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# The Role of the Elementary Principal in Building Relational Trust with Low-Income Families

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THE ROLE OF THE ELEMENTARY PRINCIPAL IN BUILDING RELATIONAL  
TRUST WITH LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

by

AMY W. MCCLURE

(Under the Direction of Teri Denlea Melton)

ABSTRACT

Students in schools across the country are failing to meet academic standards. School leaders are responsible for solving the problem and must search for ways to help all students learn and improve academic achievement. Although copious studies have been devoted to exploring the benefits of and barriers to family involvement and engagement in schools, very few have deconstructed the direct role of principals in family involvement in school. The purpose of this study was to explore how elementary principals in low income, elementary schools in the southeastern U.S. use elements of relational trust in family involvement efforts. Grounded in cultural study and critical theory research traditions, and informed by symbolic interactionism, the study was guided by an overarching question and was supported by three sub-questions. After a thorough review of relevant literature including the topics of family involvement, trust, and leadership practices, a phenomenological study was conducted to answer the research questions focused on the perceptions of current principals of low income, Red Carpet award winning elementary schools in South Carolina regarding their role in building trust with families. The study consisted of conducting face-to-face interviews of ten (10) purposefully sampled participants using a structured interview protocol consisting of fifteen (15) questions and review of artifacts. Thorough and extensive analysis of the data revealed themes and sub themes. Principal perceptions provided thick, rich descriptions allowing the researcher to support the goals of the study. Principals defined family-school trust as providing a safe comfortable place that is inclusive of all stakeholders and inspires a sense of confidence in the principal and school. Principals held the following beliefs: trust plays an important role in family school trust; certain strategies are the most productive for working with low income families to build trust and improve involvement; competently acting in the best interest of families and having high academic expectations demonstrates leadership best practices; and finally, principals believe they have a moral imperative to ensure that children in their care are receiving the quality education they deserve. Recommendations include suggestions for future research in the area of the principals' role in trust building for family involvement.

INDEX WORDS: Trust, Family involvement, Elementary principal, Red carpet schools, Low income

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## DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my children Heather & Brad Wilson. I have been in school practically your whole lives. It has all been for you. To my husband, Derek: Your help with all of the things I couldn't do while pursuing this has been invaluable. We have been through a lot and we keep hanging on. Lub!

To my parents you have always believed in me and you instilled a strong work ethic I am grateful for. I love you both!

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### General Introduction

*The school is often discussed in terms of its relationship to the community, suggesting that the school is something apart from community. In fact, the school exists within a mosaic of overlapping communities and is, in itself, capable of functioning as a community. At the root, members of the school community assume responsibility for one another. Those children become our children, and parents are not external agents but full partners in the education of their children and of each other's children.*

Sam Redding and Lori G. Thomas (vii)

The value of family involvement in a child's overall growth and development is widely accepted and has been studied empirically for decades (Sheldon, 2003). Evidence has also shown that family involvement in a child's education leads to improved academic outcomes (Epstein, 1985; Henderson & Mapp 2002). Schools in low income communities are struggling to bring students to the same academic standards as their more affluent peers (Dryfoos, 2008; Goddard, Salloum, & Berebitsky, 2009). In recent years, educational reform efforts seeking specifically to reach children in low income communities have resulted in a surge of calls for "parental involvement" in education (Mattingly, Prislín, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2002; Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009).

Family involvement has been defined in many ways, is used interchangeably with the phrase *parental involvement*, and has evolved over time (Ferguson, Ramos, Rudo, & Wood, 2008). According to recent literature, family involvement goes beyond individual family members' direct participation in events within school to include family circumstances that lead up to involvement decisions, as well as relationships families

have with others in the school (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004). Even though much is known about the value of family involvement, efforts to more adequately involve families are often stymied by conflicting priorities, budget problems, or inconvenience (Ferguson, Ramos, Rudo, & Wood, 2008). On the other hand, successful family involvement practices direct energy toward giving families the explicit knowledge and procedural insight needed to navigate the educational system for their benefit (Caspe & Lopez, 2006; Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2007; Glick & Hohman-Marrott, 2007).

Typical in-school family involvement policies and programs are geared toward school-based activities and what individual parents can do to support their own child's learning at home (Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009). This can lead to misunderstandings and mistrust between families and schools when parents who are not "visible" to school staff are assumed to be uninvolved (Goddard, Salloum, & Berebitsky, 2009; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Utilizing a collective approach to family involvement through building relationships rather than an individual, more school-centered activity-based approach found in traditional forms of involvement is needed when working with low income families (Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Henderson, & Mapp, 2002; Sanders & Harvey, 2002). For family involvement efforts to be effective, however, stakeholders must not only be aware that trust is important, they must explicitly confront misconceptions and actively seek to ameliorate the conditions that foster distrust between schools and families (Quiocho & Daoud, 2006; Resto & Alston, 2006). Trusting relationships are the "glue" between families and schools in low income areas and help to build trust and cooperation needed for the rigorous work of educating children

(Tschannen-Moran 2004). Relational power or the ability to get things “done” collectively on behalf of children is critical in schools (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). School principals serve as the gatekeeper to relationships within schools; therefore, they have the power and resources to develop trusting relationships with families in order to increase family involvement.

### **Family Involvement**

Families can tell when their input and presence is welcome and when it is not. They also easily recognize when programs and initiatives are intended to benefit them (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004). School cultures may promote the idea that teachers are independent professionals loyal only to the district or state, thereby further separating them from the families of the students they serve (Jeynes, 2010). Conventional family involvement practices are typically designed to reinforce the school’s agenda rather than create bridges to the community (Auerbach, 2009). Educators rarely think about the connection between taxes and other support parents provide to indirectly pay school salaries. However unnerving it may be to some, educators should have a “customer friendly” attitude toward families (Jeynes).

With open communication and many informal opportunities to build relationships (Smith, 2006) the understanding of families by administrators is increased. Educators must encourage a definition of family involvement that recognizes a broad array of parental behaviors intended to support academic success (Auerbach, 2004). Even with the best of intentions, educators must also realize some parents will remain disconnected from the school. This realization may lead to less judgment of parents for a perceived lack of involvement. Middle-class educators must also assess community needs prior to

creating and implementing practices intended to increase family involvement and build trust (Adams, Forsyth, & Mitchell, 2009).

### **Trust**

Trust has been linked to student achievement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001), leadership success (Bennis 1989), and sound, healthy interpersonal relationships in schools (Hoy, Tarter, & Witkoskie, 1992). It is human nature to care the most about the things we cannot take care of without help, such as our life, reputation, or children (Baier, 1986). Therefore, we must frequently put the things we value the most at risk of harm from people in positions of power. In the case of children, we send them to school to be taken care of and to receive an education from adults who we may or may not explicitly trust (Tshannen-Moran, 2004).

We may have no choice but to continue to rely on another. According to Baier (1986), reliance on others can still remain although trust is gone. Trust of any particular form is made more likely, in adults, if there is a climate of trust. Prior experience and cultural norms affect one's ability to trust. The more far-reaching the power of the trusted, the more ambiguous it will be to determine whether trust has been violated.

Lewis and Weigert (1985) viewed trust through a sociological lens. They found that trust is unique to groups, not individuals, and implies interaction and relations among people that are based on the expectation each social interaction will have a defined beginning and end. Further, according to the authors, trust reduces complexity by removing the need for constant calculations about others' intentions whereas distrust creates suspicion which also lessens complexity by prescribing different actions such as monitoring and implementing defense mechanisms. There is no perfect defense against

distrust however. Eventually, Lewis and Weigert also found, group members either gain knowledge after a period of suspicion leading to trust or they realign themselves toward the new norm which leads to some form of trust.

As schools can be thought of as social networks (Adams, Forsyth, & Mitchell, 2009), families must be thought of as vital partners in the network, not outsiders. Bringing families into the core operating sphere of the school requires careful bridging efforts initiated by the school (Bradshaw, 1999). However, diversity of perspectives, motives, personalities, and interests present real challenges to authentic school-family partnerships. As Adams, Forsyth, and Mitchell found in their longitudinal study, the structure and ingrained practices of schools combined with modern societal issues create barriers to real collaboration. However, the phenomenon of trust, researchers have begun to realize (Adams & Forsyth, 2009), has shown potential as an antecedent of effective relationships within the school. In other words, trust must come before relationships. In an environment of trust, relationships are sustained and provide the support needed to create interdependent partnerships (Hoy & Kupersmith, 1985). Developing trusting relationships with families creates conditions where fewer formal policies are required to guide behavior (Goddard, Salloum, & Berebitsky, 2009).

### **Principal Leadership**

There are many reasons why any given school may be more or less successful in educating students. Perhaps the most important of these is the school principal (VanVoorhis & Sheldon, 2004). In their longitudinal study of New American Schools the authors found principal leadership was the single most important predictor of implementation of whole-school reform at both the teacher and school levels. The study



also suggested that school leadership helps set the tone for the development of school programs of family and community involvement in student education because principals hold the key to initiating programs and processes. Consistent with other scholars, (e.g., Hallam & Matthews, 2008; Louis, 2006), VanVoorhis and Sheldon found that the principal can enlist school community support, earmark funds for specific priorities, and provide time for teams of teachers, parents, and community members to meet, plan, and evaluate their family involvement actions (Hallam & Matthews, 2008; Louis, 2006). The importance of the above mentioned actions cannot be understated. If the principal does not utilize his/her leadership capacity to create the actions and structures needed, family involvement will not occur in meaningful ways (Auerbach). Sometimes principals have views and perceptions that inhibit their ability to create a context for family involvement. Flessa (2008) found that principals who rely on a deficit model of family involvement tend to focus on what families do not do. They blame parents when students do not meet performance targets or behave in ways that coincide with school mores instead of examining school practices and capacity to engage and encourage families to become more involved. Principals must overcome the tendency to blame families for student achievement gaps and get to the real business of building trust with families to strengthen family-school relationships that may lead to greater involvement (Kim, 2009) and ultimately student success (Auerbach, 2009).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Students in schools across the country are failing to meet academic standards. School leaders are responsible for solving the problem and must search for ways to help all students learn and improve academic achievement. Although copious studies have

been devoted to exploring the benefits of and barriers to family involvement and engagement in schools, very few have deconstructed the direct role of principals in family involvement in school. Even less is known about the role of elementary principals in relational trust building to increase family involvement as a solution to student achievement problems. Previous studies of the role of principals in trust building have been concentrated in mid-western and northern states; there is little evidence to support trust building as a strategy to improve family involvement practices in other contexts. The researcher has been unable to locate any studies that address this construct in the southeast. Grounded in cultural study and critical theory research traditions, and informed by symbolic interactionism, the purpose of this study was to explore how elementary principals in low income, elementary schools in the southeastern U.S. use elements of relational trust in family involvement efforts. Based on seminal work reported in prior large scale studies, certain school characteristics facilitate the type of relationships needed to improve relationships to increase family involvement. South Carolina (SC) Red Carpet Schools have been identified as family friendly and, therefore, were chosen to include as a study focus.

### **Research Questions**

Family involvement in school has been linked to student academic success. In addition, principals have been found to have considerable influence over the conditions needed within schools to enhance family involvement in schools. Studies have also been conducted that link trust and leadership in schools in the Midwest and northern U.S. However, what was not known is how principals in low income schools in the southeastern U.S. use elements of trust to develop and maintain family involvement in

schools to improve student academic success. Therefore, this study was designed to answer the following overarching question:

How do elementary principals of low income schools use elements of trust to guide their leadership practices in family involvement efforts?

The following sub-questions served to assist in answering the overarching question.

1. How do elementary principals define family-school trust?
2. How do elementary principals perceive the role of trust in family-school involvement?
3. What strategies do elementary principals use to develop and maintain family-school trust in order to improve family involvement?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The study was planned to show connections between how principals function as leaders with their constituency: low income families and a context, low income elementary schools in South Carolina (SC), to increase trust in their schools. Specifically, the study examined how principals practiced the five elements of relational trust defined by Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (1998; 2000) as benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness, and how those elements overlapped with considerations of trust, defined by Bryk and Schneider (2002) as respect, competence, personal regard for others and integrity in order to build trust with families for the purpose of increasing family involvement in low income schools.

### **Significance of the Study**

The concept of trust building as a strategy to promote family involvement has been studied and found effective before; however, previous studies on the relationship

between trust and schools have been confined to mid-western and northern contexts. Poverty is growing among families and school children in the southeast, and therefore the number of low income children entering public schools, is increasing. Since improving family involvement in low income schools has been proven as an effective strategy in improving student achievement, this study of increasing family involvement among this population is important because there is little evidence to support trust building as a strategy in family involvement practices in this context. Further, many low income South Carolina (SC) Red Carpet schools have earned awards for family-friendly practices; yet, no studies have been conducted to explore what principals in these schools do specifically to improve family involvement. Determining how principals in low income SC Red Carpet Schools perceive the role of family involvement and their own leadership practices in regard to improving family involvement will yield insight for other practitioners in the field and direction for future research.

### **Autobiographical Background**

As a former low income single parent who struggled to navigate the complexities of school interactions on behalf of her children, the researcher has a special interest in studying the interactions between principals and low income parents that influence involvement in public school. As an aspiring principal, it is the belief of the researcher that this study will yield greater insight for current and other aspiring leaders to build more meaningful relationships with families, ultimately creating more equitable opportunities for low income families to become more involved in their children's education. Finally, it was also a goal of this study to contribute to the professional

literature by providing an expanded view of the importance of building trust for family involvement to practicing principals.

### **Procedures**

This qualitative study met the criteria recommended by Yin (2009) in that the overarching research question and sub questions employed “how” questions to explain a present circumstance: How current elementary school principals build trust in family involvement efforts. Therefore, the researcher was the key instrument using a case study approach via structured face-to-face interviews to conduct an in-depth exploration of principals’ perspectives on their role in relational trust building for improving family involvement.

After approval from the research committee, the Georgia Southern University Institutional Review Board (IRB), and participating school system gatekeepers, two participants were contacted to review the interview questions in a pilot study. Participants were asked interview questions to assess the feasibility of the protocol questions and to assess whether the data collected was suitable to answer the research questions. Following the conclusion of the pilot study, a purposive criterion-based sample of principals was selected from the remaining members of the population. All principals who met the criteria for inclusion who were willing and able to participate were accepted. The researcher attempted to sample the full number of remaining principals up to the maximum of fourteen with a minimum of five to establish face validity of the interview questions. In all, ten participants agreed to be interviewed and provide artifacts such as memos, handbooks, and Red Carpet rubrics for the study therefore, ten participants were interviewed using the protocol.

## **Data Collection**

After obtaining signed informed consent documents from participants, structured, audio taped, face-to-face interviews comprised of questions derived from the review of literature and designed to answer the research questions were conducted (see Appendix C). Artifacts such as memos, flyers, handbooks, and Red Carpet rubrics were reviewed as well. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of participants and confidential information yielded during the interview and artifact review process. The researcher also captured thoughts during the interview on printed copies of the interview protocol document for reflective review following each interview. Detailed, or thick, descriptions collected through case study provided the impetus for careful analysis (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007).

## **Data Analysis**

Following the completion of interviews and artifact review, a professional transcriptionist was employed to accurately transcribe the data. A third party confidentiality agreement was signed by the transcriptionist and retained by the researcher for documentation. All records have been secured. The analytic strategy for the study was generative in nature; a constant comparative phenomenological method was utilized (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). The researcher compared across categories as incidents were recorded and classified. Constant scanning during the initial analysis revealed new typologies and relationships (Goetz & LeCompte, 1981). A preliminary coding list was developed based on the literature review and was refined as coding progressed.

### **Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions**

The limitations of this qualitative study involved conditions beyond the researchers' control, and are as follows: The study was conducted in a particular region of the southeast; therefore, results may not be generalizable to other locations or contexts. However, results may be transferrable; the researcher addressed this by providing descriptive contextual details and direct quotes to support findings so the reader may determine transferability for him/herself. Additionally, a limitation may have been that some schools could have scored higher on the Red Carpet Schools rating rubric than others; thereby, indicating more inclination toward family involvement than others. Red Carpet award rubrics were requested from participants (see AppendixF) once the exact participants were identified and consent to participate was obtained. Further limitations included possible principal bias toward or against family involvement in education and honesty in describing practices to involve low income families.

Delimitations or conditions chosen and controllable by the researcher are also applicable to the proposed study. The study was delimited by the selected population, criteria for selection, and the focus of the study. Only participants with two or more years experience as a principal those who were principals of Title I, Red Carpet award winning elementary schools at the time of study were selected. Further, the researcher was not interested in discrete measures of family involvement described in traditional ways. Rather, interest was directed to the subtle, everyday interactions between elementary school principals and low-income families.

The study was predicated upon certain assumptions. The researcher believes that principals have good intentions toward all families and families are most often doing the

best they can to participate in their children's experiences at a given moment in time. Also the researcher assumed that participants understood the terms and constructs and was being open and honest when answering interview questions. Further, it was assumed Red Carpet schools all met minimum criteria for selection, and were functioning at similar levels organizationally prior to the award. Finally, it was assumed the instruments measured what was intended.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Cultural Capital:* Cultural capital explains differences in social positions and exchanges that occur when interpreting signals used within cultures for social and cultural exclusion (Bourdieu, 1977). For the purpose of this study, cultural capital will be defined as the degree to which parents access and use resources conducive to protecting their interests in their children's education.

*Family Involvement:* Family involvement refers to what parents and extended family members do within the school environment to foster educational experiences based on school generated goals (Epstein, 1985; 2005). The terms parent and family involvement are used interchangeably in the literature; however, family involvement takes into account the variety of family structures evident in modern schools and the processes families use to decide to become involved (Hoover-Dempsey, et.al, 2005). For the purpose of this study, family involvement will be defined as in and out of school activities and processes parents and adult caregivers participate in to encourage their children's academic goals.

*Red Carpet Schools:* Red Carpet Schools are schools in South Carolina that have won awards for being family-friendly. These schools demonstrate the characteristics of



friendliness, understanding, empathy, fairness, control, providing options and alternatives, and providing information.

*Title I:* The term Title I refers to a large federal program designed to provide funding and resources to schools with high rates of poverty--those with child poverty rates above 40%. For the purpose of this study, Title I will be used interchangeably with low-income schools.

*Trust:* The term trust is multifaceted and varies based on context. For the purpose of this study, trust is derived directly from work on trust in schools and is defined as one's willingness to be vulnerable to another based on the confidence that the other is benevolent, honest, open, reliable, and competent (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998; 2000; Tschannen-Moran, 2004).

### **Chapter Summary**

It is widely known that children benefit from family involvement in school, and much is known about barriers to traditional parent involvement in schools. Families are essential to learning. Learning takes place within a larger societal construct where multiple factors come to bear. It is also widely accepted that principals are primary school leaders. The school principal is in a pivotal position to change perceptions and create a fundamental paradigm shift in family involvement. What is not well known is the extent to which elementary principals of low income schools can impact family decision making regarding their involvement in their children's education. The purpose of this study was to explore how elementary school principals of low income schools used elements of relational trust to enhance family involvement.

A purposeful sample was utilized. Elementary principals of low-income Red Carpet Schools in South Carolina (SC) were interviewed. Following a pilot study, structured, taped, face-to-face interviews comprised of questions derived from the review of literature and designed to answer the research questions were conducted with ten invited principals. In addition to interviews, internal artifacts such as memos and handbooks along with external artifacts such as state report card data and parent satisfaction rating data were reviewed. Detailed, or thick, descriptions collected through case study were analyzed using constant comparative phenomenological analysis.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

#### **General Introduction**

Chapter II sets the stage for literature reviewed in preparation for the proposed study. For the purpose of this dissertation, three strands of research inform Chapter II: family involvement; trust; and, principal leadership. First, family involvement is introduced by defining the context of family involvement for the purpose of this study. Commonly used models of family involvement are explained and the concept of low income family involvement in schools is outlined. Second, trust theory is defined for the purpose of the study and the specific type of trust to be explored, relational trust, is explained. Trust in the context of schools is also reviewed. Third, principal leadership is reviewed as the final prong of the literature needed to justify the proposed study. Leadership is defined and leadership in schools is contextualized. Leadership for building trust, specifically in low income schools is tied to the general definition of leadership and the construct of trust. Leadership for building trust in schools ties the other two components of principal leadership to the larger purpose of the study. Finally, a summary of the major themes distilled from the relevant literature is given.

Decades of research have gleaned reliable information about the benefits of, and barriers to, traditional family involvement in schools (Bouffard & Weiss, 2008; Caspe & Lopez, 2006; Lopez, 2003). Additionally, structured family involvement models have been introduced to describe the construct, function, and capability of involvement along with federal and state legislation (Epstein, 2005; NCES, 2001). Often, schools are unclear about how to unpack the concept of parent and family involvement due to vague

guidelines (Epstein; Sanders & Harvey, 2002). Additionally, societal changes over the last century have created much more weak connections between schools and the neighborhoods they serve (Cohen-Vogel, Goldring, & Smrekar, 2010).

School leaders have continued to struggle with finding a balance between their academic mission and families' needs as economic and social times have become more complex (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey, et.al, 2005). Urban schools are predominantly low income and consist mostly of students of color. Often families in urban low income schools are single parent headed families (NCCP, 2007). Low income schools are facing intense pressure to raise standards and achievement. Family structures have changed, schools serve a much more diverse population, and legislation has increased what is expected of public schools today (Sanders & Harvey, 2002). However, schools do not exist in isolation nor can schools do everything needed to educate students alone (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2006). Organizations as storied as the national PTA have redesigned their standards for family involvement from "what schools should do to involve parents, to what parents, schools, and communities can do *together* to support student success" (Johnson, 2008 p. 34). The role of complementary learning, or how learning happens outside school, and whole-family involvement in learning has come into play since earlier parental involvement programs were introduced (Bouffard & Weiss, 2008).

To address the significance of family involvement in education, scholars have recognized the need to explore alternate views and policies on family involvement to reflect the needs of modern children and schools (Bouffard & Weiss, 2008; Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009). A broader systems approach is necessary to address the

complexity of modern times as well as the need for mutual responsibility for children's learning (Dryfoos, 2008; Gorski, 2008; Rothstien, 2008). More effective than discreet family involvement endeavors, Jeynes (2010) found traits of educators, such as having appropriate expectations, providing positive communication, having the best interest of students and their families at heart, and having mutual respect, to be more important. Principals are a critical piece in the larger puzzle because they influence and maintain the structures and relationships that build trust necessary to increase family involvement in public education (Adams & Forsyth, 2009; Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

### **Family Involvement**

In this section, the literature on family involvement in education is explored by reviewing common definitions of family involvement and framing the significance of family involvement in academic achievement along with opposing views of involvement. Models for family involvement are presented and the concept of low income family involvement in schools is explored to set the context for the proposed study.

#### **Definition of Family Involvement**

While it is commonly accepted that families provide the greatest influence on children's development and learning, part of the difficulty in comparing studies regarding family involvement lies in the use of different definitions among stakeholders and researchers (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004; Epstein, 2005). Beliefs about and expectations for family involvement between schools and families themselves often conflict (Rous, Hallam, Grove, Robinson, & Machara, 2003). Parents tend to have a more community-minded view of family involvement in school that includes keeping their children safe, providing supplies, and making sure they attend school (Bouffard &

Weiss, 2008). Teachers and school staff, on the other hand, may define involvement in more visible ways, such as volunteering in the classroom or helping at school functions (Lawson, 2003). Conventional definitions do not always respect the diversity present in contemporary family structures. Families may include two parent households, single parent households, guardians, siblings, grandparents, and/or other family caregivers (Borg & Mayo, 2001); hence, the use of the term “family involvement” which is used interchangeably with “parental involvement” in the literature, and often is the preferred terminology. Following decades of research on specific programs and practices, the importance of family involvement in education continues to be supported (Auerbach, 2007; Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010). New evidence has also emerged to suggest that subtle aspects of family involvement such as parenting style, family expectations, and the quality of parent-child communication may be more influential in student achievement than more blatant acts of involvement (Adams & Forsyth, 2009; Jeynes, 2010).

### **Significance of Family Involvement**

Underscoring the importance many Americans place on family involvement in education, federal educational policy legislation reveals years of attempts to increase family involvement as a school improvement strategy (Bouffard & Weiss, 2008; Chavkin, 1998). In fact, according to Domina (2005), parental involvement initiatives were included in the Reagan administration's 1986 Goals 2000: Educate America Act and in the Clinton administration's 1996 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. An additional condition was added in 1996, underscoring the significance of family involvement that requires the nation's most impoverished schools to spend at

least one percent of their Title I funds to develop family-school "compacts" which are written agreements between schools and families that outline each other's responsibility in educating children. Finally, increasing parental involvement in schools was one of the six themes of the Bush administration's 2002 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). In addition to provisions mentioned above, NCLB (2002) also requires schools to create explicit opportunities for families to become more involved through scheduled teacher conferences, progress reports, and volunteering, and by providing information on specific ways parents can help their children learn.

States and local schools have also tried to meet federal policy goals by making family involvement more of a priority (Domina, 2005; Mickelson & Smith, 2007). The 2007 Parent and Family Involvement in Education survey by the National Center for Education Statistics showed that nearly all K-12 public schools in the United States engaged in activities to foster parental involvement. While survey data showed 94 percent of parents reported receiving reports about their child's progress, and 91 percent of parents reported receiving written communication about school events, or other general correspondence (Herrold & O'Donnell, 2008), families and educators do not always agree about the extent of efforts taken to improve involvement (Auerbach, 2009; Barajas & Ronkvist, 2007).

The United States has a long standing allegiance to localized public education that presumes community, namely family, involvement in education (Chavkin, 1998; Epstein, 1985; Mickelson & Smith, 2007). Some would argue that this participation is linked to the democratic ideals at the foundation of the country; however, more modern research suggests that efforts to involve families and the extended community have not matched

the efforts of school reformers and leaders (Hiatt-Michael, 2006.) In other words, family involvement endeavors have not been put into authentic practice (Gordon & Louis, 2009). As Gordon and Louis found, competing interests may compound the issue of family involvement as some view families as “outsiders” or visitors to the school environment.

While the intent of legislation, such as NCLB, has been to require schools to create opportunities for family involvement, legislating family involvement does not ensure families will participate in school offerings. Schools must still create conditions to foster family involvement and families must believe their efforts will be well received (Hoover-Dempsey, et.al, 2005).

### **Opposing Views of Family Involvement**

Although it seems intuitive to believe that family involvement positively contributes to the academic achievement of students, inconsistencies abound in the research on family involvement and are related to the wide range of definitions, measurements, and facets of family involvement found in the literature (Fan & Chen, 2001). While literature to support increasing family involvement in education can easily be found (Ferguson, Ramos, Rudo, & Wood, 2008), not everyone agrees with the clarion call. Further, the authors contend, contrary to what is often assumed, more involvement on parents’ part may not always be better for children especially if parents view themselves as lacking the ability to effectively participate in their children’s school experiences or they feel the need to have inordinate control over student school experiences (Casanova, 1996). In those cases, negative results surface. In her exploration of homework practices in a large school district, deCarvalho (2001) suggested evidence



that parent involvement policies and practices result in negative effects such as the perpetuation of discrimination along class, gender, and ethnic lines. Fan and Chen (2001) conducted a meta-analysis to determine the relationship between parental involvement and urban elementary student achievement and found insignificant results, however the authors did not distinguish between studies that examined specific parent involvement intervention and other types of involvement programs. Mattingly, Prislun, McKenzie, Rodriguez, and Kayzar (2002) reported in a research synthesis that parent involvement programs have virtually no influence on academic achievement. The authors conducted a research synthesis of 41 studies of parental involvement intervention programs in K-12 schools that each examined changing parent behaviors. Findings revealed that the programs analyzed offered little empirical support for prior claims that involvement programs are effective. However, the authors did not use a statistical or meta-analytic approach to combine results from studied programs and they included 23 unpublished studies.

The problem with a large number of unpublished studies is that unpublished studies may either have failed to confirm the hypothesis of the researchers or studies may have shown no significant difference (Galvan, 2006). In this case, the authors asserted that parental involvement programs are generally ineffective; therefore, choosing many unpublished studies served to bolster support for their assertion. Another weakness in the review is that although the authors described categorical variables from reviewed studies, such as program description and context, they did not explain their methodology completely and focused only on specific parent intervention programs with outcome

measures of the reported studies. Thus, this study was designed to explore more subtle aspects of family involvement not outcomes.

Contrary to the findings of Mattingly, Prislin, McKenzie, Rodriguez, and Kayzar, Jeynes (2003) conducted a meta-analysis of parent involvement programs in urban secondary schools and found family involvement programs had a positive effect on student achievement. Building on that prior work in secondary schools, Jeynes (2007) expanded his meta-analysis of family involvement programs to include 52 urban elementary schools and corroborated earlier results. Overall, the relationship between family involvement and urban student academic outcomes was about seven tenths to three fourths of a standard deviation. This is close to what Rosnow and Rosenthal (1996) described as a large effect size, which is approximately equal to 0.8, substantiating Jeynes' prior assertions that family involvement efforts are worth pursuing. He further described a new pattern in his most recent meta-analysis regarding the more subtle aspects of family involvement (Jeynes, 2010). Specifically, the author found that for urban students, parenting and family expectations yielded more positive results than more mainstream involvement activities such as checking homework and attending school-initiated functions. Corresponding with Jeynes' work, Pomerantz, Moorman, and Litwack (2007) found naturally occurring, and therefore more subtle, aspects of family involvement show more positive results than specific parent involvement interventions.

Domina (2005) used a repeated measures approach based on an ordinary least-squares regression model to examine data from the children of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 to estimate time-lagged growth models of the effect of several types of parental involvement on scores of elementary school achievement tests and the

Behavioral Problems Index. Although the author's initial findings suggested that concrete parental involvement activities do not independently improve children's learning, he conceded some involvement activities such as advocating for children and holding high academic expectations do prevent behavior problems which may lead to improved academic achievement. This finding is in alignment with Jeynes' work (2003; 2007; 2010) describing the indirect effects of family involvement on student achievement.

While most family involvement is benign and helpful, left out of models such as Epstein's are types of family involvement that have negative consequences for schools and children (Casanova, 1996). Some parents, especially middle class parents, particularly college educated mothers, (McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999) tend to be more knowledgeable about the most beneficial track placements and course options local schools have to offer. They are also more likely to understand how to become included in placement decisions. This is significant because the influence families exercise over the placement of their children in courses and tracks is one way in which middle class parents pass on socioeconomic advantage to their children. Family involvement, in this regard, creates a negative situation whereby a relatively small number of involved or well-connected parents are granted a great deal of control over the organization of the school (Casanova, 1996). Even as track and course placements and demands by a relatively small number of parents presents problems for principals, combating this negative effect can be addressed by finding ways to reach out to all parents and to educate those who do not understand about the importance of a highly demanding curriculum (Ferrara, 2009).

Family involvement is fundamentally a good thing but not if trust in the faculty and principal are absent from the relationship (Adams, Forsyth, & Mitchell, 2009; Fuller, 2008). The professional knowledge and experience of school staff must be respected to allow school leaders to exercise their right to guide the school's course based on that professional expertise. As Casanova (1996) asserted few things in life are better in larger quantities, family involvement included. To avoid negative consequences of over-involved families, school leaders must create bridges between themselves and families because they are dependent on parents to provide resources that affect student performance as well as including support for the tax base (Bradshaw, 1999; Jeynes, 2010). School leaders must also create safeguards against unnecessary interference with the professional decision making of teachers and principals (Hoy & Miskell, 2008).

Another difficulty surrounding family involvement is that educational policy typically frames parents and caregivers in a certain light often as models for others (Nakagawa, 2000). Family involvement policies are often part of a strategy to improve education for children of color and lower income students. When families do not measure up to the school's expectation for family involvement, their children may receive less attention or less commitment from the teacher, thereby reproducing and reinforcing the status quo. (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Nakagawa, 2000). Although family involvement is worthwhile, it cannot and should not supplant other school resources.

Overwhelming empirical evidence (e.g., Fan & Chen, 2001; Ferguson, Ramos, Rudo, & Wood, 2008; Hoover-Dempsey, et.al, 2005; Jeynes, 2003; 2007) and common sense, however, override the relatively small number of negative reports regarding family involvement in education.

## **Models of Family Involvement**

No doubt, family involvement is a complex topic. Families tend to become more involved when they perceive they have the expertise and ability to advocate for their children (Hoover-Dempsey, et.al, 2005), when they feel welcomed in the school (Auerbach, 2007), and when trusting relationships are present (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Goddard, Salloum, & Berebitsky, 2009) yet, families may become resistant if overwhelming demands by the school overshadow families' existing support networks (Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007; Weiss, et al, 2007). In other words, families want to be involved but they do so when it feels comfortable and doable.

Further compounding family involvement issues is the fact that while evidence proving that school-family connections work may come in the form of traditional measures such as student achievement, attendance, or behavior (Epstein, 2005), other evidence that family involvement in education is important may manifest in less tangible ways, such as greater value placed on education, heightened expectations of students, respect for diversity, and more student ownership of their own learning (Ferguson, Ramos, Rudo, & Wood, 2008). Research has shown both traditional and personal measures to be significant in helping families more readily engage in their children's academic lives (Duchesne & Larose, 2007; Juntilla, Vaurus & Laakkonen, 2007).

A multitude of programs, policies, and theories exist to attempt to guide and explain family involvement in education (Epstein, 1985; 1995; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). To this end, many family involvement models have been developed over the years to address the variety of ways schools have attempted to relate with families. One of the most recognizable parent involvement models was created by Joyce Epstein.

Her original work has undergone subsequent revisions to include advice on challenges school leaders face when implementing the model and has formed the basis for national policy (Epstein, 2005; NCES, 2007). Epstein's typology (1996) depicts six categories of action-oriented parent involvement that serves as a framework for schools to use when developing involvement practices to connect schools with families. The six categories of involvement follow with descriptions of each: (1) *parenting*: helping all families to establish home environments to support children as students. Examples include parenting workshops, adult learning courses such as GED training, and home visits; (2) *communicating*: designing effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children's progress. For instance, schools should schedule regular conferences, send regular information such as report cards and newsletters, and offer translators as needed; (3) *volunteering*: recruiting and organizing parent help and support. This might consist of parent staffed phone trees, parent resource rooms, or school volunteer programs; (4) *learning at home*: providing information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning. Sample practices include providing calendars with activities to complete at home, giving grade-level appropriate information about skills needed to be successful and distributing summer learning packets; (5) *decision making*: including parents in school decisions, and developing parent leaders and representatives. School councils, active PTA/PTO organizations, and parent networks would be included; and (6) *collaborating with community*: identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development. Examples include

service learning and providing information on community resources such as mental health to families in the school (Epstein et.al, 2002). While Epstein's model takes into account the work parents do at home to support education, it still leaves schools to determine "what counts" as parent involvement (Jackson & Remillard, 2005).

Another widely known parent involvement model was developed by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) and focuses on the process that leads families to become involved in education. Based on earlier work (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987), the model has been subsequently revised (1997; 2005) yet retains the three original interrelated components. The first is that psychological motivators encourage involvement; in other words, parents must believe they should be involved and that their involvement will benefit the child. The second component is that parents are more involved in their child's education when they perceive invitations to involvement from others. The third is that parents' beliefs about their life context variables allow and enable or prohibit involvement. This means that parents must believe they have both adequate knowledge and skills to help with school success and the time and energy to be involved. In essence, as the authors have suggested, school practices may enable increased family involvement and families' decision making regarding educational involvement is often influenced by others including school staff, and community members.

### **Low Income Family Involvement in Schools**

At first glance, family involvement seems like a simple concept. Research over the past three decades (Epstein, 1985; 1996; Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987) has shown the

value of family involvement in students' academic and social education. However, schools, particularly low income schools, are under the increasing pressure of accountability hardly imagined two decades ago and must be able to show tangible, increasing student achievement results (Johnson, 2008). School principals, especially in low income schools, are under intense pressure to demonstrate instructional leadership to ensure students are learning what is being taught to improving academic achievement (Hallam & Matthews, 2008).

As demographic variables such as socioeconomic status, race, and family status are strong indicators for family involvement (Mattingly, Prislun, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 20002), family characteristics must be taken into account when evaluating family involvement efforts. Knopf and Swick (2008) explained how increasing societal pressure on families has led to less involvement with institutions like church, neighborhood groups, and consequently schools. Family compositions have changed, roles have switched, less time is spent together, and family members are under more pressure to get more education and work more than ever before. Neighborhoods surrounding schools provide the social and cultural networks that connect families to the school and create the rituals, routines, and traditions germane to the school (Marschall & Stolle, 2004). Corresponding with Marschall and Stolle's findings, Cohen-Vogel, Goldring, and Smrekar, (2010) conducted a mixed methods study of the effect of neighborhood context on family involvement in schools. Data from teacher surveys and principal interviews were superimposed on community data. The authors found that family involvement is dependent upon neighborhood context. Family involvement in school has been shown to be more beneficial to children from low-income backgrounds because greater



involvement mitigates the negative impact of neighborhood context (Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007; Sanders, 2001). Family involvement should be a natural complement to schools' efforts to improve student achievement.

Further compounding problems with family involvement in schools, principals and teachers may have negative beliefs about low-income students and their families that lead to discouraging behavior (Lott, 2001). Schools trying to improve family-school relationships may be fighting an uphill battle, according to Lott, because middle class faculty and staff have difficulty acknowledging the privileges enjoyed based on class status. Low-income parents typically receive less friendly interactions and fewer warm welcomes at school than middle-class parents (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004; Barajas & Ronnkvist, 2007). Their ideas are more often rebuffed and they are less able to communicate with the school due to differing experiences and expectations for what the school should do to engage families. Research from low income and lower performing schools (Daly, 2009) suggested that leaders in low income schools in particular must shift their efforts from managing materials and monitoring curriculum to building trusting relationships to facilitate the conditions needed for staff to respond openly when perceived threats such as increasing pressure occur.

Building relationships through actions such as giving specific invitations to school events personalizes school efforts to involve families, however, invitations to school meetings are not enough (McGrath, 2007). Schools may need to find additional ways to engage parents within their own familiar contexts—through churches, neighborhoods, and respecting the needs of diverse families (McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999). For this strategy to work though, school staff and leaders must also appreciate differences in the

ways low-income and minority families may view their relationships with schools. As McGrath and Kuriloff (1999) suggested, educators may be misguided regarding family involvement. Rather than focusing on continuously creating new programs and policies, schools might do better to use their professional expertise, the kind of expertise families most often do not have, to create the structures and opportunities that engage families more fully, thereby encouraging better student academic achievement.

In addition to setting the context for low income schools, the literature on parent and family involvement also links some of the explanation for low levels of involvement in school designed plans with societal and political factors (Ferguson, Ramos, Rudo, & Wood, 2008; Lareau, 2003; Lawson, 2003). As Domina (2005) described, parental-involvement policies are often designed to give disadvantaged children and their families social leverage in the educational system. By shifting cultural and social resources to low income children, greater opportunities should exist for families and schools to network with each other (Lareau). However, even with strong out of school support networks, many families, especially those from low income backgrounds, experience off-putting structures that inhibit involvement in education (Auerbach, 2007; Duschene & Larose, 2007; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007). Nevertheless, others are more persistent despite obstacles and engage in their children's education based on a variety of factors, such as prior experience in educational settings, history of involvement, personal beliefs, and special requests to be involved (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Auerbach; Hoover-Dempsey, et.al, 2005).

Low income parents, particularly African-American parents from disadvantaged communities, are often perceived as minimally involved in schooling and educational

practices and are sometimes referred to as “hard to reach” (Chavkin, 1998; Drummond & Stipek, 2004). While schools cannot “fix” all of the conditions surrounding low income families’ involvement, schools have the resources and influence needed to respond to families’ concerns (Epstein, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey, et.al, 2005).

In low income schools, parents are less likely to be associated with other parents and are more likely to have differences in educational and material resources to be able to relate to school staff equitably (Lareau & Horvat 1999). Parents’ social class influences children’s life experiences within institutions such as public schools (Lareau, 2003). For low income families, parenting practices and cultural logic are often at odds with what they encounter in central institutions such as public schools. Lower income parents have accessed other social institutions evidenced by higher incarceration rates and use of public assistance programs (NCCP, 2007), often with unfavorable results.

Lareau (2003) found that socioeconomic background influences families’ parenting styles and, therefore, their motivation for involvement in schools. According to Lareau, middle class children are a product of *concerted cultivation*, meaning that in middle class families adults consider proper parenting to include providing access to organizations and institutions as consumers; networking and individualization is important. On the other hand, lower income parents are more concerned with *accomplishment of natural growth* with their children; in other words, lower income adults tend to have a more directive style and expect clear boundaries between children and adults.

Minority parents, in particular, have had such a long history of detachment from formal school involvement practices; hence, they must be convinced of the value of

involvement over a period of time (Goddard, Salloum, & Berebitsky, 2009; Spillane, Hallett, & Diamond, 2003). Collins (2001) has described this phenomenon as turning the “flywheel.” This means school leaders in low income communities must keep working incrementally to raise awareness of the importance of family involvement by building trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000) and work to counter cynicism on both the part of families and educators in their charge to build momentum through small victories.

Another reason parent involvement in low income schools continues to be weak is that urban schools have become more disconnected from the public they serve (Ferguson, Ramos, Rudo, & Wood, 2008). Low income parents know their children’s strengths and weaknesses well; however, they often lack the institutional finesse needed to interact with educators from different educational and economic backgrounds (Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009). This presents opportunities for misunderstandings and further leads to isolation. Families are important to their children’s education, yet urban schools often fail to connect extensively or in deeply meaningful ways with families regarding the education of their children (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). However, relationship building can create a sense of community not often found in urban schools to increase shared responsibility for education (Goddard, Salloum, & Berebitsky, 2009).

Even though school staff and families in low income areas may have different backgrounds, families and educators have a shared interest (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001) in the welfare of children; therefore, building relationships should be at the center of active involvement in school life. Effective relationships, built on understanding and trust, allow diverse individuals to form cohesive groups to work collectively for the good

of children to meet agreed upon goals (Adams, Forsyth, & Mitchell, 2009). Moving away from anonymity to more personal and face-to-face relationships between families and schools increases mutual accountability for academic and behavioral outcomes particularly in low income schools (Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009).

In addition to respecting modern family concerns, educators must also shift their thinking of how low income parents are involved in education from a deficit model to a resource model (Gorski, 2008; Lopez, 2003). A deficit model (Borg & Mayo, 2001; Lareau & Horvat, 1999) relies on stereotypes of low income families, such as: poor people are poor due to their own intelligence and moral choices; low income families do not value education as evidenced in their lack of attendance at in-school events; and, low income families are unmotivated to improve their children's academics. On the other hand, a resource model means that families care as much about their children as their more affluent counterparts, and, when given the appropriate opportunities, provide as much support to their children's academics as others (Gorski; Lareau & Horvat). Families are most effectively involved when authentic activities are tied directly to learning and student achievement. Successful schools, like other organizations, employ a relentless focus on results or outcomes instead of activities (Collins, 2001).

Families that are not as connected to their children's schools often share misconceptions about the intentions of faculty and staff, just as faculty and staff often do about families' motivation and involvement or the lack thereof (Casper & Lopez, 2006). In fact, as Anderson and Minke (2007) found, families often rate their involvement in education higher than teachers rate it. Schools and families may not understand each others' rationale, timing, or the positioning of involvement activities resulting in mistrust

(Barajas & Ronnkvist, 2007; McGrath, 2007). Particular attention should be paid to developing better relationships with the families of children most at risk; namely, those students from low income backgrounds (Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2007).

Although researchers have found significant differences between levels of parental involvement between socioeconomic, racial, and status of families, commonalities should be the focus of family involvement efforts (Rous, Hallam, Grove, Robinson, & Machara, 2003). Genuine partnerships with low income families require attending to class and power differences between groups and can be done through relationship building that addresses misconceptions and seeks to build trust (Lopez, 2001; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Traditional involvement programs and activities are important and should not be dismissed; rather, understanding about building relationships with families should be the precursor to programs and activities (Drummond & Stipek, 2004). Without significant relationships, families are unlikely to participate. Successful family involvement programs and policies facilitate connections between families and schools by addressing local family needs, creating a sense of welcome, and extending personal invitations to families (Hoover-Dempsey, et.al., 2005; Sanders & Harvey, 2002). By focusing on commonalities and addressing the more subtle aspects of family involvement such as trust, schools will be able to more effectively involve families to enhance student achievement (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Jeynes, 2010, Tschannen-Moran, 2004).

### **Trust**

“We inhabit a climate of trust as we inhabit an atmosphere and notice it as we notice air, only when it becomes scarce or polluted.”(Baier, 1985)

This section provides an overview of the phenomenon of trust, explores definitions of trust, describes the concept of trust known as relational trust, and illustrates the context of Red Carpet schools as a model for building trust to improve family involvement.

The phenomenon of trust has been studied over the past four decades (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Likert, 1967) and across disciplines including applied psychology (Hoy & Kupersmith, 1985), economics (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2000), organizational theory (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995), cultural theory (Hofstede, 1983; Marschall & Stolle, 2004) and sociology (Lewis & Weigert, 1985).

A recurring theme across disciplines is that trust facilitates the conditions under which certain outcomes are likely to occur (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). Trust is a psychological state that provides a representation of how individuals understand their relationship with another party in situations that involve risk or vulnerability (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). Instead of directly causing risk taking behaviors, trust associations may influence the extent to which motivation for engaging in risk-taking behaviors is likely to lead to risk-taking behaviors (Kochanek, 2005; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). This idea can also explain people's behavior in response to other cues that motivate people's behavior such as work roles, cultural and group norms, and organizations rules (Hoy, Tarter, & Witkoskie, 1992). Trust influences task-related behavior and/or performance via moderation. This means that when trust is present, individuals are more likely to perform as expected. More specifically, trust affects the level and/or type of behavior that individuals engage in as a result of personal motivation based on perceived trust of others

(Lewis & Weigert, 1985). Also, higher levels of trust seem to allow individuals to take more risks that may result in higher overall achievement (Bryk & Schneider, 2003).

### **Definition and Elements of Trust**

Members of an organization must trust others to do what they are supposed to do in order to accomplish group goals. In organizational literature, trust has been defined as making good faith efforts to be honest in negotiations, and to honor commitments (Bradach & Eccles, 1989). As Baier (1986) described, trust is ethical and morally acceptable behavior that is apparent when it is present or broken, yet trust is an obscure term to define (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1999). Rotter (1967) defined trust between individuals as the extent to which people are willing to be vulnerable to others.

Lewis and Weigert (1985) found the phenomenon of trust to include cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions that merge to create the deep assumptions supporting social order. First, trust is based on a cognitive process through which individuals use their perceptions about others and institutions, to determine trustworthiness. Prior experience with the trusted may create amenable conditions for cognitive trust but will not actually create trust. Second, trust contains an affective, or emotional, component that is reciprocal to the cognitive component. The affective base allows powerful emotional attachments to form between group members making it possible for the intense work and investment needed in modern relationships to happen. Finally, human behavior in response to the other two elements of trust creates the third element of trust. This is the practical element that describes the actual social action taken by group members based on trust. Trusting others requires actors to behave confidently,



as though future actions of others were entirely predictable and without risk of negative consequences.

In summary, the three dimensions of trust, defined by Lewis and Weigert (1985), are intertwined and mutually sustaining. In general, cognitive trust specifically limits behavior in the relationship to observable conditions of trust where behavior based on affective trust is likely to be more open-ended and imprecise. As the authors described, trusting behavior is typically motivated by affect, or positive emotions, toward the object of trust, and, by cognition, or perceived good reasons, to trust another.

Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (1998, 2000) have written extensively on the topic of trust and Tschannen-Moran (2004, 2009) has completed more recent work on the topic. The authors blended recurring meanings given by earlier scholars into a commonly recognized multidimensional definition: "Trust is one party's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open" (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000, p. 556). Tschannen-Moran and Hoy described the five elements that determine an individual's willingness to be vulnerable as follows: *benevolence* is a sense of caring and confidence in the intentions or altruism of another; the belief that others will consistently act with the best interests of others at heart. When trust in benevolence is missing, cost manifests in loss of productivity because energy is invested in making mental provisions or alternate plans or assessing available recourse in case of betrayal. Reputations either strengthen high trust or diminish low trust. When trust is high, newer members are encouraged to extend trust regardless of cause to be guarded. *Reliability* is the sense that one can be depended on; predictability combined with caring. *Competence* refers to the ability to perform a

task as expected according to appropriate standards. *Honesty* refers to character, integrity, and authenticity; in other words, one's word can be relied on. Finally, *Openness* indicates vulnerability of information, influence and control and also refers to refraining from gossip or negativity. Whether or not an individual will choose to trust another will depend on the context of the interaction along with the degree of vulnerability required to complete the interaction. Each of these facets combine to create a more complete picture of trust in schools (Tschannen-Moran, 2004; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998; 1999; 2000).

### **Relational Trust**

Schools are dynamic social organizations where participants are mutually dependent on each other to achieve goals. The role of relationships and structural dependences that typify school interactions contribute to feelings of vulnerability (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Both behavioral and philosophical factors contribute to the understanding and perceptions individuals place on existing role responsibilities and expectations of others. Observations about others' behavior along with unfounded beliefs may lead to uncertainty and mistrust. However, as Bryk and Schneider found, a particular type of trust, *relational trust*, works to mediate feelings of mistrust and vulnerability. As the authors described, relational trust is "a recognition of this vulnerability by the superordinate party and a conscious commitment on their part to relieve the uncertainty and unease of the other."

Bryk and Schneider (2002) also further defined relational trust as comprised of three elements: discernment, role relations, and decision making. In other words, individuals in schools rely on trust to discern the intentions of others based on the norms

of interpersonal role relations when making decisions on behalf of children. According to Bryk & Schneider (2002), participants use four criteria to observe and interpret the intentions of others: respect, personal regard, competence in core role, and personal integrity. *Respect* refers to listening genuinely to what each person involved in the context has to say and taking the views of others into account in future actions. *Personal regard* refers to the willingness of parties to go above and beyond job descriptions, and formal requirements. *Competence* in core role refers to the ability of participants to produce agreed upon outcomes. *Personal integrity* refers to the ability to match ones words and actions consistently. This characteristic also involves moral and ethical tenets of work.

To the point, as Bryk and Schneider (2002) described, “Relational trust sustains an ethical imperative among organizational members to advance the best interests of children. Participants in schools with high relational trust enact an interrelated set of obligations with one another. In this regard, relational trust constitutes a moral resource for school improvement.”(p. 34). Effective schools depend on the cooperation of members of the school community (Kochanek, 2005). Families in low income schools are highly dependent on the good intentions of school staff. Due to the hierarchical nature of schools as organizations, it is the duty of the principal to exemplify the characteristics needed to initiate relational trust building efforts needed to decrease vulnerability and encourage others to take risks by becoming involved (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004).

## **Trust in Schools**

Hoy and Kuper-Smith (1985) were pioneers in measuring trust as a psychological phenomenon through their research describing the formation and function of trust as an important social and organizational trait needed in schools. As mentioned in the previous section, research has identified two major types of trust: cognitive and affective (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). In schools, trust is based on interactions with secondary groups, and, is most often cognitive in nature (Fuller, 2008) although both types of trust exist in schools. Cognitive theories, the researchers found, explain trust as rational and economic; individuals decide to be vulnerable to others based on predictions and perceptions of the calculated risk involved and the behavior of the other. Further, according to Fuller, cognitive trust is considered the same as professional trust in the school setting. An example of professional trust in schools is when parents base their perception of trust in the principal on the probability the principal will act in the best interest of their student.

Affective trust, on the other hand, is based on emotion, personal connections, and relationships between parties (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). Individuals involved become vulnerable to others based on attachment. This type is more often associated with family relationships instead of organizational relationships. An example of this in a school setting is when a parent places trust in the principal due to the social relations between members of the school. Another case would involve relationships between teachers on a grade level who interact in a trusting way based on prior experience with each other. In most cases, outsiders to the school rely on a mix of affective and cognitive trust in deciding whether or not to specifically trust the principal (Fuller; Hallam & Matthews, 2008; Lewis & Weigert).

As Goddard, Salloum, and Berebitsky (2009) described, risk is inherent in organized social systems where members must rely on others to act in expected ways over time. Often, rule, and formal structures are used to attempt to regulate actions; however, these attempts often fall flat as the intentions of others are not easily discerned. Therefore, adequate social exchanges are not guaranteed. In social organizations, informal structures such as trust provide better parameters for expected actions and help to provide participants with the attitudes necessary to continue their hard work in educating children. Organizational trust may be improved when trust creates conditions that facilitate positive behaviors, attitudes, greater cooperation, and greater effort toward performance. In other words, trust is an intangible factor that makes the work in an organization possible.

Although trust has been studied through multiple lenses, less is known about the influences of generalized trust and the preconditions for trust among either strangers or those barely acquainted (Marschall & Stolle, 2004). Social trust, according to Tschannen-Moran (2004), has been shown to act as a “lubricant” that facilitates collective problem solving and higher productivity. However, as Marchall and Stolle found, more general trust orientations are influenced by neighborhood context, especially among minorities where fear, suspicion, out-groups, and mistrust of “others” is more likely. The authors also suggested generalized trust, which requires a leap of faith, can be broadened through positive experiences with others from diverse backgrounds. This is significant for the proposed study as the majority of families of students in low-income neighborhoods in the context to be studied are from minority backgrounds (NCES, 2001)

while school principals are automatically part of the middle class due to education and salary level.

Leaders in low income schools must take contextual factors into account and work to build trusting relationships to mediate natural tendencies to distrust among low income families (Kochanek, 2005; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). In schools with higher levels of trust, collaboration is increased, individuals model more acceptable behaviors, faculty are more willing to take risks, academic achievement increases, faculty efficacy increases, and school community members are more flexible and adaptable (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). On the other hand, distrust has been found to increase anxiety, alienation, and lack of involvement in organizational goals (Daly, 2009; Tschannen-Moran). Trust, however, is a reciprocal process that is mutually reinforcing (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran). Schools with high trust levels have been found to be more likely to seek new ideas, reach out to the community, and commit to organizational goals (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). In other words, trust may not have a direct impact on outcomes but may influence conditions that encourage better outcomes (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001).

The concept of trust is being increasingly studied to determine how the phenomenon facilitates school improvement, enhances leadership, and provides the “glue” that holds collaborative efforts in schools together (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Daly & Chrispeels, 2008; Tschannen-Moran, 2001, 2004; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). However, few studies have been conducted to determine whether trust is beneficial to school leaders when leaders face perceived threats such as increasing pressure to improve student achievement and mandates to foster family involvement, especially in low

income schools (Daly, 2009). Understanding the impact of trust on the school environment has become critical as postmodern influences have changed the landscape of collective belief and faith in traditional institutions such as public school (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Policy makers often resort to a “carrot and stick” approach to educational legislation (Daly) intended to solve the larger societal problems facing families and schools today. Unlike any time before in public education, high-stakes accountability and increasing governmental and public pressure to improve has changed the landscape of American public education since the passage of NCLB. Further, as Daly suggested, NCLB is broader in terms of its scope, mandates, and sanctions for noncompliance. Extreme policies such as NCLB create a threatening environment that may diminish trust.

In other organizations, performance may be more habitual based on the standard nature of the work at hand. However, schools are dynamic, organic, and have constantly changing circumstances that require extensive problem solving skills, flexibility and the ability to rapidly build trust when role expectations might not be clear (Stearns, Henderson, & Will, 2005). Researchers have begun to realize how trust is related to student achievement by linking relational trust and boundary spanning efforts of schools to academic press and increased learning by students (Adams, Forsyth, & Mitchell, 2009; Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Context matters in the development of trust in schools.

### **SC Red Carpet Schools**

Some low income schools have been more successful than others at improving student achievement. Bryk and Schneider (2002) conducted a large scale study in Chicago schools that revealed that the major difference, extracting other contextual variables such as SES, was trust between the adults. Schools that intentionally create

structures and policies to encourage benevolent and caring interactions between low income families and schools can compensate for the negative effects of family circumstances (Adams, Forsyth, & Mitchell, 2009). By combining enabling structures with creating conditions that enhance trust, the authors found that schools can do much to improve the achievement of students by building trusting relationships.

According to a definition provided by the South Carolina (SC) Department of Education, (2009), SC Red Carpet Schools are successful at creating family-friendly school environments and providing excellent customer service. These schools are able to successfully meet organizational conditions necessary for the formation of parent-school trust (Adams, Forsyth, & Mitchell 2009). Specific customer service attributes of Red Carpet Schools include: friendliness, understanding and empathy, fairness, control, options and alternatives, and information, which correlate with elements and conditions of trust found to improve achievement in schools (Bryk & Schnieder, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004).

Jeynes (2010) found subtle characteristics of schools like whether or not the principal and staff are caring, supportive, and warm may be more important in encouraging family involvement than specific programs and initiatives. With population growth, widespread anonymity, and more structural differentiation, a greater number of social relationships are based on cognitive trust (Knopf & Swick, 2008). Because outsiders to the school rely on perceptions to determine cognitive trust (Lewis & Weigert, 1985), it is important for schools to create the conditions necessary for good impressions of the school to facilitate the cognitive process. Red Carpet Schools do things outwardly to substitute for prior experience with the school. Whereas primary group relations such



as those in families are normally characterized by high levels of emotional trust, secondary groups, such as the relations found between schools and families, are typified by cognitive trust.

Lewis and Weigert (1985) explained another way of thinking about cognitive trust in secondary groups as system trust. As relationships become more anonymous and therefore more calculated, due to perceived risk, group members depend on system trust to substitute for prior experience and emotional bonds. System trust, according to the authors, is activated by the appearance that everything seems to be in proper order. Families need to feel valued. Compelling overt and implicit efforts such as specific invitations, as well as an inviting environment give parents more confidence to become involved (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Caspe & Lopez, 2006; Hoover-Dempsey, et. al, 2005a).

When trust is low, leaders often try to create a highly structured environment so that trust will neither directly nor indirectly cause negative outcomes (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). While high structure may carry negative associations, in some situations enabling structures (Forsyth, Barnes, & Adams, 2006) such as those found in Red Carpet Schools create the type of structures necessary for a positive environment that may lead to greater trust. The tone and actions of administrators, teachers, and front office staff create the climate of the school. It is immediately apparent upon entering a school what the level of family involvement is and whether the school is more of a fortress or safe haven for families (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). Red Carpet Schools' faculty and staff, including front office staff, project the climate of the school and establish to others whether the school is approachable and receptive or rejecting (Berger, 2008).

The role of the principal is critical in shaping the perceptions of teachers and staff in a school that contribute to the climate of the school (Ferrara, 2009). The first step in encouraging families to become more involved is to create a welcoming school environment that starts with the beliefs and attitudes of the principal and is projected in the demeanor of school staff. Families may be more inclined to become involved when the environment is designed to reduce pressure on families and to increase positive affect toward the school (Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007). Red Carpet schools purposefully set out to create conditions where families feel more positive toward the school by taking steps to make families feel welcome immediately through things such as exhibiting pleasant telephone manners and providing a warm reception by front office staff.

Trust-implying behavior reinforces and perpetuates trust from others (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). Red Carpet Schools take actions to imply trust in families; therefore, families may be more inclined to trust those schools. Elements that influence parental satisfaction with the principal and school come from inside and outside the school (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001). Red Carpet Schools focus on what happens inside the school to make families feel more welcome, thereby enhancing the likelihood families will trust members of the school.

Red Carpet Schools espouse trust building practices by creating certain structures like providing a welcome plan including marked parking spaces, and family handbooks that describe policies, procedures, and resources available to families that project an atmosphere of warmth, openness, and caring (SC Dept. of Education). When schools initiate trust-building interactions, a positive cycle is perpetuated; parents see the school

building trust and begin trusting the school more. Alesina and La Ferrara (2000) examined trust between citizens and various institutions from a national economic perspective. The authors analyzed survey data from the U.S. General Social Survey for the years 1974-1994 using regression models. The five states with the lowest average levels of trust are located in the Southeast; thereby, reinforcing the need to study the phenomenon of trust in this context. Additionally, the researchers linked certain factors such as recent experience of distrust with an individual or institution belonging to a minority group and living in a low income or racially mixed community with a greater likelihood of decreased trust. Further, individuals with low income were found to have the strongest association with low trust. Although the factors noted previously were found to reduce trust, the authors also explained that time and positive experiences can overcome the negative effects associated with distrust.

Family involvement in schools is dynamic and is a product of the relationship between school issues such as culture and principal leadership and family variables like socioeconomic status and prior experience with schooling. Because schools have greater capacity to encourage better family-school relations, principals must take care to remove school imposed barriers to involvement (VanVoorhis & Sheldon, 2004; Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009). Red Carpet Schools use best practices to encourage involvement such as creating open environments, displaying caring attitudes, and developing positive interactions (Kim, 2009). Principals must genuinely respect other forms of involvement besides PTA meetings and school site activities including making time for informal, individualized opportunities (Kim, 2009) to have conversations about student's progress

and potential. This can only happen, however, when families trust the leadership, character, and behavior of the principal.

The principal's support is crucial in creating school cultures that build staff capacity to improve family involvement (Hands, 2005). Principals, according to Hands, have the influence necessary to encourage family-school partnering interactions that may lead to common sentiments about the importance of school and academic persistence. In her qualitative case study of two schools in Ontario and their efforts to create partnerships with the community, the author found that successful partnering efforts depended on school outreach, a focus on achievement outcomes, personal flexibility, compromise, and describing partnership benefits to potential partners. Another key finding from the study consistent with work by other researchers (e.g., Jeynes, 2007; 2010), personal, low-key initial contacts helped smooth the way for future associations between the school and families. This finding supports the use of Red Carpet Schools in the proposed study as those schools seek to provide informal opportunities for positive interaction between schools and families. Families pay attention to the physical symbols schools display like keeping well maintained grounds and welcome banners, and the tone schools use to communicate. Based on program guidelines, Red Carpet Schools are those where leaders have worked to create the appearance that everything is in proper order by taking care with physical symbols used to communicate with families as well as the outward appearance of the school.

## **Principal Leadership**

In this section, leadership is defined and operationalized within a school context. Contemporary definitions of the term leadership are as varied as those involved in leadership. One that is applicable for educational leadership suggests that leadership is a process involving the influence of one over others in a group situation whereby mutually desirable goals are attained (Northouse, 2007). Further, as Northouse found, leadership provides guidance to others, is concerned with the relationship between the leader and followers, and is interactive rather than static or unilateral. Studies of leadership over decades have identified core competencies for effective leadership (Daly, 2009; Daly & Chrispeels, 2005; Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). A successful leader is defined as a competent individual who knows how to create an organizational vision, draw from others' expertise while providing direction for others and uses positive influence to achieve organizational goals (Leithwood & Reihl, 2003; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). According to Hoy, Gage and Tarter (2006), in mindful organizations, the environment cultivates habits of mind that continuously seeks disconfirming evidence to test assumptions. Mindful administrators know that "believing is seeing," and they are always on guard. They are suspicious of facile explanation as well as their own success. An atmosphere of trust is a necessary condition for school mindfulness. Red Carpet Schools mindfully attempt to involve families by creating structures and conditions that lead to trust and consequently, greater involvement.

In addition to providing definitions of leadership, the literature over the past forty years has supported the indirect impact of leadership on student learning through leadership development of school climate and performance expectations that influence

achievement (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). However, all leadership is not equal. A particular type of leadership called leadership for learning is needed for high performance outcomes (Murphy, Elliott, Goldring, & Porter, 2007). School leadership is situational and contextual and is dependent upon school operations and classroom teaching. Further, according to Murphy, Elliott, Goldring, and Porter, leaders in high performing schools keep the best interests of students and their families the quality of student learning at the forefront of all decisions. Expert school leaders effectively connect the school to its families and the community to enhance the learning activities taking place in the school.

The boundaries of any organization regulate the flow of information in and out of the organization and the openness of the organization. According to Bradshaw (1999), business and social science literature describe the role of those who work collaboratively between departments within an organization and agencies outside the organization as “boundary spanners.” When problems extend beyond the boundary of a single organization or department and involve others, solutions require activity across and on the edge of organizational boundaries. Boundary spanners work in the area where these boundaries cross and overlap. In other words, collective problems require collaborative solutions. Student achievement is an issue that requires input from multiple sources; therefore, boundary spanners are needed. In this case, principals are the boundary spanner between the school and families in the community.

Boundary spanners occupy unique positions in organizations, and their access to and control over the distribution of information tends to increase their status (Hiatt-Michael, 2006; Price-Mitchell, 2009). Their position allows influence because they

control the amount of information that enters the organization and who receives it, they can influence the way people in the organization perceive the outside environment.

Boundary spanners gain additional leverage from their ability to choose among activities and to control the information allowed to cross the organizational boundaries. Boundary spanners must be able to perceive and adjust to different settings. Throughout the life of a collaborative effort, boundary spanners communicate frequently within and across organizational boundaries and engage in a variety of activities that may support the new organization, protect their own organizations, or link organizations together (Adams, Forsyth, & Mitchell, 2009; Bradshaw, 1999; Price-Mitchell, 2006).

Related to the concept of boundaries between role groups in schools, Epstein (1995) described the idea of three overlapping spheres of influence on how students learn and grow: the school, the family, and the community. The spheres are pushed apart and drawn together by the actions of people in each context. The boundary spanning role of the principal is critical when collaborative activity focuses on the school. Most principals have had some boundary spanning experience (Kim, 2009). They understand the need to listen, conduct needs assessments, identify resources, build consensus, and develop plans (Reihl, 2000). The principal must have positive attitudes toward collaboration and strong boundary spanning skills to carry out this complex role effectively (Price-Mitchell, 2009). Successful boundary spanners want to improve conditions for their “clients” which, in the case of schools, is their students. Principals must have a vision of where partnerships are headed and should be committed to collaboration as the process for achieving the school’s goals (Sanders & Harvey, 2002).

Successful boundary spanners understand the “outside layers” of their own organizations (Bradshaw, 1999). Specifically, boundary spanning principals have the traits necessary to take the appropriate actions such as monitoring the organizational environment, gathering and analyzing data to identify and better understand the needs of students and their families to make a difference in family involvement. They see connections and commonalities; imagine innovative strategies; are willing to take risks; and recognize resources (Shelden, Angell, Stoner, & Roseland, 2010). However, they do not impose solutions. They have a unique sense of timing yet are not threatened by questions about how schools have traditionally done their work. Finally, effective boundary spanning principals can tolerate role conflict and ambiguity (Auerbach, 2009; Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppeseu, & Easton, 2010). Although the principal’s own boundary spanning activity is critical to the success of complex partnerships, the principal cannot accomplish school goals alone (Resto & Alston, 2006; Smith, 2006).

Collins’ (2001) leadership framework, while primarily describing a business atmosphere, provides useful insight as well into the leadership qualities and actions necessary to propel organizations--including schools--from good-to-great. In particular, he has defined leaders needed in contemporary times as having a blend of personal humility and professional will by using timeless principles. In other words, according to Collins, successful modern leaders have disciplined thought and take disciplined actions to create the culture of discipline necessary for greatness.

Although other factors contribute to the success or failure of a school, leadership is the catalyst. Fully one-quarter of student achievement can be traced directly and indirectly to school leadership; second only to the teacher, school principal leadership has



an impact on student achievement (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Within the complex context of school staffing policies, a barrier exists. The mission is to educate students. However, principals may not always be able to get the best instructional people on the metaphorical “bus” right away (Collins, 2001). Yet, principals can always work to cultivate the right relationships to be the best at family involvement in education. The school level leader influences and guides the focus, vision, and environment of the school. Principals can increase the adaptive capacity of those in their circle of influence through relationships, building skills, and knowledge. The principal identifies and supports learning, structures the social setting, and buffers external demands (Norte, 1999). Although principals are in a unique leadership position, the principal’s role with capacity building in literature is often addressed in an indirect way (Riehl, 2000).

To combat problems facing modern educators, principals should be stewards of their schools providing collegial leadership through problem-solving and caring replacing the outdated elitist images of principals as executives (Sergiovanni, 2001). The role of principal is a moral one tied to serving the purpose of the school and safeguarding the foundational integrity of the school.

The principal must take special care to both understand his/her constituency and nurture relationships with all groups within the school for greater productivity. It is particularly important for principals who are culturally different from their school families to quickly create cognitive or professional trust as they most likely do not have established emotional bonds. In an atmosphere of distrust, communication is inhibited thereby perpetuating the destructive cycle of distrust. This causes disorganization,

minimal performance, and lack of collaboration. Staff members are also less likely to take direction from the principal or support each other (Hallam & Matthews, 2008). Additionally, Hallam and Matthews found, “principals cannot simply check off desirable practices and assume they have built enduring relationships of trust.” (p.232). Instead, principals should create the structures and vision needed (Cosner, 2009) to exhibit self-trust and an atmosphere that promotes openness and sharing.

Another way for principals to balance building trust with the functions of leadership is to continuously be on the lookout for problems (Collins, 2001) and then confront concerns honestly instead of shirking their responsibility by passing the buck or downplaying important issues (Shelden, Angell, Stoner, & Roseland, 2010). Hoy, Gage, and Tarter (2006) described the habit of constant scanning for subtle changes that can cause trouble as mindfulness. Often, as the authors suggested people are so entrenched in their habits and set ways of doing things that they become hypnotized by the minimal success of their routines. More than just being alert, mindful leaders must be in tune with their school and the members of the group to head off potential problems whenever possible before they occur.

Most often principals are the initial contact person linking community influences and school staff experiences; therefore, principals stand as both the gatekeeper and conduit to family involvement in schools through the trusting relationships they build. Principals can be strong visionary leaders by creating processes and structures of governance that include well thought-out role definitions and mutual respect (McCullough, 1999). In other words, the principal creates the foundation for family

involvement by clearly articulating the mission of the school and taking appropriate actions to ensure the vision comes to fruition.

### **Leadership for Building Trust in Schools**

In early work on trust in organizations, Whitener, Horsgaard, and Werner, (1998) found, in addition to risk, opportunism is also inherent in organizations. Individuals within the organization may exhibit self-serving behaviors that are not related to organizational goals. Leaders may minimize this effect by consistently, and in some circumstances preemptively, exercising trustworthy leadership behavior. This includes voluntary actions within the social context of organizational interactions such as sharing information and control and transparent communication that provides subordinates with a type of social capital or reward. Initiating trust necessary to facilitate smooth social exchanges within the organization is incumbent upon the person with the most power. In the case of organizations, this is the leader; in the case of schools, this is the principal.

Fuller (2008) described trust relationships between role sets in school as complicated because the principal serves as a bridge and buffer and they may find themselves in a quandary. They must understand the people they work with well enough to be able to simultaneously build trusting relationships with varied role groups while also realizing that the very differences that are inherent in a school present barriers to trusting relationships. As Murphy, Elliott, Goldring, and Porter (2007) noted, few studies have examined how differences in power, race, or social class impact how trusting relationships in schools are formed. School administrators are often culturally different from their students and parents which is often the cause of distrust. Distrust causes anxiety and takes energy away from the work and mission of school by wasting time and

creativity (Adams, Forsyth, & Mitchell, 2009; Adams & Forsyth, 2009). School principals negotiate the various relationships with stakeholders necessary to run the school. Those relationships are complicated with relevance, friction, and influences. Today's focus on professional learning communities compel the principal to shift from an all-knowing one to mediator of decision making; the principal uses trust as a form of social capital to allow vulnerability when trusting others and enabling a sense of reliability and security when being trusted (Noonan & Walker, 2008).

When trying to gain cooperation from others, leaders often resort to tactics such as coercion or incentives. However, as Kochanek (2005) described, punishment-reward systems only work well when others' intentions are completely known. As Kochanek also explained, several factors make trust in schools different than in other provider-client relationships: unlike other clients, students are compelled by law to attend; teachers are single professionals yet they work with dozens of clients (students) at once; and clients receive the services for free. Therefore, trust relationships in schools are limited by the special organizational properties of schools. However, when students or families do not trust the abilities of the teacher or school, they have few options. One frequently used option is to withdraw cooperation, trust and support (Kochanek, 2005).

Schools combine a complex blend of bureaucratic and professional functions in one organization leading to situations of interdependence and uncertainty (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). To mitigate the inherent risk in such situations, principals have become more pivotal in fostering the trust building process within role groups due to the hierarchical relationships found in schools (Auerbach, 2009; Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Cosner, 2009; McGrath, 2007; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000).

### **Leadership for Building Trust with Families in Low Income Schools**

Although various interests and groups may conflict over family involvement, research suggests that schools, and specifically school leaders, or principals, can bridge between competing groups by developing collaborative structures and working toward involving parents in shared decision making at the school and thus building social capital that leads to trusting relationships (Bradshaw, 1999; Gordon & Louis, 2009). Principals are considered “gatekeepers” and “conduits” between the school and the outside world and can influence the effort the school puts into bridging the span between families and schools when many other factors cannot be controlled (Bradshaw; Cosner, 2009).

Because teachers work as isolated practitioners schools function as groups of “uncoupled associations” (Kochanek, 2005) where members work based on assumptions that others are working to meet organizational goals. However, as Kochanek also illustrated, due to the detached nature of classroom teaching, the only verification available to support work assumptions is by outward behaviors such as keeping students quiet in the halls, or turning paperwork in on time associated with the traditional teaching role. Since everyone in the school may not be performing as expected and traditional roles such as those stated before are typically linked to minimum competence, dependencies across role groups are inherent. For instance, teachers are dependent on other teachers in the previous grade level to adequately prepare students. Families are dependent on teachers to appropriately instruct their students and have their best interests at heart. Therefore trust between groups is important to mediate the vulnerability inherent in schools (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Leadership is critical in developing the trust

necessary to meditate this vulnerability (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010).

Even as trust has been found to be a critical element of organizational culture it is often overlooked because administrators may not want to confront the brutal truth (Louis, 2006). Although small subsets of like-minded individuals in a school may have high relational trust among themselves, many schools have weak levels of relational trust among most of the adults who work in and with them (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001). Furthermore, Louis found, when trust is low change makes school climate more difficult. This is important to consider due to the increasing pressure to create change in schools by legislation such as NCLB. Principals can make the difference in family involvement efforts, however, participatory reforms such as increasing student achievement through increased family involvement calls for a certain kind of leader (Noonan & Walker, 2008).

In their study of secondary principals in Ontario, Lloyd-Smith and Baron (2010) found the principal's outlook regarding family involvement is a pivotal factor in the depth of school-family relations. Results from their case-study research found that while many principals may agree that family involvement is desirable, implementation of appropriate and meaningful roles for families is more challenging. Further, as the authors found, many principals family involvement actions do not match their intentions thereby leading to lower levels of family involvement. Sometimes principals are not willing or are unable to take the necessary steps to promote family involvement in their individual schools. In contrast to Lloyd-Smith and Baron's findings, Griffith (1998) found the success of some elementary principals with family involvement efforts may be due to

having more concrete, defined roles for families both in and out of school. Since elementary principals may be more inclined to encourage family involvement, the proposed study is intended to explore subtle aspects of family involvement in an environment where higher levels of family involvement are likely to exist.

As mentioned previously, principals must rely on others to do the work they are assigned to do to meet academic goals; they cannot be everywhere at once. To be successful in educational reform, principals must be comfortable with distributed leadership while still guiding involvement efforts and sharing attention when efforts are successful and assuming the blame when they are not (Hiatt-Michael, 2006). Much effort at all levels has been devoted to bridging the gap between home and school. Federal, state, and local policies have included increasing family involvement in education as an objective of much educational policy based on decades of research suggesting the benefits of involvement for children. To date, according to Pomerantz, Moorman, and Litwack, (2007) research conducted on parents' involvement in children's education has generally taken the approach of examining the extent to which parents are involved, with more involvement on the part of parents being better for children. Although this is a useful first step, according to the authors, this research has focused on the "why" of family involvement not the "how" and has not taken into account the other more subtle aspects of family involvement in school (Jeynes, 2010).

As mentioned previously, because advancing children's achievement, particularly in low income schools, is the predominant goal of educational policy, the pivotal reason for increasing parents' involvement in children's academic lives has commonly been that of improving children's achievement. This has important implications for both society

and individual children and their families. Higher levels of achievement in school are typically related to greater prospects for pursuing higher education and eventually greater career opportunities that may lead to a higher quality of life for individuals. On the societal level, collectively developing children's academic skills is beneficial for competition on the global stage and continued functioning of society. The importance of and implications for family involvement are important for creating effective interventions to promote involvement. Leaders must understand the "why" and "how" to be successful at improving family involvement in education (Auerbach, 2009; Jeynes, 2010; Kochanek, 2005)

In designing effective family involvement interventions with low income families, leaders must give attention to the types of involvement that yield the most positive results such as involvement that is designed to promote student self-sufficiency (Lareau & Horvat, 1999) such as programs that show families how to help academically. This also includes explicit activities (Epstein, 1985; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997) and structures designed to build trust between home and school (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Jeynes, 2010). Effective family involvement is characterized by actions that increase families positive affect toward their ability to participate and positive beliefs toward their children's potential (Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007). Specifically, low-key strategies, according to the authors that create an environment that focuses on the process of learning rather than only children's performance creates the context for effective family involvement. Finally, Cohen, Smrekar, and Vogel (2001) found that leaders create their perceptions themselves and are not reliant on district policies to guide their family involvement efforts. By itself, this finding suggests that principals, who have a great deal



of influence over the culture of the school, may have a subtle and indirect influence on student achievement by increasing openness and making the school more democratic.

Although findings suggest that principals who are open-minded and have positive perceptions about family involvement are important, these attributes alone are not enough to improve student achievement through increased family involvement (Hiatt-Michael, 2006). Further, while building trust and implementing more democratic decision making processes are needed for successful family involvement, merely creating family involvement structures or being open to family involvement and influence does not necessarily lead to increased student learning (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001). In other words, simply being open to or implementing family involvement programs is not enough; principals perceptions and attitudes must coincide with their family involvement actions that are based on trusting relationships and take into account the context and conditions of the school. This supports the assumption that it is not the structures that make a school democratic but the everyday actions that encourage or discourage the flow of ideas and influence across boundaries are the subtleties that permeate school family interactions (Bradshaw, 1999; Price-Mitchell, 2009).

Many factors affect family involvement in schools including race, income, family size, parent self-efficacy, geographic location of school, educational attainment of parents, and grade level of the child (Fan & Chen, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Marschall & Stolle, 2004). Principals can begin turning the figurative flywheel to improve family involvement regardless of context, as Collins (2001) has described, by creating tangible evidence that their family involvement efforts make sense and by utilizing data on the effectiveness of implementation. The converse is

what has happened in some family involvement practices. Leaders often change course, latching on to fads or what Collins calls “The Doom Loop.” Buildup and momentum fail to happen; therefore, results are disappointing, knee-jerk reactions based on emotion occur, and the cycle repeats itself until stakeholders abandon the situation. Again, educational leaders must understand the physical (tangible variables such as budgets, environment, personnel, and resources) and psychological (perceptions, beliefs, motivations, and feelings) context of leadership (Mitchell & Castle, 2005) to be able to build trust with families in low income schools. In other words school context and local conditions are powerful influences in determining how effective school leaders will be in engaging families in education (Gordon & Seashore-Louis, 2009; Griffith, 2001).

Further, strong support and direction from the principal in family involvement efforts are important to creating the “bridging” or boundary-spanning role needed to form the type of shared decision making between the school and families needed to improve student achievement (Bradshaw, 1999). Griffith (2001) explained that principals who focused on instruction and viewed their role as carrying out the objectives of the extended community were more effective at improving family involvement in low income schools.

Congruent with Griffith, Auerbach (2007) emphasized the fundamental principle of “ownership” in the goals of the school and the education process. She found that principals who feel a sense of ownership in the school and see parents as equal partners were not only able to foster a greater sense of accountability toward the community but were also able to engage parents and community members in the ownership of the school process. Tschannen-Moran (2004) found that when school administrators form the trusting relationships necessary for collaboration between the school and the outside

community, schools and communities share a sense of purpose and exhibit greater levels of trust especially in low income elementary schools. Consequently, where there is greater collaboration between the school and the outside community, there is more outside influence in the school decision-making processes thereby reinforcing the need for a leader with the ability to bridge school and family interests in student achievement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Goddard, Salloum, & Berebitsky, 2009; Tschannen-Moran, 2004).

Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel (2001) found that greater collaboration between the family and school has benefits for families by increasing confidence about their ability to participate and about their lives and their children. The authors also found that school staff members report more positive views about families when greater trust and collaboration occur between families and schools. These findings are consistent with the research that says leaders can and often do play a significant role in the level of parent and community involvement in schools (Adams & Forsyth, 2009; Anderson & Minke, 2007; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Cohen-Vogel Goldring, & Smrekar, 2010; Jeynes, 2010).

### **Chapter Summary**

A significant problem facing schools today is that students across the country are failing to meet academic standards. While copious studies from the past four decades have been devoted to exploring the benefits of and barriers to family involvement and engagement in schools to enhance academic achievement, and the nature of principal leadership in schools, very few have deconstructed the direct role of principals in family involvement in school. Although it is also widely accepted that principals are primary

school leaders responsible for solving the problem of students not meeting academic standards, what is not well known is the extent to which elementary principals of low income schools can impact family decision making regarding their involvement in their children's education. Even less is known about the role of elementary principals in relational trust building to increase family involvement as a solution to student achievement problems. Therefore, based on the review of literature, this study was conducted to explore how elementary school principals of low income schools use elements of relational trust to enhance family involvement.

### **CHAPTER III**

#### **METHODOLOGY**

Students in schools across the country are failing to meet academic standards. School leaders are responsible for solving the problem and must search for ways to help all students learn and to improve academic achievement. Although numerous studies have been devoted to exploring the benefits of and barriers to family involvement and engagement in schools, very few have deconstructed the direct role of principals in family involvement in schools. Even less is known about the role of elementary principals in relational trust building to increase family involvement as a solution to student achievement problems. Previous studies of the role of principals in trust building have been concentrated in mid-western and northern states; there is little evidence to support trust building as a strategy to improve family involvement practices in other contexts. The researcher was unable to locate any studies that address this construct in the southeast. Grounded in cultural study and critical theory research traditions, and informed by symbolic interactionism (Glesne, 2006), the purpose of this study was to explore how elementary principals in low income, elementary schools in the southeast use elements of relational trust in family involvement efforts. Based on seminal work reported in prior large scale studies, certain school characteristics facilitate the type of relationships needed to improve relationships to increase family involvement. South Carolina (SC) Red Carpet Schools have been identified as family friendly and, therefore, were chosen to include as a study focus. The school principal controls much of what goes on in a school and is centered at the hub (Mitchell & Castle, 2005) of school activity and in transforming schools. Principals are responsible for establishing adequate family

involvement practices by creating a clear focus and adequate enabling structures (Hoy & Miskel, 2008) and by fostering a climate of relational trust among groups (Tschannen-Moran, 2004) which leads to improved family involvement. Principals should take the lead in empowering families to feel as though the school works for them instead of feeling threatened. Families will come to see the school as “theirs” (Borg & Mayo, 2001; Kunjufu, 2005). By understanding the process families use to determine their involvement (Hoover-Dempsey, et. al, 2005), building trust (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010), and carefully choosing respectful family involvement activities and policies (Epstein, 2005), principals can more effectively involve families in their children’s educational experiences. Therefore, elementary principals in low income Red Carpet schools were interviewed to determine their perceptions regarding family involvement vis-à-vis relational trust to answer the following research questions.

### **Research Questions**

The study will be designed to answer the following overarching question:

How do elementary principals of low income schools use elements of trust to guide their leadership practices in family involvement efforts?

The following sub-questions served to assist in answering the overarching question.

1. How do elementary principals define family-school trust?
2. How do elementary principals perceive the role of trust in family-school involvement?
3. What strategies do elementary principals use to develop and maintain family-school trust in order to improve family involvement?

## **Research Design**

Qualitative research (Creswell, 2009) allows the researcher to collect data as participants carry out the behaviors being studied in a naturalistic and authentic setting therefore, a qualitative study design was utilized because prior studies regarding trust as a mediator in school-family relations have been quantitative (e.g., Adams, Forsyth, & Mitchell, 2009; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Goddard, Salloum, & Berebitsky, 2009). Case study research, in particular, was used to determine what is behind the empirical data. Further, the study met the criteria recommended by Yin (2009) in that the overarching research question and sub-questions employ “how” questions to explain a present circumstance: How current elementary school principals in low income schools develop and use trust in family involvement efforts. The investigator had no control over the events being studied; the participants control the events within their particular schools. Finally, the focus of the study was a complex social phenomenon within a real life context. Building trust in schools to improve family involvement is a social activity that is subject to the assumptions, personal beliefs, prior experiences, and current emotions of families and school staff.

### **Population, Sample, and Sampling**

The population for the study was elementary principals of South Carolina (SC) Red Carpet schools with at least two years experience as a principal and at least one year of experience in the school prior to receiving the Red Carpet award. Participants were anticipated to respond to requests to participate because they were expected to be proud of the school’s accomplishment in winning the award, and it was anticipated participants

would be eager to share with other schools how they achieve greater success in engaging families.

Red Carpet Schools are doing something right in the area of family involvement. Prior to receiving the award, each Red Carpet School had been independently screened and rated on “family friendly” indicators such as: customer service; creating a sense of welcome; warm school environment; evidence of responding to the needs of parents and community, and effectiveness of response by the school to community and parent needs. These indicators align with criteria from family involvement and trust literature (see Appendix A). To determine this award, a team of observers completed unannounced visits and telephone calls to rate schools. Schools also completed a self-assessment and application. Data on Red Carpet schools is available from the South Carolina (SC) Department of Education website <http://ed.sc.gov>. The demographic of each of the indicated schools is reflective of the population of schools elsewhere in the region. Approximately 44% of all children in the state of SC are low-income (NCCP, 2007), and 51.3% of all public school students in SC receive free and reduced lunch; approximately 34.5% are students of color, which is similar to data for the southern region of the United States in general (NCES, 2007).

Approval from the Institutional Review Board at Georgia Southern University and the supervising committee was obtained. Then, a brief proposal that outlined why the site was chosen and describing the activities planned (Creswell, 2009) were submitted to each district gatekeeper for review and approval prior to undertaking the proposed research. Contact information for elementary school principals was found on district



websites and in employee directories and was obtained after receiving proper approval for contact.

Following the conclusion of the pilot study, a purposive, criterion based sample of ten (10) principals responded and was selected from the remaining members of the population. All principals meeting the criteria for inclusion who were willing and able to participate were accepted. Criteria for inclusion included:

- Elementary school principal
- Is/has been Red Carpet Award recipient in a Title I school
- At least 2 years experience as a principal
- Principal at the school the year before the award was given

The criteria for having two years experience as a principal was chosen because, as Daly (2009) found, new principals to a school site were not able to adequately utilize trust as a leadership resource because they were more focused on concrete role responsibilities. According to Daly, principals should have experience in the role to effectively answer questions about their role in fostering trusting relationships.

Additionally, principals selected must have been in at least their second year as an elementary principal at a Red Carpet School at the time the award was given. Principals in their first year at a Red Carpet school would not have influenced the conditions that led to the award. Finally, elementary principals were chosen to include because principals' perceptions about family involvement are typically more positive among lower grade principals (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel 2001). Principals perceived greater levels of family involvement in the lower grades which provided a justification for studying elementary principal's perceptions of family involvement as those principals are presumed to be

more open to family involvement. School sites selected were identified as a Title I school to meet the low income requirement.

There were fourteen possible participants. The researcher attempted to sample up to the full number of remaining principals following the pilot; at a minimum, five participants could have been selected to establish face validity of the interview questions. Participants meeting selection criteria were invited through an introductory letter that was followed up with telephone calls and e-mails to encourage participation. Interviews were scheduled and conducted with ten (10) participants. Interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the participant during the school day to allow for naturalistic observation and document review prior to or following the interview.

### **Instrumentation**

Elementary school principals are often the first contact families have with the societal institution of public schooling and, therefore, have a unique position as they interact with families more than middle and high school principals (NCES, 2007). Understanding how elementary principals perceive their role in family involvement is important to creating changes in the ways schools involve families. Therefore, the researcher was the key instrument using a case study approach via a structured protocol consisting of face-to-face interviews to conduct an in-depth exploration of principals' perspectives on this construct.

Interview questions (see Appendix C) were presented to two potential participants for review as a pilot study to assess the feasibility of the questions. Individuals responding to the initial pilot study were removed from the population before sampling was conducted for the actual study. Based on the responses from the pilot study, the

following changes were made. Both participants asked for interview question one (1) to be rephrased and to be provided with an example of the term “goodwill.” Therefore, the researcher added the phrase “what does family-school trust mean to you?” to the end of question one (1) and gave an example of what goodwill could include after question four (4) such as a kindness like paying for a family to attend a school carnival or explicitly showing concern by asking students to make cards for a sick family member of a student. The remaining questions were asked in the manner as originally designed.

Instrumentation included an opportunity for triangulation (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007) of the data through a combination of multiple data sources. Principals were asked to provide artifacts for review such as internal documentation from memos, handbooks, or letters to parents, and external documents such as rubrics used to determine the Red Carpet award, state report card data, parent satisfaction survey data, and face-to-face interviews with participants. Triangulation of the data was also used to address potential researcher bias. The researcher also addressed researcher bias by keeping a separate personal journal to record feelings and emotions experienced while being immersed in the experiences of participants, referred to as bracketing (Moustakes, 1994). Concerns regarding credibility and validity were addressed through peer debriefing sessions by asking a peer researcher to review data and asking clarifying questions and by providing the opportunity for participants to review the accuracy of data through member checking as recommended by Creswell (2009).

### **Data Collection**

After obtaining signed informed consent documents from participants, structured, audio taped, face-to-face interviews comprised of questions derived from the review of

literature and designed to answer the research questions were conducted (see Appendix C). Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of participants and of confidential information yielded during the interview and observation process.

The researcher captured thoughts during the interview by writing field notes on printed copies of the interview protocol form for reflective review following each interview. Detailed, or thick, descriptions collected through case study provided the impetus for careful analysis (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). Further, artifacts such as parent flyers, memos, handbooks, calendars, and satisfaction surveys were reviewed as archival documentation (see Appendix F). Meaning was sought from the perspectives of participants guided by the desire to infer cultural and behavioral patterns as viewed from the *emic*. In other words, the perspective of the one participating in the context being studied was most important.

### **Data Analysis**

Following the completion of interviews and document review, a professional transcriptionist was employed to accurately transcribe the record. A third party confidentiality agreement was signed by the transcriptionist and retained by the researcher for documentation. Tapes, observation records, and field notes were secured in a locked safe. The analytic strategy used for the study was generative in nature; a constant comparative phenomenological method is was utilized. Constant comparative phenomenological analysis combined categorical coding with simultaneous comparison of all of the socio-cultural processes and episodes observed (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). The researcher recorded and classified data collected through interviews, documents, artifacts, and field notes to compare across categories. In the process of initial analysis,

new typologies and relationships were uncovered as a result of constant scanning (Goetz & LeCompte, 1981). A preliminary coding list was developed based on the literature and was refined as coding progressed. As recommended by Goetz and LeCompte, reconstructing categories created by those being studied as they conceptualize their own experiences was a goal of the researcher.

### **Reporting the Data**

Demographic data from the interview protocol are reported in chart form in Chapter IV. Findings from the interview research have been reported by major finding and presented in themes using direct quotes to substantiate findings in Chapter IV as well.

### **Chapter Summary**

To determine the perceptions of elementary principals in low income South Carolina (SC) Red Carpet Schools regarding how they use elements of relational trust to enhance family involvement, a purposeful sample of elementary principals in SC Red Carpet low income schools was selected. A structured protocol including taped, face-to-face interviews comprised of questions derived from the review of literature and designed to answer the research questions were conducted with ten invited principals following a pilot study. Detailed, or thick, descriptions collected through case study were analyzed using constant comparative phenomenological analysis.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **REPORT OF DATA AND DATA ANALYSIS**

Grounded in cultural study and critical theory research traditions, and informed by symbolic interactionism, the purpose of the study was to explore how elementary school principals in low income, elementary schools in the southeastern U.S. use elements of relational trust in family involvement efforts. The study sought to show connections between how principals of low income schools function as leaders with their constituency which is low income families and a context, which is low income elementary schools in South Carolina (SC), to increase family school trust. Specifically, the study explored how principals practice the five elements of relational trust defined by Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (1998; 2000) as benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness, and how those elements overlap with considerations of trust defined by Bryk and Schneider (2002) as respect, competence, personal regard for others, and integrity in order to build trust with families for the purpose of increasing family involvement in low income schools.

#### **Research Questions**

Trust is not a new topic neither is family involvement nor is principal leadership and while there are ample studies regarding principal leadership and trust, there is limited research on how elementary principals build trust with low income families and no studies were located regarding Red Carpet Schools (RCS). Since there are few studies on principal trust in low income schools and none found in the Southeastern U.S. and none found on RCS, this study was designed to answer the following overarching research

question: How do elementary principals of low income schools use elements of trust to guide their leadership practices in family involvement efforts?

The following sub-questions served to assist in answering the overarching question.

1. How do elementary principals define family-school trust?
2. How do elementary principals perceive the role of trust in family-school involvement?
3. What strategies do elementary principals use to develop and maintain family-school trust in order to improve family involvement?

### **Research Design**

Chapter IV is an account of the data collected and it is based on the perceptions and beliefs that principals in low income Red Carpet award winning schools have of family involvement and their influence on trust for building family involvement among low income families in their schools. This section explains study findings with regard to the research questions. Interview questions were designed to relate to the constructs embedded in the research questions. Structured interview questions were categorized based on the research questions as shown in the appendices. More detailed descriptions of study findings follow.

Qualitative design was chosen because prior studies regarding trust as a mediator in school-family relations have been quantitative (e.g., Adams, Forsyth, & Mitchell, 2009; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Goddard, Salloum, & Berebitsky, 2009). Case study research, in particular, was utilized to find out what was behind the empirical data from other studies. Further, the study met the criteria recommended by Yin (2009) in that the overarching research question and sub-questions employed “how” questions to explain a

present circumstance: How current elementary school principals in low income schools develop and use trust in family involvement efforts. Finally, the focus of the study was a complex social phenomenon within a real life context; building trust in schools to improve family involvement is a social activity that is subject to the assumptions, personal beliefs, prior experiences, and current emotions of families and school staff; therefore, comparing cases utilizing in-depth interview questions was the most appropriate choice for this study.

Interviews were conducted at the convenience of participants in the work place and were structured yet casual in nature to facilitate the dialogue and conversation necessary to answer the interview questions in the most open way possible. As Moustakes (1994) determined, representing the lived experiences of participants in a comprehensive way is the aim of interview research, therefore interviews were transcribed verbatim including vocal hesitations, slang, specialized terms, pauses, and filler words. However, body language such as hand gestures, movements, eye contact, and laughter were not transcribed. While body language aided the researcher in interpreting verbal expressions given by participants, body language was not included in the transcribed record. Excluding body language from the transcriptions did not affect coding and analysis of the data. Additionally, to triangulate findings, parent satisfaction survey data were collected from each participant's state school report card along with artifacts such as newsletters and parent letters.

The data analysis method of constant comparison was employed by the researcher in this phenomenological study. The constant comparative method of data analysis is a generative method which allows for combined categorical coding with simultaneous



comparison of all of the socio-cultural processes and episodes observed (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). In addition to a description of the data analysis method, this chapter also presents a thick, rich description of the study participants along with their verbatim responses and paraphrasing to glean an understanding of the population and the contextual influences of each setting. Procedures used in the study are described in detail along with major themes and subthemes discovered through the study.

### **Respondents**

It was anticipated prior to beginning the study that principals who met the criteria would be glad to participate due to being proud of winning the award and being recognized by their peers and the state department for being family friendly. Potential participants were contacted directly after gaining permission from district gate-keepers. Participants were informed of their rights and written informed consent was obtained prior to beginning each interview. Every attempt was made to ensure confidentiality. Participants were each assured of confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms and any specific references to personal information, families, or schools have been excluded. A diverse sample of the population participated in the study as shown in Table 1 which included males and females, diverse ethnic backgrounds, and from schools in different geographic regions of the state and different neighborhood contexts including rural, urban, and suburban schools. The rationale for allowing diversity of context was that each principal had to meet the same initial criteria by winning the award for being family friendly. Therefore, a heterogeneous sample was utilized.

In the sample, there were eight Caucasian females, one African American female, and one Caucasian male. The age of principals ranged from 43 years to 64 years old with

an average age of the participants being 51 years old. Principals had a range of experience from 4 years to 22 years with the mean number of years experience as a principal being 10 and the average number of years in the current school was 4.5 years. Schools included five (50%) rural, three (30%) urban, and two (20%) suburban settings. The following table depicts the range of experience and backgrounds of the participants.

Table 1.

*Demographic Profile of Respondents*

| School Pseudonyms | Parent Satisfaction Rating | Setting  | Low Inc. Pop. | Principal Pseudonyms | Age | Yrs exp | Yrs at school |
|-------------------|----------------------------|----------|---------------|----------------------|-----|---------|---------------|
| Avelton           | 93.8%                      | Rural    | 71%           | Barbara Johnson      | 55  | 8       | 3             |
| Deer Trail        | 77.0%                      | Rural    | 89%           | Elizabeth Stevens    | 47  | 7       | 5             |
| Hunter's Glen     | 98.1%                      | Suburban | 51%           | Julie Scott          | 44  | 5       | 5             |
| Birchmore         | 84.7%                      | Rural    | 83%           | Michelle James       | 52  | 22      | 3             |
| Woodbridge        | 91.2%                      | Suburban | 45%           | Linda Roberts        | 49  | 6       | 6             |
| Falls Creek       | 93.6%                      | Urban    | 72%           | Nancy Lewis          | 64  | 10      | 10            |
| City Park         | 86.8%                      | Urban    | 62%           | Sarah Christopher    | 44  | 4       | 4             |
| Montvale          | 96.7%                      | Rural    | 62%           | Bill Davis           | 62  | 21      | 2             |
| Oak Street        | 94.7%                      | Urban    | 36%           | Janine Taylor        | 50  | 11      | 3             |
| Laurel Meadow     | 78.6%                      | Rural    | 52%           | Dawn King            | 43  | 7       | 4             |

**Data Analysis Process**

The analysis of the data from the study was grounded in cultural theory and symbolic interactionism as described in Chapter III and was based on transcribed interviews with participants. A digital recorder was used to capture audio recordings of study interviews. A professional third party transcriptionist was employed, after signing confidentiality agreements, to provide accurate verbatim transcribed copies of the interviews. In addition to verbal responses given and visual observations made during the

course of each interview, field notes were also taken during the sessions to make note of differences in intonation, gestures, and extended pauses. A preliminary coding list was used to conduct an initial review of both the transcribed record and field notes to identify significant statements and responses salient to the research questions. A line-by-line analysis was conducted to allow for more in-depth understanding of participant's responses and to determine preliminary themes. After conducting preliminary coding, the researcher listened to each interview in its entirety while simultaneously reading the transcribed interview to compare the files for accuracy and against the preliminary coding list. Following the simultaneous review of the transcriptions and audio files, the researcher reread the individual written transcriptions to color code statements and responses between cases that corresponded with similar responses from participants. The researcher interpreted the identified statements and created the resulting themes and sub-themes. Following in Table 2 is a chart that depicts examples of the significant statements and deductive meanings found in the interviews.

**Table 2.**  
*Significant statements and Deduced Meanings*

| Significant statements   | Deduced meaning  |
|--|--|
| “[I’ve] just always got my radar out for any resources that can help my children. That can help the families and in turn help the children give them experiences that they wouldn’t normally have.”                                      | The principal has a direct responsibility in optimizing resources for low income families. |
| “And if we know that there’s a family that has four kids or whatever we tell them to please come and we make sure they get tickets.”   | Working with families is a personal mission and is part of a disposition to serve others.  |
| “So when somebody in the community dies and is well known in the community, and, they know they are going to have a lot of people at the funeral, they will ask to use our auditorium to have the funeral in. And they’ll, work with us” | A reciprocal relationship with the community is crucial for low income schools.            |

The color coded significant statements were categorized into general themes. Once the final coding list was developed, data were imported into NVivo9 to search for horizontality as recommended by Moustakes (1994) where the total number of uses for specific words and phrases were counted further adding to the reliability of the resulting themes and sub themes that follow in the next section.

### **Findings**

The purpose of this study was to explore how elementary principals in low income, elementary schools in the southeastern U.S. use elements of relational trust in family involvement efforts. The researcher used in-depth constant comparison analysis to answer the overarching research question and supporting sub-questions that guided the study. Participants described their definition of trust and how they use elements of trust to guide their leadership practices from interviews and review of school artifacts based on the research questions. As expected, participants were proud of their accomplishments in building family-school trust and were quite verbose. In the following section, data will be presented in response to each sub-question culminating with answering the overarching research question.

#### **Principals' Definition of Family-School Trust**

The first research sub-question asked elementary principals to define family-school trust in order to explore whether or not participants understood the construct. Each participant gave his or her definition. Respondents defined family-school trust as providing a safe comfortable place that is inclusive of all stakeholders and inspires a sense of confidence in the principal and school. In general, participants believe family-school trust consists of direct leadership acts and intangible factors such as feelings.

### **Creating a safe comfortable place.**

Also emerging as part of the definition of family-school trust was creating a safe comfortable place. Included in this category, five of ten participants (50%) indicated that a general feeling of trustworthiness shows family-school trust by building rapport with families and being non-threatening and welcoming.

Ms. Scott asserted that building rapport helps families feel more comfortable.

She explained:

Family school trust [is] rapport that you build with your stakeholders in your community. They know that they can reach you and that you are going to be able to walk; even though you are not walking the mile in their shoes, that you will walk it with them. [Even] if you are not in the same experiences as they have at least at some point or some way, you can have the empathy that to what they are going through.

Ms. James described family-school trust. She said “It means that parents feel comfortable coming into the school.” Ms. Christopher corroborated this when she said:

It means that parents are comfortable coming to school to talk about anything they feel like they need to talk about. It also means to me that parents trust us with what should be their most prized possession and they’re comfortable sending them to school. They’re comfortable that we’re providing the education that their children should be getting and that we’re [going to] keep them safe.

Helping families feel more comfortable was very important to Ms. Lewis. She spoke about placing student artwork and student-painted murals in the front entrance to the school. She also described other efforts to make families feel more comfortable “Our

PTO built benches. We put them in a circle in the courtyard by the front door. Parents come early [to dismissal] and have a little social time and they feel comfortable.” Her assertions were supported by comments made by an anonymous rater in the school’s Red Carpet site visit who said the school “feels warm and welcoming and it is friendly and well run.”

Creating a safe comfortable place was the element principals (50%) described as most important in their definition of family-school trust.

**Being inclusive.**

Being inclusive is an indicator of family-school trust according to two of the ten (20%) participants. According to participants’ descriptions, being inclusive means the principal specifically seeks to include the entire family and the community in a relationship with the school. As an example of her belief in inclusivity, Ms. Johnson showed the researcher a flyer for a community talent show inviting the surrounding families and community. Ms. Johnson explained:

Family-school trust, first of all, when you look at the total picture, I believe in order for the school to be successful, you have to have a good relationship with the school and the family. That trust for me means not just the [immediate] family or the parents but the grandparents and community members [as well]. So I look at it as something that is very inclusive.”

When explaining her definition of family-school trust, Ms. Taylor gave a similar definition. She stated:

When the families in your school trust you not only is it the families that bring the children to the school but also the school family itself. It is trust within the

building, and its trust from those in our external publics. Whoever brings that child to school knows that they can trust us to do the right thing.

Including all stakeholders is important in family-school trust as many modern family structures have changed. Children may live with extended family or fictive “kin.” The school also relies on others who do not have students in the school for tax base support and should include the surrounding community in the school.

**Inspiring confidence.**

Confidence in the principal and the school is how family-school trust is defined according to three of the ten participants (30%). Being honest and showing integrity by having their words and actions match are the elements of creating a sense of confidence. Principals further said that openness and expecting honesty in return from families shows family school trust and inspires confidence. Ms. Stevens spoke at length about this question:

Family school trust... well, I would define it by saying that families have to trust the school when they drop their child off or when they put their child on the bus, so they have to have confidence in the school they are sending their child to; confidence not only in the teachers but the cafeteria staff, the office staff, you know, just everyone.

Inspiring confidence in the school and principal involves the principal taking specific actions. Mr. Davis spoke of family school trust in terms of his own actions and he added another dimension to the definition by acknowledging his position of power as the principal:

They believe what you say. They know that you are going to do what you say you are going to do and knowing that I'm not going to use my position or my power in any negative way against them. I think once they have that relationship with they know they can come to you and be open and tell you the truth and know that you that you are going to remain confidential you are not going to use it against them. That you do what you say you are going to do. I think that is all part of it.

Mr. Davis' statements were confirmed by prominent signs in the front office telling all visitors to check in with the receptionist and obtain a visitor's badge. According to participants, inspiring confidence in the school lends a general feeling of trustworthiness to schools and principals.

### **Principals' Perceptions of the Role of Trust in Family Involvement**

Regarding the principals' perception of the role of trust in family involvement, the second sub-question, the participants were quite verbose. With regard to the research sub-question, participants had two main responses. First, principals described the importance of trust in family involvement. It is also important to note that all participants described how they perceived their personal role in building trust with families as well in response to this question. Actively seeking to form relationships with low income families appeared repeatedly in responses. Participants described the personal role of the principal as including the following elements: acting as a bridge or boundary spanning; having positive beliefs about families; and, feeling a compelling personal mission to serve others.



### **Acting as a bridge.**

Linking families with resources beyond the boundaries of the school is a bridging action that eight out of ten (80%) participants indicated as necessary in low income schools. The principal has a direct responsibility in optimizing resources to build trust with low income families. In other words, the majority of participants said it is the principal's responsibility to seek out resources to help families in and outside of the school. When answering the question, Ms. Scott spoke about the school's weekend backpack food program. She explained how the program does not cover summer months and what she does to try to remedy the problem. As Ms. Scott's stated:

I try to get [the] community in because they are huge link to helping me provide resources for these children. [Kids] are in their community, and the church is right down the road from them. I know there is a separation between church and state. I get that. But, if [the church] is right next to this house, and they know that child is not going to have a meal during the summer the food pantry is at this church. [I ask] can somebody just take a meal packet to this house for the week?

Supporting her statement, Ms. Scott showed a brochure that is given to families at the end of the school year explaining who to call at the school in the event of a food crisis. Similarly, to Ms. Scott, Ms. Johnson spoke about the principal's role in seeking out resources to help students and families. As Ms. Johnson was explaining some of the things she has initiated to find funding for special programs, she stated "Yes, we had to write the grant. I have been in schools where they didn't want the grant because it would involve more work. But our staff, we reach out because our parents look for that. We just do a lot of things like that. Just to let them know that we value education."

Although the majority of principals (70%) agreed that spending time and energy looking for resources to help families is important, principals admitted to sometimes feeling conflicted that their own personal time was often compromised. Ms. Taylor looked away from the researcher and toward the parking lot as she said, “You know, there are some days when I get in my car, I would just like to think I can sort-of blend in [with] the crowd, but you don’t.”

Adding another facet to principals’ perceptions about their role in acting as a bridge to build trust, seven out of ten (70%) went a step further. In addition to seeking resources, principals in low income schools should also seek solutions to families’ problems according to these participants. Ms. Stevens gave several examples of times either she or a staff member has tried to help solve a family problem. As Ms. Stevens explained:

This happens on a regular basis, the child doesn’t have lunch money, somebody on this staff is [going to] pay for that child to eat lunch. If the child doesn’t have a ride home [and] they missed the bus, and the parent doesn’t have a car, someone [will] take them home or go get them. It is just those kinds of things like I said in the very beginning—we are [meeting] them where they are. If that means you have to go to their home and pick them up or have a meeting at their home, we have done that.

While speaking about how she spends time daily getting to know her students and actively scanning for children with concerns, Ms. Taylor spoke about an incident at lunch one day that illustrates this facet further:

In one family we had, a lady is a pharmacist assistant. Last year, her daughter, was at the cafeteria table. I was in there having lunch, and she was trying to hide the fact that she didn't have anything to eat. Long story short version, I told her "don't ever go without food" and we have helped them some with food boxes.

In order to help families find solutions to problems that impact student achievement, principals (70%) reported that acting as a bridge between the family and school and the community is important.

### **Positive beliefs about families.**

The beliefs participants hold about families was a surprising element for the researcher. It was anticipated that principals would have opinions about the families they serve; however, all participants (100%) held the following positive beliefs about their low income families: most low income families are trying as hard as they can; and, principals must have empathy to be able to meet families where they are. Finally, principals also believe that many uninvolved families likely feel intimidated by the middle class status of school personnel or have had bad experiences in school themselves.

Participants repeatedly stated that low income families are struggling to meet their basic needs and trying as hard as they can. Ms. Stevens elaborated, "We live in a society where both parents work you know they are working, they are doing everything they can to meet the needs for their children." Mr. Davis had a similar response, "Families want to [be involved] but they are blue collar hard working families that just don't have... the time to get involved the way they want to." When describing her beliefs about why low income families are not involved, Ms. Taylor added to the theme. She stated:

Sometimes it's just gas getting to the school...I mean, they're struggling. We are feeding 91 people a week, and [out of] those 91, about 30-40 of them we are their groceries for the week. They just truly struggle [with] keeping food on the table, and the power bill paid. Sometimes they just need a little help to get over the hurdle of the weekend.

Although Ms. Roberts described having a small percentage of uninvolved families, she stated, "this is a working class neighborhood and some parents are working two jobs. And they are exhausted when they get home." Also tied to the theme of families struggling, principals spoke of having empathy for families. In other words principals believe they must be able to "meet families where they are" to ensure their children have a more productive educational experience. When speaking about enrolling homeless students, Ms. Stevens explained, "We accept anybody, any time, it doesn't matter if you have all your documentation or not. The goal is let's get the child in school. Let's provide them with what they need." Her statements were supported by the presence of large signs posted on either side of the front office door welcoming all families and explaining how to enroll students who do not have proper documentation.

Another belief principals shared was that many parents have had bad school experiences themselves. When describing the families in her school that are struggling to be involved, Ms. King explained how the educational background of families can impact involvement. She stated:

For whatever reason, you know, I won't say they're non-readers but, they weren't very successful in school. So normally those parents are the ones that you have

a harder time reaching because they don't want to darken the doors to a school where they weren't successful.

When explaining her efforts to reach uninvolved families, Ms. Christopher had a similar explanation to Ms. King. She stated "then you have a third [of the parents] that probably didn't have a good school experience themselves and sort of keep a distance." Ms. Lewis has had the same experience trying to reach uninvolved families. She spoke about how the school is beginning to serve the children of students her faculty taught. She said "Yes, because so many of the parents are really young and haven't been out of school that long themselves and they hated school." Ms. Taylor described her outreach efforts to uninvolved families. She also had a similar explanation for having a portion of uninvolved families despite the school's award winning status. She explained:

I think a lot of our struggling families [are uninvolved] because their experience was not successful in school, so you really have to work to gain their confidence and get them aboard. [Some of it is] fear of the unknown, some is their educational level, their background of experiences [some of it is] bad experience. Sometimes it is just the busyness of life.

As mentioned previously, the element of positive beliefs about families principals described was a surprising dimension that emerged. In hindsight, this makes sense because principals would not have been able to establish the affective trust found in responses throughout the study if they did not believe families care about their children.

#### **Feeling a personal mission to serve.**

The researcher was most surprised by the final theme that emerged from this sub-question. Because all principals had previously won the award for being family friendly,

it was assumed that the participants would have certain qualities such as being caring or friendly. However the majority of participants, seven out of ten (70%), revealed they are compelled by a personal mission to serve others. That personal mission was explained as doing whatever it takes to do what is right for children, and having a servant leadership attitude towards the children and families with whom they work.

When speaking about doing whatever it takes, Ms. Johnson put it succinctly “We understand here, that it’s all about the children. The children are being served and, you know our job here as educators, we know that.” Ms. Scott also described doing what it takes in relation to teachers when she spoke about having teachers attend all family events. She stated “it pushes teachers out of their comfort zone, but I want them to remember that they are here for the kids and no other reason.” Ms. Taylor was quite animated about this question. Her voice became more pitched as she elaborated matter-of-factly. She stated:

If it’s best for children, it should be best for teachers. My mantra and my motto is “in the line of things, we do what is best for children, and that is my priority.” If I meet the children’s needs, I am meeting the needs of the teachers instructionally, and then I am also meeting the needs of the parents. We don’t exist for faculty or for parents. You can have parents that have children not in our age range. You can have a building full of teachers ready to teach, but unless the building is filled with children you don’t have a school.

When explaining how she tries to do whatever it takes Ms. James talked about specific instances where she has done things to make sure children are taken care of. She stated:

One of the things you can do is provide transportation. We work with some of our low income families like children who need glasses or need to go to the dentist. And we will provide the transportation to pick them up and take them to the dentist, or take them to get the glasses, so that the child's needs are met.

Ms. Johnson described what the core values of her school are. She explained about how she works with teachers and students to learn how to take care of each other and excel in the school she said "heart also means that you're brave, you know, you have that, that strength, you do whatever it takes" Ms. Lewis had a similar sentiment. She stated "You [must] be willing to go the extra mile. We as administrators need to have that mindset."

Ms. Taylor explained, similarly to her earlier statement about the personal toll being a principal in a low income school takes, the job takes commitment. She stated:

It's hard though, it really is hard, and especially on a day when you are really tired, and [parents] are really yelling at you, but you just have to dig deeper and work harder. It takes a lot of out of you sometimes. I look back and think gosh, I have aged or it has been tough, but if you are committed to do that and I think it is a calling, when you are an educator it is a calling.

When describing having a servant leadership attitude, participants linked serving others with the personal mission mentioned previously. When speaking about servant leadership and families, Ms. Stevens also spoke about students giving back "We do a lot of things, not only giving to the children and the families, but also teaching them how to give...because you may be in need right now, but there might be a time when you've got, and you need to give." Ms. Stevens' showed the researcher newsletters featuring

opportunities to give such as food drives and clothing drives. Her signature in the personal message section of each newsletter reads “in devoted service.”

As she pondered the answer then spoke at length about how she feels, Ms. King described her mission to provide opportunities for her students they might otherwise not have. As she stated:

I always have my radar out for any resources that can help my children. That can help the families and in turn help the children give them experiences that they wouldn't normally have. I've taken the entire school to see the Polar Express when it first came out, because some of them had never been to a movie before. [We] took the whole school to the circus two years ago, the entire school. [We] took the whole school to the Greenville drive baseball game, [this is] just an effort to allow these children to afford new experiences.

Ms. King also shared newsletters and calendars. Similar to Ms. Stevens' signature, Ms. King signed each personal message on newsletters with the statement “serving you in education” confirming her belief in serving others.

Overall, Ms. Taylor had the most compelling description of serving families. She spoke of her school's food pantry as her personal mission. She frequently referred back to the pantry throughout the interview. Her recollection of what happened with one struggling family and her persistence in trying to help them was touching:

This was last school year. We knew those children were hungry, the mom had not accepted our offer for food and so I called, I e-mailed her, and she didn't respond back. I called her, she didn't answer the phone. So, my children and I, we packed food in the back of our car. I told them, “you are just staying in the



car, but I am going to go to the door, and if she will allow it, I am going to give her food". So she did come to the door, I told her I wasn't coming in, because she had to know that I wasn't coming to check her house out and that kind of thing. And what it did for my two children is they saw those bottles of grape juice, that canned spaghetti sauce, the noodles and pastas things that they would maybe consider us almost out of food at home was like a Christmas sleigh from the North Pole for those children who were hungry.

Principals gave the most in-depth answers to questions about the role of trust in family-school involvement. Acting as a bridge was a common theme with seven out of ten (70%) giving examples of bridging actions. Also emerging from participants' perceptions were two other significant themes. Positive beliefs about low income families were reported by all ten participants (100%) and feeling a personal mission to serve others was reported by six out of ten (60%) respondents. Participants' reports were confirmed with artifacts they provided such as newsletters and program flyers.

### **Strategies Principals Use to Develop and Maintain Family-School Trust**

Data revealed that principals in low income elementary schools use interrelated strategies to develop and maintain family-school trust. From analysis of the interview transcripts, three themes emerged to answer the sub-question: What strategies do principals use to develop and maintain family-school trust? Principals used school initiated involvement; principals were community oriented; and, principals constantly used both formal and informal communication strategies.

**School initiated involvement.**

Principals in this study initiated family involvement by offering a wide variety of involvement options, such as making the initial contact with families, extending personal invitations to families, and maintaining formal options for family input such as PTO and/or school council. When describing efforts to initiate positive involvement, Ms. Scott stated:

I do a lot of handwritten letters. Teachers do too. I ask them to send home happy notes or happy grams instead of it being negative all the time. I call those the “wow moments”. I want parents to go “wow I got something nice instead of something negative”. I tell the teachers to please make at least two positive phone calls a week.

To support her statements, Ms. Scott provided newsletters with positive student accomplishments featured. She also provided a copy of a special flyer sent home monthly called *Recipes for Success* that suggests ideas for fun learning oriented activities for families to try at home. Ms. Scott provided a copy of the Red Carpet rubric as well. Also confirming her assertions were comments made by an anonymous on-site rater who stated “good connections between what is happening in the school and home.” When speaking about her school’s efforts to initiate involvement with families, Ms. Johnson had a similar position to Ms. Scott’s on making initial contact with families. She stated:

I encourage teachers to make sure they make positive contact and start building that relationship right at the beginning of the year. If the time comes that we have a matter that’s not so positive, there will [already] be trust between the parent and the teacher.

Ms. James spoke about being a principal in a more affluent school prior to this assignment and how her efforts to involve families there were different. Whereas families in her former school were more visible in the school and seemed more involved overall, she explained that she has had to find a variety of ways for families to help that are non-threatening in her current school. She stated:

We also try and include people in helping with school things. We specifically will call them and ask them to come. Maybe, [we will ask for] help selling ice cream, or [to] come and help with a special activity that we are having. A lot of them are shocked because they've never been called or asked before.

Ms. Roberts had a similar idea to Ms. James for initiating involvement with low income families. She spoke about seeking out opportunities for families “We also try to find ways that they can help. Some might like to sell ice cream some might like to make copies.”

Confirmed by family program flyers each principal shared, both Mr. Davis and Ms. Christopher explicitly offered a variety of options based on family needs surveys. Each showed examples of family night handouts where participants were able to choose from a menu of topics based on family feedback such as bike safety, positive discipline, math support, and children's fitness.

When speaking about school initiated involvement as a trust building strategy, Ms. Johnson was consistent with her earlier focus on inclusivity. As she spoke about families in her school, she also compared her current assignment to her work in a more affluent school in another area. She became almost combative during this part of the interview and explained that people often judge low income families erroneously for

what is perceived as a lack of involvement. Although she spoke of initiating involvement, Ms. Johnson went further to explain that involvement does not have to occur inside the school. She stated:

You may have parents who are behind the scenes, who are really stressing to that child that you need to be in school, you need to get your work done. You know, that's involvement. If we have parents who may not ever show up here, but they support us at home, and they support education, and instill that in the child, that's positive involvement.

Overall, participants (100%) reported initiating family involvement as a trust building strategy. To support this theme, principals provided artifacts and described offering a wide variety of involvement options, extending personal invitations, and maintaining active PTO and school councils.

#### **Being community oriented.**

Being community oriented means that principals believe that an integral reciprocal relationship with the community is crucial for low income schools. To demonstrate this belief, principals in the study described encouraging the community's use of the school, consulting with the community, and understanding the impact of local context on families.

Particularly, understanding the impact of local context emerged as crucial evidenced by the responses of all ten (100%) participants. Ms. Scott explained how the school tries to do things to make connections with the community "I see these kids at church. I see them in the community. I go to their ball games. We put student artwork and student writing and different community venues." Mr. Davis described some of the

innovations he has brought to the school to more involve the community. In one example, he shared a photo flyer of a family-community math night. The school won a state public relations award for the program. He stated:

We went out of the box. We partnered with electric company, Bi-Lo, and the community. We actually went into the community. We all met at Bi-Lo. All the teachers there met the parents, gave them a package of information for shopping that night and related the shopping with the math standards for that grade level. Because we had such a great turn out and the parents were so excited about it we made it real. We made real learning. It wasn't just "here's the standard. Go home and memorize the standard". We actually took the standards [and] applied it to real life. We had coordinators there from Zest Quest to meet with families on healthy living habits and shopping guides. [We showed] how to shop, buy nutritious food. We had the electric [company] there giving out t-shirts for the community. [They are] supporting our positive behavior and so by stepping out of the box and getting more community involvement [we] help to foster that type of community support

Ms. Johnson's face often lit up as she described family and community activities that are the most meaningful to her. She spoke extensively about the local context and importance of actually using the feedback community members gave to improve activities:

You also look at the data and you look at parent surveys and you get your information back. We have a parent suggestion box. Parents put information in that box, students put information in that box. Because of one of our students

suggested it, we [are] starting now with a talent show, something as simple as that. It's a big thing in the community. You know, people are out here in [large numbers] in February. They want to see the talent show and here with the community members, it's a big event. That's because a child put that in the suggestion box we would "like to have a talent show." That's the way to get families involved.

As in her earlier response, Ms. James spoke about differences between more affluent schools and her current school. This is the area she was the most expressive about. She explained how this school's location and demographics make community events different. She added "Out here, in this community, where people have to go for jobs, they have to drive an hour away from home; they don't have time to get involved." She also spoke of her desire to ensure community support and reciprocity. As she stated:

We do the Fall Festival. Our goal is to provide something for the community. To [be able to] come and to have fun. It is not a money-making project of any kind. It's just to try and bring the community together. The school creates a sense of place where people feel that is a good place to be.

In return for her consideration Ms. James explained the reciprocal relationship she has with the community. When things happen in the school that might create confusion or conflict in the community, she said she reaches out to the community to combat problems. She chuckled as she reiterated how people sometimes make things too complicated. She described the simplicity of communicating with the community to solve problems. She went on to describe an incident that occurred right after her appointment to the school regarding a traditional end of the year ceremony. She stated:

“I’ll give you an example. Up until this year, it’s always been called graduation. I don’t believe in graduating except once. Everybody was hysterical so I called in a few people from the community and I showed them the program. I even sent an email to one of the town council guys. I said “here’s what is on the program. The only difference is that I am calling it promotion not graduation.” Everybody was happy then and there weren’t any problems. It’s little things like that where if you know the people in the community, you can get things done.”

Also talking about the impact of the local context, Ms. King seemed to be understanding. As she explained “It’s an area where family is important; we don’t do moneymakers because they just don’t work up here with this population. So we just try to make everything open [and free] for them to participate.”

The use of trust building strategies was evident in the participants’ responses as eight out of ten (80%) described encouraging community use of the school; six out of ten (60%) reported consulting with the community on decisions; and all ten (100%) reported understanding the impact of local context on family involvement.

### **Constantly communicating.**

Using constant communication was a prominent strategy used by principals in the study. As expected, based on the criteria for winning the award, all ten principals interviewed (100%) reported using traditional forms of communication such as newsletters, phone calls, websites, and flyers. Other, more subtle communication, such as providing access to information, creating purposeful, positive publicity, explaining procedures, and using informal language when possible, spoke more to the personal beliefs of the participants.

Using informal language and explaining procedures were strategies reported by seven out of ten (70%) of participants. When referring to communication, Ms. Stevens emphasized trying to make families feel more comfortable by communicating how meetings are arranged. As she stated:

Almost every time when I walk a parent back, if I am the one to get the parent, I will say, all right please don't be intimidated, there are a lot of people in there, but this is why we have so many people. Yes, I just prepare them because if you just walk in, and you see six people at this big table, and you have to sit at the end, you know, it's a little, you know, I think it is just very intimidating.

Purposefully creating positive publicity was a communication strategy reported by five out of ten (50%) of participants. Mr. Davis described the importance he places on adequate communication as a form of public relations. He stated:

We have actually won an award for South Carolina award for public relations award for our family math night. Every Friday we have a communication team meeting with parents, the PTA, and some of my teachers. When you don't communicate well, people will fill that void with negativity.

Ms. Christopher said "I think any time we can communicate with them about the good things their kids are doing here too really helps us a lot." Ms. Scott explained her background in communications prior to becoming an educator. Similarly to Mr. Davis, she felt that purposeful publicity is necessary to offset inevitable negative incidents that may occur. In explaining a conversation with her new media specialist, she was quite animated as she described her philosophy. She stated:



I said, “I want you to send something every week to the media, every week! There is something going on in this building that you can send a picture or an article about every week to the media.”

She went on further to say “I hate to say that it is strategic and it’s calculated. It somewhat is. If we inundate the community with all the good [things] going on, when something bad happens it’s not going to bring the house down.” While all principals used formal communication strategies such as newsletters, flyers, and websites, their use of informal strategies such as strategic publicity, and explaining procedures to families was more related to their personal beliefs.

### **Principals Use Elements of Trust to Guide Leadership Practices**

Principal’s leadership practices were the main focus of this study. The study was designed to elicit the beliefs and perceptions of principals and how those beliefs and perceptions influence their practice as it related to family involvement. The leadership practices identified through analysis of the data revealed four themes: acting in the best interest of families; showing goodwill or benevolence; having high expectations for academics, and being competent.

#### **Acting in the best interest of families.**

Acting in the best interest of families means principals are fair, they respect families as equal partners, and use power appropriately. While she was sharing examples of ways she and her staff try to help such as paying a power bill or moving a refrigerator for a family, Ms. Christopher stated “I just think that we try just to treat everybody like we would want to be treated and go above and beyond when we have the

opportunity.” When speaking about this theme, Ms. Taylor had a similar explanation to Ms. Christopher’s assertion about treating low income families the same. She stated:

Treat them the same as everybody else. Don’t be [just] a respecter of titles or degrees. Every family has just as much right and access to the building, the school, [and] the programs. You welcome them all wherever they are unless they cross a line that makes them not eligible to come in the building [such as] a criminal record or whatever. Try to reach out to them.

While explaining his thoughts, a man leaned in to Mr. Davis’ office to speak. After the man left, Mr. Davis pointed toward the doorway as if to say “that is what I mean.” He was adamant about his stance on this topic. He related a recent incident that occurred when a particular parent expected to enter the classroom wing without a pass. He stated:

Treat them fairly and respectfully. I don’t care if their parent is [a] school board member or trustee or works in the textile mill. They’re all going to be treated equally. If you are a PTA member you’re not going to get any special privileges here. You’re going to be treated like everyone else.

Ms. Scott described this concept slightly differently. She related an incident where parents had come in to her office for a conference about their child. The father of the child had made a comment about the principal’s status being above his. Ms. Stevens said

I didn’t realize that until I had a parent conference about a month ago... I am sitting here thinking. “Look at where he is sitting. My diplomas are on the wall.” You know, I almost set him up for that. And I am sitting here thinking to myself,

“Okay, the next time I have a conference with them I don’t need to have a conference in here. I need to have a conference in a conference room.”

As typical of her responses, Ms. Johnson spoke at length about fairness. She had similar sentiments to Ms. Scott. She stated:

I think one of the things I look at as a principal is that I treat people the way I’d like to be treated. And also treat people the way I look at my children. I see these kids, here, as my children. We try to be fair, consistent, and one of the things that [we] even explain to children is that fairness doesn’t mean that you are going to be treated exactly alike. We do what’s best for you.

Acting in the best interest of families was a leadership practice reported by the majority (60%) of participants. Principals described this theme as being fair, showing respect and treating low income families as equals.

#### **Showing goodwill and benevolence.**

Showing goodwill and benevolence includes principals’ participation in the following: helping with basic needs or intended acts of benevolence; being understanding of families’ feelings; providing a family-friendly atmosphere, and allowing family control in decision making. Principals were quite vocal about these aspects of their leadership practices with all ten (100%) describing at least one instance where they intentionally showed goodwill or benevolence. Like her other responses, Ms. Johnson emphasized caring and gave explicit examples to describe her answer about goodwill.

She stated:

It’s the way you send the message; by the way you treat others. You can tell when someone is being genuine. We answer that phone even if we are not being

rated for Red Carpet. We try to make sure we answer the phone; people understand that we care about them. And we are trying to let them know we are a friendly place, this is a friendly atmosphere.

Most principals echoed the sentiments of Ms. Johnson and indicated that the front office staff is critical to making the school have the welcoming feeling they are looking for. As Ms. Taylor stated:

A gentleman came up front this morning, [he was] a little rougher character, he wanted to come to field day. We need to treat him the same as if anyone else were coming in the door. When you have someone as [friendly as] our receptionist up front, she is just great. That makes a huge difference. It's how you feel when you go into someone's home and you feel welcome. I tell the secretaries...even if we are not Red Carpet in title I want to see Red Carpet in action. It is how I really felt.

When describing goodwill, Ms. Christopher, like 70% of participants, thought of it as helping with basic needs. She said "I think any time that we answer a call if they're in need that certainly builds that good will." As typical of most of her responses, Ms. Taylor related goodwill to the food pantry; she stated "We make sure they have food. We are going to feed them through the summer. Some we send food home on the weekend." Ms. Roberts thought for a while about her response to this question. She shared a flyer that lists a computer lab schedule and explained how the school's demographics have changed slightly over the past couple of years along with the needs of families. She stated:

We have opened our computer lab twice a month to encourage folks to come in we'll help with job resumes, we'll help them learn to use the internet, word, excel, any of those kind of things. I think it's easier to reach some of those [parents] once you help them with their needs and then you can work in that whole school part.

Another way principals demonstrated goodwill was by allowing families to have some control in decision making. Both Ms. Stevens and Ms. King spoke on this topic by describing recent conferences where they had to talk with families about possible retention of their children. Ms. Stevens explained her incident. She stated "We as a team talk about what we want to accomplish. I try to give them as much power in the decision making process, so that they do feel like they have some control." Ms. King described her conference with parents framed by her own personal experience with her son. She spoke about trouble he has had in school and how she tries to identify with parents when it comes to retention. At one point she appeared emotional. Ms. King asserted:

I carry that a step further and I just tell them "look you're the parent I'm not the parent I will give you all the information that you need to make this decision."

But I don't really like to make that decision. I'll tell them "I can tell you if this were my child and this was the information that I was working from [this is] what I would do." But I try to help them make an informed decision [and] they will listen to it.

Showing goodwill and benevolence were prominent among participants in this study. All ten (100%) principals interviewed described incidents that support their efforts to demonstrate these leadership practices for building trust.

### **Competently performing the role.**

Competence was found to be a common theme principals displayed in working with low income families. This theme includes the elements of consistently following policies and procedures; being visible; being responsive to families' requests; and follow through. Consistently following policies and procedures emerged as an element of competence through the words of several principals. For instance, Ms. James reported "In my discipline I am very consistent. I do the same thing no matter who you are, the, discipline applies to everybody." About being consistent, Ms. Taylor stated "It takes time and you have to see things followed through." When describing being responsive to families needs, Ms. Lewis explained the school's efforts to be more receptive to suggestions for improving involvement. She stated:

"One year we had [a question] on a survey "which night is best for you to come to school functions?" The majority of the responses were Monday. We've had our [programs] on Mondays ever since. We try to meet their requests." Ms. Christopher also indicated the same. She shared a copy of a family survey sent to parents to gauge satisfaction with involvement programs and activities. She said "We survey the parents to see what other types of topics they would like for us to provide information for them."

Being visible was also reported as being an element of competent leadership. When explaining the importance of being visible in the school and among families, Ms.

Taylor spoke about being outside during arrival duty each day to greet families but also to scan for problems. She stated:

You know I try to be [outside] most of the time. There are some days I will be tied up inside, but most every day I am outside at arrival for a good portion [of duty] because the children see me, this sort of sets the tone for the day. Some of [what I do] is picking up the phone and calling [parents] directly. I called a kindergarten parent not too long before you came. But also, talking with parents directly, meeting them out at the dismissal, and talking to them at arrival are what I think [are] important; being seen to head off issues.

Similarly to his previous responses, Mr. Davis spoke of his belief in public relations. He felt like being visible was related to his leadership practices and his commitment to working with families in the school. He stated:

I'm visible out in the parking lot as parents are coming through. You know, I'm out there talking, meeting the public. Through our awards, we're constantly communicating our high expectations. You have to show them you're willing to go the extra mile.

Competently performing the role was described by the majority (80%) of participants and included being consistent, being responsive to families, being visible, and following through on promises.

### **Focusing on academics.**

Because the Red Carpet award is not contingent on academic performance, the researcher did not include academic factors in the research questions. However, when analyzing the data, a surprising theme emerged from the study. Focusing on academics

was common to the majority (80%) of the principals' responses regarding their leadership practices. The most recent state academic report card became available after study interviews were completed. When reviewing the report cards to determine parent satisfaction ratings, the researcher discovered that the majority (60%) of participants' schools also received above-average academic growth ratings leading the researcher to confirm the importance of this emergent theme. Based on participants' responses, focus on academics was found to include these elements: providing a quality education, providing families with specific information on how to help with academics, and having high academic expectations.

Principals indicated that the school must do its part in educating children in order to build trust with families. For reasons discussed previously, such as families feeling intimidated or struggling to meet basic needs, low income families often rely on the school for all of a child's education.

When speaking about how she and the school demonstrate high quality, Ms. Taylor explained the importance of the school and the family doing their respective parts. She said "So, we try to communicate to parents that we are going to work hard when we are here. We need some help at home, but children also need to be children because you only have one childhood." Mr. Davis has been a principal for over twenty years. He described common experiences working with low income families over the years. As he stated, "[In] most Title I schools, we will hear "I don't know how to help my child so I am leaving it up to the school." They turn their kids over to us to teach them." Ms. Roberts echoed Mr. Davis' statement, "You know they depend on the school to provide the education. They might help with homework some but the school has to [provide] the



education.” Ms. Lewis felt similarly “Most want the school to educate their child, and teach them at school. They are working; a lot of times they are working 3<sup>rd</sup> shift, and any time they have with their child, they don’t want to be doing homework with them. They want us to do the education.” Ms. Christopher spoke about the importance of the classroom teacher in building trust with families. She explained how she expresses her expectations to teachers in the school. As she said “We’re providing the education that their children should be getting, part of trust is what we do with their children in the classroom.”

When participants talked about their expectations for academics, they often included having a vision for achievement and a commitment to quality. For example, Ms. Johnson said:

I let them know our vision at this school. It’s one statement, small school, with a big heart where everyone excels. As I said before our vision statement says that. “We are a small school with a big heart, where everyone excels.” And we explain that. If you come to our family program or you ask our kids what is our goal here at the school, they will all say 100% in student achievement. And not just even in student achievement, we say everyone excels, our staff, everyone. We all give 100%. We all try to do what’s best for our children, and so we have to, we set the tone. We need to make sure our kids our learning. That’s what we’re here for. But we’ve made AYP, because we stress that you know, education is important, and they have to give 100%.

When speaking about quality, Ms. Scott’s statement paralleled Ms. Johnson’s. She stated:

Well we set our standards very high. I tell the teachers, and I tell the parents that the education that I want to give to your child is the same education as I would expect a teacher to give to my child. My children go to school here. I think you know that says a lot that you bring your own child to the school that you are going to be an administrator at. “I always ask the teachers okay, how is this going to affect Xavier? How is this going to affect Madeline?”

Ms. Scott’s assertions were confirmed by statements given by an anonymous on-site rater on the Red Carpet award rubric who said “this school exudes the aura of a school that is functioning at the very top levels academically...” Ms. Stevens also spoke about having a vision for academic achievement. She stated: “Well, for me and for my staff, we just talked about what is it that we want this school to be, and we all came to the realization that we wanted the school to be a place where we build and enhance success.”

Mr. Davis has also served as principal of another school that won the Red Carpet award prior to his current role. He spoke extensively about his vision for how working with families can and will make the difference in academic achievement. As he shared:

We are making goals-we want every family to know that no child in this school is going to the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade unless they are reading on level. We have all made a commitment. I can tell you the reading level of every child in this school. We constantly communicate with parents concerning where their child is academically. We have quarterly conferences with parents where we look at scores; we map a plan of what we are going to do here at school and what they can do at home.

In a slightly different way, Ms. James explained that her role includes helping families feel more confident in their children. She clarified this by saying that when families generally feel more confident in their children, they are more inclined to be involved in academic activities that contribute to student achievement. As she described her philosophy, she pointed to a series of academic award plaques on the back wall of the office.

She stated:

I keep telling them every time that they come into this building, [and] whenever I have an opportunity at PTO meetings. Whatever is going on I keep telling them that their kids are good, and their kids are smart and their kids are capable. And [I tell them] that we have got to work a little bit harder to reach the goals that we need to reach. [I tell parents] “I set my goal as to make sure your students aren’t put at the bottom of the rung.” And that, your students are put higher up, and I said I need your help to do that. So [we have] seen just this past year, and the year before that, that the test scores go up. And they know that I’m here for academics. They know that I’m here to try to do what’s in the best interest of children.

Focusing on academics emerged as a prominent theme yet was not anticipated prior to beginning the study. The majority (80%) of participants’ responses reflected this focus and six of the ten (60%) showed above average growth ratings on the most recent state report card confirming the validity of respondents’ statements.

## Summary

After obtaining appropriate clearance from the doctoral committee and Georgia Southern University Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher scheduled and conducted face-to-face audio-recorded interviews with ten (10) principals of Red Carpet award-winning, low income elementary schools in South Carolina. Artifacts such as flyers, memos, handbooks, school calendars, and Red Carpet School rubrics were collected for review and triangulation of data. Lived experiences of these participants along with information about the leadership practices of principals in low income Red Carpet winning elementary schools in South Carolina were gathered. Schools were located in three regions of the state and included suburban, urban, and rural contexts. The demographic profile of the participants showed diversity in background and experience.

This study utilized a qualitative research design and was grounded in symbolic interactionism. Each interview took place within the principal's office and lasted on-average 40 minutes; artifact review took approximately 30 more minutes per school. The researcher used a structured verbal interview protocol which included fourteen (14) questions with each question using at least one (1) subtopic question to elicit principals' responses about their everyday practices and how they perceive their role in building trust for family school involvement.

Based on body language, intonation, and the persistence of participants in answering questions, participants appeared to be giving thoughtful and truthful answers to the interview questions. In eight out ten cases (80%), principals spoke for a longer amount of time than they had committed to, with four of those eight lasting fifty minutes.

Several respondents indicated that they think about their leadership practices but had not previously thought in-depth about their role in trust-building until the interview. The study produced findings that included themes related to the following: participants' definition of trust; their perceptions regarding the role of trust in family involvement; participants' use of trust building strategies and participants' reporting of leadership practices. Themes and corresponding sub-themes are supported by quotations from participants

This study confirmed that principals of schools that have won Red Carpet awards for being family friendly are, in practice, using strategies and showing outward signs consistent with the criteria to build trust to improve family involvement. Respondents gave varied definitions of family-school trust that indicated three sub-themes: being inclusive; creating a safe comfortable place, and, inspiring a sense of confidence. Principals in the low income schools studied believe it is their direct responsibility to initiate and nurture family involvement. They believe they have a direct role in building trust with low income families and all of the participants interviewed believe that low income families are struggling and doing the best they can to help their children succeed. All participants use strategies to build and maintain family involvement and have won awards for being family-friendly. However, what made the biggest difference between the principals, who all met the same initial criteria, is that the majority, seven (7) of the ten participants (70%), believe that working with low income families to help meet their basic needs is a personal mission. Those principals regard families and children in the community as the sole reason for their existence. They believe that must serve in a bridging role and if they do not create the conditions necessary to help support low

income families as an extension of the community, it simply will not happen. They also believe they have a moral imperative to ensure that children in their care are receiving the quality education they deserve. In the final chapter, research is summarized, findings are discussed in relation to the literature, and implications for future research are identified.

## **Chapter V**

### **SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS**

Chapter V includes a summary of the study, analysis of findings, discussion of research findings, conclusions, implications and recommendations for future research, and concluding thoughts. This study explored the role of elementary principals in building and maintaining trust with low income families to improve family involvement. In this chapter, the research study is summarized, findings are linked with relevant literature, and implications are presented.

#### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to explore how elementary principals in low income, elementary schools in the southeastern U.S. use elements of relational trust in family involvement efforts. Grounded in cultural study and critical theory research traditions, and informed by symbolic interactionism, the study was guided by the following overarching question: How do elementary principals of low income schools use elements of trust to guide their leadership practices in family involvement efforts? The following sub-questions served to assist in answering the overarching question.

1. How do elementary principals define family-school trust?
2. How do elementary principals perceive the role of trust in family-school involvement?
3. What strategies do elementary principals use to develop and maintain family-school trust in order to improve family involvement?

After a thorough review of relevant literature including the topics of family involvement, trust, and leadership practices, a phenomenological study was conducted to

answer the research questions focused on the perceptions of current principals of low income, Red Carpet award winning elementary schools in South Carolina regarding their role in building trust with families. The study consisted of conducting face-to-face interviews and a review of artifacts. After the verbatim transcription of interviews by a trained third party transcriptionist, data analysis followed involving a line by line analysis of the transcribed interviews, color-coding of significant statements, deducing the meanings of significant statements, identifying major themes and sub themes, and searching for horizontality as recommended by Moustakes (1994). Data analysis of the in-depth interviews and artifacts revealed themes and sub themes. Principal perceptions provided thick, rich descriptions allowing the researcher to support the goals of the study.

#### **Analysis of Research Findings**

- Major finding I: Principals' definitions of family school trust vary, yet fall into one of three categories: being inclusive; providing a safe comfortable place, and/or, inspiring a sense confidence.
- Major finding II: Principals believe that trust plays an important role in family school trust by understanding that families are trying as hard as they can; helping low income families is a personal mission; and, they must act as a bridge between families, the school, and resources.
- Major finding III: Principals believe that the most productive strategies for working with low income families to build trust and improve involvement are using effective communication, providing school initiated involvement opportunities, and being community-oriented.



- Major finding IV: Principals believe that competently acting in the best interest of families by showing goodwill and having high academic expectations demonstrates leadership best practices.
- Major finding V: Principals believe they have a moral imperative to ensure that children in their care are receiving the quality education they deserve.

### **Discussion of Research Findings**

Data presented in Chapter IV were reviewed relative to common themes among participants. This study revealed themes related to principals' definitions of family-school trust, their role perceptions, how principals use trust building strategies, and principals' perceptions of their leadership practices. In addition to the themes, sub themes emerged. The sub themes that emerged from definitions of family-school trust were being inclusive, providing a safe comfortable place, and inspiring a sense of confidence. Role perceptions included acting as a bridge, having positive beliefs about families, and feeling a personal mission to serve. Trust strategies included providing school initiated involvement, being community-oriented, and communicating. Finally, principal leadership practices were found to include acting in the best interest of families, showing goodwill or benevolence, having a focus on academics, and performing the role of principal competently. As indicated by Creswell (2007), verbatim quotations were used to depict participants' understanding and lived experience while a synthesis of whole group descriptions were included consistent with Moustakes' (1994) finding that experience of the whole group must be included to lend substantiation to the findings.

Findings discussed in the previous section are consistent with the literature reviewed in Chapter II regarding the organizational conditions necessary to the formation

of family-school trust, crucial elements of trust, and the bridging, or boundary spanning role of principals. What follows is the correlation to the literature review.

### **Definitions.**

Part of the difficulty surrounding aspects of family involvement including family-school trust is due to the use of varied definitions among stakeholders (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004). Confirming this theory, respondents in this study defined family-school trust in three ways: being inclusive; providing a safe comfortable place, and inspiring a sense of confidence. Although principals gave varied definitions, they defined family-school trust in ways that Adams and Forsyth (2009) found positively influence and maintain the structures and relationships necessary to build trust. Respondents' definitions are also consistent with Jeynes (2010) explanation that subtle or intangible definitions may be more influential than more blatant efforts.

### **Role.**

Overall, participants believe that trust is important in family involvement and that most important is their role in building that trust. Consistent with Anderson and Minke (2007) one way principals in this study enacted their role was in seeking solutions to families' problems. The majority, seven out of ten (70%), of respondents also perceived that their biggest role is in acting as a bridge between families and the school and also between families and the larger community to obtain resources that will allow families to be more involved. This complements Auerbach's (2009) assertion that conventional family involvement practices are typically designed to reinforce the school's agenda rather than create bridges to the community. Principals' bridging efforts also support the work of Ferguson, Ramos, Rudo, and Wood (2008) who found a major reason for the

lack of family involvement in low income schools was a disconnect between families and the school that has widened over time.

Principals in this study expressed empathy when describing families. They indicated that families had valuable stores of knowledge which was consistent with finding of Gorski (2008) and Lareau and Horvat (1999) who found that viewing parents through a resource model instead of a deficit model is more effective for enhancing involvement. Most participants also said that doing whatever it takes to do right by children and their families is part of a personal mission to serve that shapes their actions. This is aligned with Sergiovanni's (2001) concept of servant leadership. He found the role of the principal to be a moral one tied to serving the purpose of the school and safeguarding the foundational integrity of the school.

### **Strategies.**

Principals described a variety of strategies they use to build trust with families. One strategy that half of the respondents (50%) stated they used was to explain procedures and policies to families to help them feel less intimidated. This is correlated with Caspe and Lopez (2006) and Simpkins and Weiss (2007) work with low income families where they found that family involvement practices should direct energy toward giving families the explicit knowledge and procedural insight needed to navigate the educational system for their benefit. Principals also described trying to combat misunderstandings through consistent and positive communication which is consistent with the work of Warren, Hong, Rubin, and Uy (2009), who found this strategy allowed families to have more institutional finesse needed to negotiate the system.

Encouraging community input and use of the school while taking the local context into consideration were common strategies reported by principals. These strategies coincide with the work of Adams, Forsyth, and Mitchell (2009), who indicated middle-class educators must assess community needs prior to creating and implementing practices intended to increase family involvement and build trust. Marschall and Stolle (2004) explained that neighborhoods surrounding schools provide the social and cultural networks that connect families to the school confirming the value of being community-oriented.

### **Practices.**

Bringing together all of the major themes of the study, principals day-to-day leadership practices represent the culmination of their beliefs, perceptions, and strategies used to build trust with low income families. An important finding of this study is that relational trust was found to exist based on a type of trust exemplified called affective trust. Affective trust is a type of trust that is defined as the confidence one places in another based on emotion, personal connections, and relationships between parties (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). This study found that affective trust was present between participants and families based on the responses of participants. This type is more often associated with family relationships instead of organizational relationships but was found in cases within the study based on principals' personal mission to help families meet basic needs. Auerbach (2007) described this principle as "ownership" in the school and educational process and found that principals who have a sense of ownership are more effective at involving families.

Principals repeatedly depicted incidents where they sought to build genuine partnerships by intentionally acting in the best interest of families and showing benevolence. Sixty (60%) of participants reported helping families with basic needs as a way to show benevolence. Acting in the best interest of families and showing benevolence is supported by Tschannen-Moran (2004) as a way to mediate the natural tendency to distrust among low income families. Acting in the best interest of families was also found by Murphy, Elliott, Goldring, and Porter (2007) to be a strategy of high performing schools and was included in their definition of leadership for learning.

Another way principals utilized best practices was to focus on academic achievement as a way to show families the school is trustworthy. As reported in Chapter IV, state achievement data was not reviewed until after the interview process was complete due to the timing of the release of the data. Upon review of the reports, the majority of schools in the study (60%) were found to have earned higher than average growth rates confirming the participants' statement about their focus on academics. Focusing on academic outcomes is aligned with Collins (2001). He found that the most successful organizations employ a relentless focus on results or outcomes instead of activities. Specifically included in the focus on academics was respondents' perceptions about their responsibility in ensuring teacher performance which was consistent with the work of Ferrara (2009) who found that the role of the principal is critical in shaping the perceptions of teachers and staff in a school and contributes to the climate of the school.

### **Conclusions**

The findings of the study were all aligned with existing literature as reviewed in Chapter II. There were no contraindications revealed. Based on the qualitative nature of

the study, findings represent the perceptions and beliefs of one set of principals used to help answer the research questions. Although findings from the study are not definitive, conclusions have been drawn from the study. Principals serving as leaders in low income schools need to be aware that they are the most influential person in the school when it comes to family involvement. Teachers may be the point of contact with families day-to-day, but the beliefs and leadership practices of the principal set the tone for family involvement, particularly with low income families. Building trust with low income families is an imperative function of the principal. Several elements make up the relational trust needed to provide the bridge between families and the school including competently performing the job, and being benevolent, reliable, honest, and open with families. When principals used these elements of trust to enact strategies intended to improve family involvement and guide their leadership practices, families were more involved, felt more satisfied with the school, and academic achievement improved. Principals must be aware of their perceptions and beliefs and how those influence their family involvement practices.

### **Implications**

Implications from this research can be important to current and aspiring principals, state department family involvement programs, leadership preparation programs, and the literature in the field of educational leadership. The role of trust in family involvement cannot be discounted particularly when working with low income families. Mistrust and misunderstandings are more prevalent between low income families and schools because “invisible” parents are often assumed to be uninvolved. This “invisibility” among low income families is often the result of their struggling to

meet basic needs. Trusting relationships are the “glue” between families and schools in low income areas and should be encouraged to help build the cooperation needed for the rigorous work of educating children.

Elementary principals in low income schools should reflect on the level of personal commitment required to work with this population prior to accepting a position. Principals in low income elementary schools should endeavor to better understand the local community context and work to build bridges between the school and families in the community. This study showed that competently performing the job, being benevolent, reliable, honest, and open with families were elements that must be practiced by principals in low income schools to effectively build trust.

The State of South Carolina should be made aware that the Red Carpet program is a valuable asset that principals and school communities value. The criteria that were established by the program align completely with the elements of trust found in the literature that supports more effective family involvement. The majority of principals spoke very highly of the criteria. They indicated that the process helped them focus on being more family friendly and also stated they would volunteer to help with purchasing the carpets to reduce program costs.

Leadership preparation programs should include components of building trust with families in coursework. It has been the experience of the researcher that leadership programs often focus on models of family involvement but do not study the subtle aspects of involvement such as trust and the pivotal role of the principal in building trust. Programs must also spend more time educating aspiring leaders about the special

commitment needed to lead a low income school based on the increase in low income populations in public schools.

Finally, this research will complement the existing body of literature on family involvement, principal leadership, and family-school trust because it confirms prior research that found principals are the gatekeeper and “conduit” in family school relations. This study also provides support for the importance of elements of trust identified by scholars which are the most important for building and maintaining family-school trust.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The role of the principal in building trusting relationships with low income families has been shown to be significant. This is important for current and future principals, family involvement efforts, and academic reform. School leaders must be aware of how role perceptions along with their beliefs about families impact their leadership practices in regard to family involvement. Trusting relationships form the “glue” that allow family-school involvement to happen. The following recommendations are supported by literature in the field and data collected from this study. This qualitative study was focused on the overarching research concept of principals’ perceptions of the role of trust in family involvement. Following are recommendations for future research.

- Since this study was conducted only with Red Carpet award winning elementary principals, future study might include award winning middle school or high school principals to compare results.
- Because all principals had already received awards for being family friendly, future research could include a study of elementary principals in non Red



Carpet low income schools to determine whether beliefs and perceptions of study principals are widespread.

- This study was qualitative in nature, and as such, included in-depth questions designed to explore more subtle aspects of trust and family involvement. Future research might include a quantitative study of all principals of Red Carpet schools that have won the award to expand the study.
- This study should also be expanded to include the background of participants to determine if they have had prior experience with low income families prior to their current position and whether or not that experience would make a difference in leadership practices.
- The findings of this study could be made into an instrument and sent to a large number of principals for a comparison study.
- Finally, future research should include a study of families in schools identified to determine their lived experiences and perceptions and to compare those to principal perceptions and beliefs. This would present both sides of the story of family-school trust.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

This chapter provided a summary of the study and a discussion of the findings related to relevant literature. Implications for current and aspiring principals, state department family involvement programs, leadership preparation programs, and existing leadership in the field. There is no doubt that the role of the modern principal is complex. By *hearing* the voices of ten elementary principals, this study shed light onto the complicated factors that determine family-school trust in low income schools and the

role of the principal in building that trust. With the rise of low income populations in public schools and families struggling more than ever before, it is crucial that principals in low income schools understand and embrace their role in building trust with families to improve involvement that will lead to greater achievement. Schools cannot and should not do it alone.

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## APPENDIX A

### Red Carpet Schools Alignment with Constructs of Trust

Red Carpet Schools by definition meet organizational conditions necessary to the formation of parent-school trust (Adams, Forsyth, & Mitchell, 2009).

|  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| Red Carpet Schools<br>Customer service element | Defined by program<br>guidelines as:  | Correlates to:<br>Tschannen-Moran (2004)<br>Bryk & Schnieder (2002)                                   |
| Friendliness                                   | Polite and courteous to the<br>customer   | TM (Benevolence) B&S<br>(Personal regard for others)  |
| Understanding & Empathy                        | Understanding and<br>appreciation of the<br>customer's feelings                         | TM (Benevolence) B&S<br>(personal regard for others)  |
| Fairness                                       | Just and impartial treatment<br>of all customers  | TM (benevolence,<br>reliability, honesty) B&S<br>(respect, personal regard for<br>others, integrity)  |
| Control  | Perceived ability of the<br>customer to impact the<br>decision-making process           | TM(benevolence, openness)<br>B&S(respect, personal<br>regard for others)                              |
| Options & Alternatives                         | Belief by the customer that<br>all avenues to satisfy their<br>request will be explored | TM (reliability, competence,<br>honesty, openness) B&S<br>(competence, personal<br>regard, integrity) |
| Information                                    | Access to information,<br>policies, and procedures<br>provided to the customer          | TM( honesty, openness)<br>B&S (competence, personal<br>regard)  |

## APPENDIX B

### Item Analysis

| Item                                    | Research  | Interview Question              | Research Question  |
|---|---|---------------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Defining family-school trust         | Forsyth & Adams   | 1                               | Sub 1              |
| 2. Low income family involvement        | Epstein; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler                             | 2                               | Sub 3              |
| 3. School initiated involvement         | Epstein; Jeynes   | 3                               | Overarching; sub 3 |
| 4. Showing goodwill                     | Hoover-Dempsey  | 4                               | OA; S3             |
| 5. Acting in best interests of families | Bouffard & Weiss  | 5                               | OA; S3             |
| 6. Role conflict                        | Reihl; Hoy & Miskel ;Rous, Hallam, Grove, Robinson, & Machara | 6                               | Sub 2              |
| 7. Communicating with families          | Johnson; Knopf & Swick  | 7                               | OA; S3             |
| 8. Competence                           | TSC-M / B&S   | 8                               | OA; S1             |
| 9. Honesty and integrity                | TSC-M / B&S   | 9                               | OA; S1             |
| 10. Trustworthiness                     | TSC-M / B&S   | 10                              | OA; S1             |
| 11. Advice others in role               | Marzano, Waters, & McNulty                                    | 11                              | OA; S2             |
| 12. Principal practices                 | Noonan & Walker   | 12                              | All                |
| Gender                                  | Hallinger & Murphy<br>Hallinger, Bickman, & Davis             | School context/demographics     |                    |
| Years experience                        | Daly; Hallinger, Bickman, & Davis                             | School context/<br>Demographics |                    |
| Years at school                         | Hallinger; Bickman, & Davis<br>Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel          | School context/demographics     |                    |

## APPENDIX C

### Interview Questions

#### 1. Selection Criteria

Is this a Red Carpet School? \_\_\_\_\_ Is this a Title I School? \_\_\_\_\_

#### 2. Demographics

Gender:        Male                  Female                  Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Years of experience as a principal: \_\_\_\_\_

Years as a principal at your current school: \_\_\_\_\_

#### 3. Interview Questions

1. How do you define family-school trust?
2. How involved are most families in their child's education?
3. What can schools do to get low-income families involved in their child's education?
4. How do you show good will to your low-income families? [benevolence]
5. Can you think of examples where you or your school has acted in the best interest of your families? [benevolence, honesty]
6. Has acting in the best interest of families ever conflicted with the best interest of your teachers or your school? [benevolence]
7. How often do you or your school communicate with families and in what ways? [reliability, openness]
8. How do you show your families that this is a high quality school? [competence]
9. How do you project a sense of honesty and integrity in working with your families? [honesty, openness]
10. If I asked a large sample of low income families about how trustworthy you and your school are, what am I likely to hear? [all 5 elements]
11. What advice do you have for other elementary principals about building trust with low income families in order to build and maintain family involvement? [all 5 elements]
12. Is there anything else you would like to add about the role of trust in family-school involvement? [all 5 elements]

## APPENDIX D

### Document Review Form

Participant \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ School \_\_\_\_\_

Type of document: \_\_\_Memo \_\_\_Handbook \_\_\_Sign-In log \_\_\_Conference form

In what ways has the principal demonstrated the following elements of trust?

| Element   | Behavior |
|---|----------|
| <u>Benevolence</u><br>(e.g. acts in best interest of others; goodwill)  |          |
| <u>Reliability</u><br>(e.g., predictability, consistency)   |          |
| <u>Competence</u><br>(e.g. deadlines will be met; high quality work)  |          |
| <u>Honesty</u><br>(e.g. authenticity and integrity)   |          |
| <u>Openness</u><br>(e.g. maintains confidence of information; reveals pertinent information in a timely manner) |          |

## APPENDIX E

### Georgia Southern Institutional Review Board Approval

|   |                         |                      |
|---|-------------------------|----------------------|
| Georgia Southern University<br>Office of Research Services & Sponsored Programs |                         |                      |
| <b>Institutional Review Board (IRB)</b>   |                         |                      |
| Phone: 912-478-0843   |                         | Veazey Hall 2021     |
|   |                         | P.O. Box 8005        |
| Fax: 912-478-0719   | IRB@GeorgiaSouthern.edu | Statesboro, GA 30460 |

**To:** Amy W. McClure  
Teri Melton  
Department of Leadership, Technology, and Human Development

**CC:** Charles E. Patterson  
Vice President for Research and Dean of the Graduate College

**From:** Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs  
Administrative Support Office for Research Oversight Committees  
(IACUC/IBC/IRB)

**Initial Approval Date:** April 29, 2011

**Expiration Date:** April 29, 2012

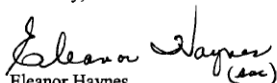
**Subject:** Status of Application for Approval to Utilize Human Subjects in Research

After a review of your proposed research project numbered **H11428** and titled "**The Role of Elementary Principal in Building Relational Trust with Low-Income Families.**" it appears that (1) the research subjects are at minimal risk, (2) appropriate safeguards are planned, and (3) the research activities involve only procedures which are allowable. You are authorized to enroll up to **14** subjects.

*Therefore, as authorized in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, I am pleased to notify you that the Institutional Review Board has approved your proposed research.*

If at the end of this approval period there have been no changes to the research protocol; you may request an extension of the approval period. Total project approval on this application may not exceed 36 months. If additional time is required, a new application may be submitted for continuing work. In the interim, please provide the IRB with any information concerning any significant adverse event, **whether or not it is believed to be related to the study**, within five working days of the event. In addition, if a change or modification of the approved methodology becomes necessary, you must notify the IRB Coordinator **prior** to initiating any such changes or modifications. At that time, an amended application for IRB approval may be submitted. Upon completion of your data collection, you are required to complete a *Research Study Termination* form to notify the IRB Coordinator, so your file may be closed.

Sincerely,

  
Eleanor Haynes  
Compliance Officer

**APPENDIX F**

## Summary of Documents Reviewed

|             | Red Carpet Rubric | PTO program | Newsletter | School handbook | Calendar Of events | State Report Card | Parent Rating |
|-------------|-------------------|-------------|------------|-----------------|--------------------|-------------------|---------------|
| Johnson     |                   |             | X          |                 |                    | x                 | x             |
| Stevens     |                   | x           | X          | X               | x                  | x                 | x             |
| Scott       | x                 | x           | X          | X               | x                  | x                 | x             |
| James       |                   | x           |            |                 | x                  | x                 | x             |
| Roberts     | x                 | x           | X          | X               | x                  | x                 | x             |
| Lewis       | x                 | x           | X          |                 |                    | x                 | x             |
| Christopher | x                 | x           | X          | X               | x                  | x                 | x             |
| Davis       |                   | x           | X          |                 | x                  | x                 | x             |
| Taylor      | x                 | x           | X          |                 | x                  | x                 | x             |
| King        |                   |             | X          |                 | x                  | x                 | x             |

## APPENDIX G

Table of Questions, Themes, and Categories

| Questions                                    | Themes                                 | Categories  |
|--|--|---|
| Overarching Principal's Leadership Practices | Acting in best interest of families    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fairness</li> <li>• Respect/treat as equals</li> <li>• Appropriate use of power</li> </ul>   |
|  | Showing goodwill/benevolence           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Families allowed control in decision making</li> <li>• Friendly courteous atmosphere</li> <li>• Helping with basic needs</li> </ul>                    |
|  | Having high expectations for academics | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schools must provide the education families expect</li> <li>• Providing families with ways to help</li> </ul>  |
|  | Performing role competently            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consistent policies and procedures</li> <li>• Tries to satisfy families' requests</li> <li>• Being visible</li> <li>• Follow through</li> </ul>        |
| Sub 1 Definition of Trust                    | Creating a safe comfortable place      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safety of building and children</li> <li>• Attention to school climate</li> </ul>  |
|  | Being Inclusive                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building rapport with all stakeholders</li> <li>• Accepting attempts by any interested party</li> </ul>  |
|  | Inspiring a sense of confidence        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Words and actions match</li> <li>• Responsive</li> <li>• Open, honest, and expecting honesty</li> </ul>  |
| Sub 2 Role perception                        | Acting as a bridge                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Principal must seek out resources</li> <li>• Building relationships</li> <li>• Seeking solutions</li> </ul>  |
|  | Having positive beliefs about families | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Families are trying as hard as they can.</li> <li>• Meet people where they are</li> <li>• Empathy</li> </ul>   |
|  | Having a personal mission              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Doing what is right for children</li> <li>• Disposition to serve others</li> <li>• Doing whatever it takes</li> </ul>                                  |
| Sub 3 Strategies                             | Providing school initiated involvement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offering wide variety of involvement options</li> <li>• Initial contact and personal invitations</li> <li>• Active PTO &amp; School Council</li> </ul> |
|  | Being Community Oriented               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage community use of school</li> <li>• Consulting with community</li> <li>• Understanding local context</li> </ul>                               |
|  | Communicating                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to information</li> <li>• Purposeful publicity</li> <li>• Informal language</li> <li>• Procedures explained and provided to families</li> </ul> |