Conference platform. Interviews were recorded on both a password-protected laptop and password-protected cellphone while also capturing notes of information shared during the interview. I scheduled interviews at the convenience of the participants based on their availability after work. All interviews with participants were conducted throughout 2 weeks. The variables of interview conditions were minimal to nonexistent; the primary variable was the time of day that was convenient for the participants. There was no variation to the previously shared data collection plan.



Each principal in the school systems who led schools that fit the study criteria were e-mailed the interview consent form. From that e-mail, eight principals responded consenting to participate in the study. I e-mailed each principal individually to schedule a day and time within 2 weeks to conduct the interviews. Two interviews were conducted using Zoom conferencing, and six were conducted face-to-face. Interviews conducted on Zoom were recorded through that platform, then downloaded and saved to my password-protected computer. I also recorded on my cellphone as a backup. I recorded face to-face interviews on a password-protected laptop and also recorded on my cellphone. I then shared transcriptions with each participant via e-mail for review. All participants accepted the transcripts as provided.

I reviewed data from each school's archived climate survey to triangulate the data provided. The questions on the climate survey that aligned with the focus of the study were reviewed, and those responses were captured in a data collection tool created in excel. In the parent section, five questions were reviewed, and for the teacher portion, three questions were reviewed. There were no unusual occurrences during the interview process or review of archival data.

### **Data Analysis**

Once all interviews were completed, I transcribed recordings and shared the transcriptions with participants within a week for review and feedback. Participants were asked to make any edits or revisions to their responses to ensure their thoughts were accurately captured. Participants were asked to return the edits within 48 hours. All participants accepted the transcripts as provided. The transcriptions and notes from each

interview and archival climate survey data were uploaded from a password-protected laptop to NVivo for analysis and coding.

The archival climate survey had five parent questions and three teacher questions aligned to the focus of the study. In alignment with Creswell (2018) and Ravitch and Carl (2016), I used open coding with thematic analysis. To maintain anonymity, the participants' names were substituted with a pseudonym. By utilizing pseudonyms, I was able to provide direct quotes captured during interviews. I uploaded the transcriptions, notes, and data collected from the archival climate survey into the NVivo platform. This software assisted in identifying specific terms used most frequently in the transcriptions, notes, and the archival climate survey responses. Additionally, as I reviewed my notes taken during the interviews, I jotted down codes based on the statements being repeated by multiple principals.

I used an inductive approach to data analysis to reveal patterns of themes and interactions in the data (see Patton, 2015). The first cycle identified common words or phrases. I have included some of those phrases in Table 2. I charted the frequency of terms using the software to track the repetition of ideas shared during the interview of the participants, notes, and review of archival survey data. During the next round of coding I used categorical aggregation and extracted single words or phrases to create a descriptive code that summarized the data. Responses were placed into several categories (Table 2). Within the categories some of the terms that emerged were deliberate planning, strategic approaches, monitoring, accountability, and lack of training.

Table 2

*Phrases, Categories and Themes Used in Data Analysis*

Phrases	Categories	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deliberate planning</li> <li>• Strategic approaches</li> <li>• Intentional focus</li> <li>• Professional development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning and Preparation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership Practices</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitoring actions</li> <li>• Accountability</li> <li>• Modeling expectations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitoring and Accountability</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ClassDojo</li> <li>• Robo Call</li> <li>• School Websites</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication Approaches</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family Engagement</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parent input</li> <li>• Parent participation</li> <li>• Reaching parents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parent engagement</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of training</li> <li>• Previous experiences</li> <li>• Trial and error</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Principal preparation or training</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Principal Training</li> </ul>

**Theme 1: Leadership Actions**

This theme included the categories of planning and preparation, monitoring, and accountability. Participants made statements stressing the importance of being intentional and strategic when planning for family engagement. Angela discussed when developing her budget for the next school year, she created the plan for family engagement so that the required funds could be set aside. Greg shared how he met with his teachers to determine to which events they would be willing to commit. In his case, teachers were

willing to attend one parent event a month. Based on the input he captured from parent surveys, he then planned out the events and workshops that teachers would provide over the school year.

The second category within this theme was monitoring and accountability. In this area, participants were unanimous in stating that monitoring implementation and holding teachers accountable were critical to the success of any of the strategies for family-school partnerships the school wanted to implement. Brenda shared how weekly she would check her teachers' ClassDojo pages to monitor her teachers' communication with parents. In cases where teachers were not meeting the expectation, accountability measures were employed. For the six participants using this tool, all shared that within the first year of use, teachers saw the usefulness of this platform and the ease it provided for communicating with parents; it then began to require less oversight by the school principal. Furthermore, participants described specific steps they used to monitor implementation without necessarily using the word *monitoring*.

## **Theme 2: Family Engagement**

The second theme to emerge involved two categories that focused on the communication approaches used by the participants and the level of parent of engagement they observed as a result of those approaches. Participants shared positive outcomes based on some of the approaches used to engage families as well as challenges they continued to face in particular areas of family engagement. While six participants used ClassDojo as a communication tool and parents were very active on the platform, the participants struggled to get responses from parents in terms of the type of workshops

and support they wanted the school to provide. David shared how he used a parent input survey on his school's website, but there were limited responses, and the few he did receive were about student discipline issues. Carol conducted quarterly chat and chews at two different times of the day, and though she has over 600 students in her school, fewer than five parents have attended the event. Each participant shared the struggle they encounter when trying to engage their parents in academic activities such as workshops. Parents participated in high numbers at talent shows and concerts, but not at events like literacy night or parent workshops. Erin shared when she desegregated her school data; the Hispanic and Caucasian families participated at a higher rate at the workshops and literacy nights. Still, at student performances, her African American families attended a higher rate.

### **Theme 3: Principal Training**

The third theme that emerged involved the perceptions of participants on their preparation to establish effective family-school partnerships. Participants identified a lack of training and the need to rely on previous experiences to determine which approaches to use with their school communities. Two participants described how they relied on experiences as teachers to determine what approaches to use as a principal. One principal stated she relied on experiences as an Assistant principal in a previous school to help guide her decisions in her current school. All participants described actions that were summarized as trial and error to determine the appropriate approaches for their given school populations.

## Results

The results from the eight interviews and supporting archival data are summarized below. The results are organized by research questions and are explained in depth utilizing quotes and data tables.

### Research Question 1

RQ1: How do principals in low-income, predominantly African American urban schools lead teachers to develop productive communication and learning at home in the development of family-school partnerships as defined by Epstein's school-family-community partnership model?

**Interview data.** According to the resulting data during interviews, all eight participants implemented similar leadership strategies to support teachers in developing productive communication and learning at home family-school partnerships. Data gathered during interviews with participants fell into three themes: leadership practices, family engagement, and principal training.

Each participant was intentional, deliberate, and strategic in planning the approaches implemented to build productive family-school partnerships. Participants began planning during the previous school year the practices they intended to implement. Discussions were held with their staff, and in 2 cases, budget decisions based on those practices were made. Francis stated,

During budget season, I meet with my leadership team to plan out the workshops we will host the following year, and we build out our calendar. Based on that calendar, I make budget decisions on where I will need to allocate funds. For

example, if I can only get teachers to cover five workshops, then I won't put money in my budget for monthly workshops.

Helen stated, "In order to get teacher buy-in, I have the teachers sign up for the committees they will serve on. Parent engagement is one of the committees, and they plan out all the activities we will have monthly." Erin stated, "I meet with the teachers to get their input on the support they need, and we plan out our professional development based on those needs."

Planning for professional development was important to the support participants provided to their teachers. Five participants shared they had to provide some type of professional development to their teachers to support their engagement with families. Five participants specifically mentioned cultural awareness. Cultural awareness was required to help teachers better understand the communities they served. As part of cultural awareness development, Erin took her teachers on a tour of the three main apartment complexes that were zoned for her school. This provided teachers, particularly those from different backgrounds, a first-hand view of the students' and families' experiences.

All eight participants shared the importance they placed on creating positive relationships with their staff members, students, families, and even within the community. This leadership practice theme was the most referenced throughout the interviews. Each participant began by sharing their vision and expectations for parent communication with their staff. Once the expectation was set, participants modeled for teachers their expectations for family-school partnerships. "Leading by example" was the

phrase used by two of the participants. According to Kouzes and Posner (2017), an exemplary leader has to be the example for others to follow. Angela stated, “So, one of the things we try to do is model what the expectation is, and that expectation is around building relationships.” Brenda stated,

We make sure that we are modeling for staff the expectation for how we communicate and engage with all our stakeholders. From our front office to our custodians, we expect that every staff member who interacts with a stakeholder is helpful and respectful. This helps to build positive relationships between the home and school.

All the participants shared similar statements about positive interactions and stressed its importance in developing family-school partnerships.

Most of the participants, 6 out of 8, used ClassDojo as a school-wide communication tool, and they actively posted on that platform and shared all school information through that platform. ClassDojo is an online communication platform that teachers and families use to share information (ClassDojo.com). Teachers can share photos, videos, messages, and upload documents. While schools used their school websites and school system’s global call-out system, participants shared they were able to reach more of their families utilizing ClassDojo. The six participants attributed the success of the platform to the fact that families were not required to provide their contact information directly to the school to access the platform. Angela stated,

As a school, we use ClassDojo, which we have found to be more effective than the school system’s call out. With ClassDojo, not only can they connect with



every teacher and get that feedback via text messaging, but the parents opt-in. So, they are not giving us any information, which for my community is a point of contention. Instead, they are keeping their numbers and stuff kind of secret, and then they're just attaching themselves to us, which has been helpful because our school for the second year in a row is at 98% of our families connected.

Parents were provided a link by the teachers, and they connected themselves to the school, allowing parents to maintain their anonymity. Additionally, in this population, phone numbers change frequently or are disconnected. With this web-based resource, even if phones were disconnected or numbers changed, with Wi-Fi parents can still access the platform. This platform also allows for direct messaging between the teacher and the parent. Parents voluntarily connecting demonstrated that parents did want to know what was happening at their child's school and wanted to be informed.

Participants with productive family-school partnerships regularly monitored teachers' communicate with parents. Participants mandated what types of information teachers were to share and the frequency. Teachers shared information that communicated upcoming events, what students were doing in the classroom by uploaded videos and pictures, and what topics students were learning. This type of communication supported Type I Communication and Type 4 Learning at Home (Epstein et al., 2018). The teachers also messaged parents directly if there was specific or private information they needed to share. Parents also messaged the teachers to ask questions or to share information. This supported two-way communication.

Teachers also upload homework assignments, projects, and videos explaining the concepts being taught and providing tips to parents to support learning at home.

Participants stated that while it began as a mandate, by the end of the first year of implementation, the teachers saw the value in utilizing this tool, and they began to require less monitoring to meet the communication expectations. Carol stated at the end of the first year of implementation, they allowed the staff to vote on whether or not they wanted to continue using ClassDojo, and it was a unanimous vote to continue with the program.

Professional development, specifically around cultural awareness was a need identified by 50% of the participants. Participants shared the importance of knowing the community they served and taking the time to learn what made that community unique. Teachers, particularly those from backgrounds dissimilar to the school, required training in cultural awareness to understand how to best communicate with families and to interact with students. Erin stated,

We start off the year with a lot of culture-building activities, letting them know they need to stress that culture-building within their classrooms, and they should also be reaching out to their families to start building that relationship early on.

As teacher's awareness grew, participants observed a shift in the parent concerns that surrounded a lack of communication from their child's teacher.

**Archival school climate data.** Data from archival surveys was used to triangulate the statements provided by the participants. The archival data supported clear expectations and modeling, with an average of 78% of surveyed staff agreeing that the principal effectively communicated their vision and goals for the school. Archival climate

survey data on parent involvement averaged 80% for the eight schools. The analysis of the teacher responses in the sub claim aligned to the principal effectively communicating their vision and goals for the school was 78%. This demonstrated that the majority of the teachers at the principals' schools knew the principals' vision, and this supported the statements made by principals during interviews of leading by example and modeling the expectation.

For the six schools that used Class Dojo as a communication tool, the archival climate survey for parents engaging in their child's education was higher at those six schools utilizing the platform with an average of 78% compared to 39% for the two schools which only used the district communication tools. This indicated this given population required an alternate method to support effective engagement in student learning.

Table 3

*Climate Survey Responses from Staff (Percent of Favorable Responses)*

	The parents of my students are sufficiently engaged in their child's education.	The parents of my students actively support the learning goals for their children.	Most of my students' parents have contacted me a Least once this school year to check on their child's progress.	My school principal effectively communicates his/her vision and goals for the school.
Angela	82	89	81	70
Brenda	60	53	60	100
Carol	91	91	83	65
David	25	44	38	79
Erin	53	65	73	70
Francis	92	89	91	95
Greg	60	64	60	68
Helen	81	92	85	79

Table 4

*Climate Survey Responses from Parents (Percent of Favorable Responses)*

	Parents have the opportunity to give input into their school's decisions	Parents are welcome at the school.	I know how to access information about how my child is performing in school.	I feel that my input into my child's education is valued.	I am kept aware of my child's progress
School 1	82	89	81	86	83
School 2	63	81	73	81	72
School 3	70	80	84	93	83
School 4	79	71	81	93	95
School 5	83	83	63	89	81
School 6	78	71	90	93	95
School 7	85	57	50	100	75
School 8	86	94	88	100	84

**Research Question 2**

The second research question was

RQ2: What are the perspectives of principals serving in low-income, predominantly African American urban schools on how administrative training prepared them to lead teachers in establishing communication and learning at home family-school partnerships as defined by Epstein's school-family-community partnership model?

**Interview data.** The perspectives of the participants were that they did not receive training on leadership specific to family-school partnerships. Erin and Helen stated it was through trial and error that they developed the strategies and approaches they currently use to engage with the community. Angela and Brenda stated they based their current practices as a principal on what they experienced as a classroom teacher. Both participants happened to work in charter schools that had high parent engagement.

However, they found those same approaches were less effective at their current school. For example, Brenda planned a workshop for parents on reading strategies to support their students, and less than 5% of the families came.

Participants needed to get training to become more effective in family-school partnerships. While participants highlighted effective leadership practices, they lacked the knowledge in the area of family-school partnerships to effectively lead teachers in that area. Helen stated:

When I came into the position, all I was told was that the culture needed to be adjusted or that I would have to do a lot of work around culture, but I wasn't given specifics. So I was kind of flying blind and through different interactions to try and figure out what was going on.

Each participant believed parent engagement was critical to the academic success of their students, and they put practices in place to engage families. Three participants specifically captured data around the different methods they used to engage families and then analyzed that data to determine which approaches were most effective. David stated:

I have a team working on taking note of who is participating and seeing what we can do differently in order to get everybody to participate. So for example, if I have my primary night and I am noticing my primary night, I might have like 15 people come out, and the majority is of them are Latino and kids is not an issue, but that is who generally comes out, then I start to look at my teachers who have already said they are only going to do one of these a quarter. So now, let's look at is the problem getting to the schoolhouse? Would it be better if we talked to the

two apartment complexes that we pull from to see if they have a meeting room that they will allow us to use so that now it is more convenient for the families to come?

Brenda stated she attended a workshop presented by Dr. Epstein to develop her skills. While she left motivated by the experience, she faced challenges when returning to her school. Overall, participants lacked training in specific strategies to best engage urban predominately African American families. Participants lost time in trial and error approaches to determine effective approaches for their school.

In summary, effective leadership skill was a key factor in supporting teachers in establishing productive communication and learning at home school partnerships. Participants who had strong leadership around strategic planning, setting clear expectations, and monitoring implementation met with more positive outcomes. All participants shared challenges in parent participation, specifically in academic events. Participants were beginning to turn to technology and social media in new ways to provide a way for parents to be virtually present. While participants agreed with the importance of engaging families in meaningful ways, there was no preparation provided in this specific area, and participants had to be resourceful and figure things out for themselves.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

According to Patton (2015), maintaining credibility requires a combination of high-quality fieldwork, a knowledgeable researcher, and the integrity of solid qualitative

inquiry. The internal credibility of the study was maintained by following the established methods and procedures. An email requesting consent was sent to all principals meeting the study criteria. Willing principals responded to the email with the words “I consent.” Participants were selected from the school district with which I have stated my affiliation. Data analysis software, NVivo was used to organize the data resulting from the interviews and the archived climate survey. Peer review was used to ensure adherence to the process and prevent bias. Saturation is addressed through the interviewing of 8 principals as well as the review of the district administered climate survey.

### **Transferability**

Transferability of the research is possible by transparency in research protocols and qualitative procedures, which can be replicated in different circumstances by other researchers to continue to study this phenomenon. The goal of transferability in qualitative research is how qualitative studies can apply to broader contexts (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Transferability was established by purposeful random selection across the population to provide a rich participant group. The selection process produced eight participants from Title I, predominately African American schools with over three years of experience at their current schools.

### **Dependability**

Dependability refers to the stability of the data and is described as consistent and stable over time. The methods for achieving dependability were the triangulation and sequencing of methods (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Data were triangulated by utilizing various data sources for the phenomena being examined. In this study, interviews with

school leaders were compared with the data gathered from archival data from the parents and teachers. Transcript reviews were used to ensure the accuracy of interview data, in which interviewees were provided the opportunity to review for accuracy. Interviewees were given the opportunity to provide any corrections to information gathered during the interview. However, no corrections were provided. Triangulation, as described by Patton (2015), was addressed by exploring information from multiple sources. Archival climate surveys were used to triangulate the data provided by the participants.

### **Confirmability**

One goal of confirmability is to acknowledge and explore the ways that our biases and prejudices may affect our interpretations of the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Confirmability was established by the consistent implementation of triangulation strategies and researcher reflexivity processes. While engaged in data collection, I consistently reflected on my personal bias and captured information as literally as possible without interpretation. All interviews were recorded, which helped to maintain the integrity of the information provided by the interviewees. By providing the interviewee the opportunity to review the transcripts of interviews, this also helped to establish confirmability. Validity in qualitative research is the ways the researchers can affirm that the findings are faithful to the participants' experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To ensure validity, the researcher used several methods that met the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability criteria of a trustworthy or valid study.



## Summary

In this study, I explored the leadership actions of principals to lead teachers in developing effective communication and learning at home family-school partnerships. The research questions explored the leadership actions of principals and how the principals developed these approaches or skills. I learned that participants used three main approaches for leading teachers to develop effective communication and learning at home family-school partnerships. Planning and preparation, accountability and monitoring, and communication tools were the three main approaches used by participants to support teachers in developing productive family-school partnerships. Participants also identified a web-based program, ClassDojo, which was most effective in connecting the family in this demographic and the school. In terms of perceptions of principal preparation, the study found that participants did not feel there were provided specific training to support them in this work. Participants had to rely on past experiences as teachers or assistant principals and use trial and error to develop effective strategies to support teachers and to build effective partnerships with families. In Chapter 5, I provide a deeper discussion of the findings of this study. The limitations of the study and researcher recommendations are further discussed.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the leadership actions of principals in urban, predominately African American low-income schools that support teachers establishing productive communication and learning at home through family-school partnerships. I conducted the study to uncover the leadership actions of the principal that support teachers in the development of productive family-school partnerships. By acquiring a better understanding of the needs of the principal, district leaders can gain critical insight into ways to provide support to future school principals, as well as identifying specific practices to engage urban low-income African American families in meaningful ways.

I found that principals used three main approaches for leading teachers to develop effective communication and learning at home through family-school partnerships. Modeling, accountability and monitoring, and professional development were the three main approaches used by principals to support teachers. In terms of perceptions of principal preparation, the study found that principals did not feel they were provided specific training to support them in this work. Principals had to rely on past experiences as teachers or assistant principals and use trial and error to develop effective strategies to support teachers and to build effective partnerships with families.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

In this chapter I discuss in detail conclusions based on the data collected and analyzed through categorizing and theme identification. The conceptual framework for

this study was Epstein's school-family-community partnership model (Epstein et al., 2018).

**Key finding 1.** The leadership actions of the principal are the most significant lever in driving any initiative in the school. In this study, the most beneficial leadership actions that supported teachers to develop productive communication and learning at home family-school partners were planning and preparation, monitoring, and accountability. This information confirms that from Cummins (2015) who stated that the school leader sets the vision of academic success for all students. It is the actions of the school leader that support the effective implementation of any initiative (Green, 2015; Sanders, 2014). The perspectives of school leaders are critical to the actions taken to engage parents. This was evident in the discussions with the school principals that their leadership approaches made the biggest difference.

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**Key finding 2.** Principals in urban, predominately African American schools struggle to determine the most effective ways to engage the families. This confirms the need for principals to receive training on effective strategies to use with the families. Through trial and error and talking with their colleagues, principals were eventually able to discover a tool, ClassDojo, that was effective with their population. Due to their leadership skills, once they identified a useful method that allowed them to engage with more of their community, they were able to use their leadership skills to implement the program. While principals have effectively improved communication with families and are providing information to support learning at home, they are not confident this is leading to increased academic outcomes for their students.

Research indicated that strong family and school relationships could lead to improved outcomes for students (Erdener, 2016; Evans, 2018; Watson & Logotech, 2015). Principals expressed that while they found a tool that increased the communication with families and that families were very responsive, they continued to struggle to get their African American families to attend trainings and workshops in person. Some principals shared how they were beginning to use technology, for example, Facebook Live, to provide trainings to parents where they don't have to attend the building physically.

### **Limitations of the Study**

A limitation of this study was the sample size of the study. While the study was within the target range of participants, a qualitative research methodology uses a small sample size. Due to the amount of data that is included in this type of analysis, a small

sample size is suggested (Rahman, 2016). To address this limitation, purposeful sampling was used to recruit the participants of the study.

A second limitation to the study was not being able to get parents' perspectives on which actions of the leader contributed to improved two-way communication with the school and what specific learning at home supports they found most useful in supporting their child. While the school shared information to support learning at home, how this information is used was not within the scope of this study. This study could be duplicated with widened scope to include student achievement data to see if the actions of the school leader are contributing to increased academic gains for students.

### **Recommendations**

One recommendation for future studies is to expand the scope of the study to include academic data. The purpose of effective family-school partnerships is to improve academic outcomes for students. It is recommended to use the assessment data to help identify which methods are supporting improved outcomes for students. The schools in this study are beginning to explore how they can expand the current platform they are using to provide workshops and parent training opportunities to better help families support learning at home.

Another recommendation is to conduct interviews with parents and teachers to further explore their perspectives on those leadership actions that have been most effective in developing effective family-school partnerships. During these interviews, perspectives on the needs of the families can also be explored to provide a deeper

understanding as to what strategies or activities schools need to implement to better support the families in these urban communities.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study supported that leadership actions are key to implementing any strategy in a school. In this study, modeling the expectation, monitoring, accountability, and professional development were the leadership actions used by principals to support their teachers in developing effective communication and learning at home through family-school partnerships. This study found that while schools had found an effective tool to engage with parents, they determined this through trial and error, and they still have not developed an effective way to engage parents in content-based activities at the school. For urban school systems, this means that more training and research is needed to provide principals the appropriate strategies to support families.

### **Social Change at the Organizational Level**

It was evident that the principals had taken leadership actions, but they lacked the appropriate strategies. To be strategic and to maximize the time the school principal is spending on trial and error, a clear family engagement plan developed at the district level can provide principals with a starting point. This plan can be developed based on the methods collected from other school principals that have been proven effective. This district-level focus on providing a compiled list of recommendations will allow school principals to focus their time on successful implementation. Schools can compile information based on what they have found to work with urban, predominantly African American communities.

The results of the study indicate principals placed value in engaging families with the school, but they lacked knowledge on the approaches best suited for the communities they served. Principals in urban, predominately African American communities communicated the need to have approaches that are tailored to the needs of the community. Principals indicated they used trial and error to determine the most effective approaches. Potential changes in the organization focused on specific approaches for specific communities would lead to greater academic outcomes for schools. This strategic and specific approach would provide schools with the strategies to best engage families in ways that support the academic outcome of their children without principals losing time in trial and error.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the leadership actions of principals in urban, predominately African American low-income schools that support teachers establishing productive communication and learning at home via family-school partnerships. Through interviews with school leaders and review of archival climate survey data, I gleaned insight into approaches and leadership skills that support productive family-school partnerships. At the center of school improvement are the leadership skills of the principal. Setting a clear vision, having a clear plan, modeling, and holding teachers accountable was a theme across all principals. The need that emerged is around approaches most effective with urban, predominately African American communities. The principals in this demographic continue to struggle to engage families in academic activities provided by the school to support learning at

home. Schools have found a tool that connects the family with the school and provides effective communication of information families can use at home.



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## Appendix: Interview Guide

Date:  
 Time:  
 Interviewee Code #:  
 Location of Interview:

Parts of the Interview	Interview Questions and Notes
Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hi, my name is            Thank you very much for participating in this interview today. As you know, the purpose of this interview is to explore the leadership actions of principals that lead teachers to establish effective communication and learning at home family-school partnerships. This should last about 30-40 minutes. After the interview, I will be examining your answers for data analysis purposes. However, I will not identify you in my documents, and no one will be able to identify you with your answers. You can choose to stop this interview at any time. Also, I need to let you know that this interview will be recorded for transcription purposes.</li> <li>• Do you have any questions?</li> <li>• Are you ready to begin?</li> </ul>
Question 1	<p>How do you support your teachers in developing productive communication and learning at home family-school partnerships?</p> <p>Probing Questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How did you determine the needs of the teachers?</li> <li>2. How do you perceive the families have responded?</li> <li>3. How would you describe the importance of family engagement in the success of the school?</li> </ol>
Question 2	How well prepared did you feel you were

	<p>to lead teachers in establishing communication and learning at home family-school partnership in a low-income, predominantly African American urban school?</p> <p>Probing Questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Where or how did you receive training to prepare you for leadership in this type of school?</li> <li>2. What has been the most challenging part?</li> <li>3. What training would have been beneficial to you in this role?</li> </ol>
Question 3	<p>What leadership actions have been the most successful in establishing communication and learning at home?</p> <p>Probing Questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How did you learn this approach?</li> <li>2. Have you found the same actions effective with all families? All teachers?</li> </ol>
Close	<p>Thank you for your answers. Do you have anything else you'd like to share?</p> <p>Do you have any questions for me?</p> <p>Thank you for your time, goodbye.</p>