

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT ACROSS THE TRANSITION FROM ELEMENTARY TO
MIDDLE SCHOOL: PARENT PERSPECTIVES OF SUPPORTS AND BARRIERS

by

MELISSA ANNE BAKER

(Under the Direction of Katherine F. Thompson)

ABSTRACT

Bringing families and schools together has long been acknowledged as a factor that has a positive correlation with a young adolescent's academic achievement (Brough & Irvin, 2001; Epstein, 1990; Sheldon, 2016). At the same time, families become less engaged with schools during the middle grades.

The purpose of this study was to explore parent perspectives of family engagement across their child's school transition from fifth grade in an elementary school to sixth grade in a middle school. In particular, this study sought to answer two specific research questions: (1) What are parent perspectives regarding the supports of family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school? (2) What are parent perspectives of barriers to family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school?

Through a multi-case study design, four parent participants of sixth grade middle school students in Northeast Georgia, during the 2016-2017 school year, described their experiences. Parent perspectives were first investigated separately using within-case analysis to gain insight into their family engagement experiences with one middle school and what experiences they believed served as supports and barriers to their engaging with the middle school. Participants'

perspectives were next investigated in a cross-case analysis to determine what similarities and differences of supports and barriers to family engagement across the school transition from elementary to middle school existed.

Three overall themes surrounding the supports and barriers to family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school emerged: (1) communication; (2) school climate, programming, and events; and (3) prior experiences. This study makes practical contributions for both research and practice in the field of school transitions and family engagement. Parent participants overwhelmingly believed elementary and middle schools involved in school transition should focus on clear, consistent, concise communication between families and schools. According to participants, schools should reach out to parents for assistance and advice to improve family engagement across the transition from elementary to middle school.

INDEX WORDS: Barriers and Supports to Family Engagement, Elementary School, Family Engagement, Middle School, Parent Perspectives, Parental Involvement, School Transition

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MELISSA ANNE BAKER

B.A., Susquehanna University, 2004

M.Ed., University of Tampa, 2009

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MELISSA ANNE BAKER

Major Professor: Katherine F. Thompson

Committee: P. Gayle Andrews
Sally Zepeda

Electronic Version Approved:

Suzanne Barbour
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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“All right, all right, all right!”

Matthew McConaughey

Oscar Acceptance Speech, 2014

Since the acknowledgements section appears to be the nerd equivalent of an Oscar acceptance speech, I began with a quotation from Matthew McConaughey as he so expressively summarizes my excitement about the culmination of this journey and preparing to embark on a new one. There are so many people who helped me and lifted me up along the way of completing this PhD.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more” (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 7).

For more than thirty years, the impact of partnerships between families and schools has been studied, and while there are differences among some researchers, most conclude that engaged families play a pivotal role in the academic success of students (Epstein et al., 2009; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Stormshak, Brown, Moore, Dishion, Seeley & Smolkowski, 2016). Today’s focus on family engagement is a result of the importance the U.S. Department of Education has placed on involving families in their children’s education (1996, 2010). The Department of Education has helped foster family engagement through federal programs such as Title I, Head Start, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Berger, 2008; Public Law 103-227; U.S. Department of Education, 1996).

While research and the federal government support and promote family engagement in schools, there continues to be a decline in family engagement as children progress through their education (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Stormshak et al., 2016). This decline is important because it has the potential to have a negative impact student academic achievement (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Stormshak et al. (2016) also noted that “a particularly salient time for intervening with parents may be during their child’s transition to middle school, in that problem behaviors often amplify during adolescence.” Data strongly suggest that there not only needs to be

increased family engagement to show long term change but also schools' efforts to engage families need to be coordinated, systematic, and organized (Epstein et al, 2009; Sheldon, 2016).

Exploring parent perspectives is important because research has shown that the frequency of family-teacher contacts, quality of family-teacher interactions and family engagement greatly decline after elementary school (Brough & Irvin, 2001; Epstein, 1990; Sheldon, 2016). The existing evidence of family engagement, however, has mostly been conducted at the elementary level, not at the middle school level (Balli, Demo, & Wedman, 1998; Parker, 2013) and does not offer much insight about parent perspectives as they move from elementary school to middle school. Also, most transition literature primarily focuses on student, not parent, experiences and perspectives of the move from an elementary to a middle school (Parker, 2013).

This study sought to address the gap in the literature regarding parent perspectives of the transition from elementary school to middle school. The purpose of this study was to explore parent perspectives of family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school, specifically from fifth grade to sixth grade. Using qualitative methods to explore parent perspectives of family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school, the researcher conducted interviews and collected artifacts over a nine-month period. Participants took part in gathering physical artifacts they identified as supports or benefits to family engagement across the school transition to middle school and participated in three semi-structured interviews. This study chronicled the perspectives of four parents from a northeast Georgia public school district as they, along with their children, transitioned from one of three urban elementary schools to an urban middle school.

Background of the Study

Upper Dublin Middle School (UDMS) is part of a larger partnership between a local university and the Upper Dublin County School District. For the past five years, UDMS has partnered with Middle Grades Education professors from the university who served as professors-in-residence. The professors spent 10-20 hours a week on-site at UDMS serving on multiple committees, aiding faculty, facilitating professional development, and teaching undergraduate and graduate courses on-site. One graduate course taught on-site focused on connecting Ph.D. students with UDMS faculty to implement service-learning projects based on the school's needs and initiatives.

Upper Dublin Middle School implemented a school improvement initiative to work towards establishing a positive school culture through engaging classroom environments that support student's emotional and social needs. The initiative also worked toward creating a partnership with families and community members based on mutual trust and respect to serve the needs of their students. According to Dr. Smith, principal of Upper Dublin Middle School, the 6th grade teachers saw a need to improve relationships with students and families due to challenging academic and social behaviors, noting that "We probably didn't make a good job of connecting with parents early on." Dr. Smith informed the researcher that the sixth grade teachers believed there was a disconnect between themselves and parents during the past school year and that they had expressed a need to improve relations.

A brief review of the literature underscored the importance of working with this parent target population, as well as the school's desire to support sixth grade students as they transitioned from one of three local elementary schools to Upper Dublin Middle School. Research has established that the transition from elementary school to middle school is pivotal

for the social, emotional, and academic success of a student (Holas & Hurston, 2012; Parker, 2009; Ryan, Shim, & Makara, 2013). The research clearly described a need for parents to be engaged with their children during this time; however, many studies showed a decline in family engagement as children get older (Brannon, 2007; Epstein, 1990; Zill & Nord, 1994). Research also detailed that middle school students whose families are engaged tend to have an easier time transitioning to middle school and high school, perform better academically, have higher graduation rates, and are more likely to attend postsecondary education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Mapp, 2004; Mac Iver & Messel, 2013). Since the school transition from elementary school to middle school is such a pivotal period for young adolescents, it is important that their families and teachers effectively support them.

Thinking further on the struggles of sixth grade teachers at UDMS, it became clear to the researcher that one way to potentially increase family engagement was to begin with families as they entered the sixth grade. The researcher constructed, collected, and analyzed data on fifth and sixth grade students, fifth and sixth grade teachers, and sixth grade parents, the UDMS principal, family engagement specialist, and sixth grade teachers. The researcher believed by constructing and collecting data on the previously mentioned groups, she could use the information to assess the school's current family engagement activities for students and parents transitioning from fifth to sixth grade and make changes to their family engagement activities based on the needs, wants, and concerns of students, parents, and teachers.

Conversations with faculty and administration at UDMS led the researcher to an interest in developing and completing further research on family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school. After multiple discussions, it was decided that the

researcher would focus solely on parent perspectives and possibly uncover reasons why transitioning families become engaged or disengaged with the Upper Dublin Middle School.

This study allowed parents whose children were transitioning from fifth grade at urban elementary schools to sixth grade at an urban middle school to share their perspectives about the supports of and barriers to family engagement. The researcher examined what parents perceived as supports of and barriers to family engagement, specifically in their attempts to engage with their young adolescent children as they prepared to graduate from elementary school and later as they acclimated themselves to a middle school.

By allowing parents to describe how they were helped and hindered in engaging with schools, the data can provide middle schools with a better understanding of how parents experience and perceive family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school. In addition to allowing participants to describe and reflect on their own experiences, this study identified ways that middle grades schools may support families whose children are transitioning from an elementary school to their neighboring middle school.

The existing evidence on family engagement has mostly been conducted at the elementary level while neglecting the middle school level (Balli, Demo, & Wedman, 1998; Parker, 2013). Also, most transition literature primarily focuses on students or teachers, not parents, across the school transition from elementary schools to middle schools (Parker, 2013).

A thorough search of the literature did not produce one study that focused on the supports of and barriers to family engagement from the perspectives of parents during the transition from elementary to middle school. The literature reviewed did reveal that family engagement during the transition process contributes to and impacts academic achievement (Baker & Stevenson, 1986; Paulson, 1994) and the frequency of parent-teacher contacts, quality of parent-teacher

interactions, and family engagement greatly declines after elementary school (Brough & Irvin, 2001; Epstein, 1990; Izzo, Weissburg, Kasprow, & Fendrich, 1999). The review also confirmed that theories, research, and policies in promoting academic achievement across elementary and secondary school levels have identified that families, family-school relations, and family engagement in education play a significant role in academic achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001; Hill & Chao, 2009; Seginer, 2006).

Statement of the Problem

During the spring of 2014, the researcher took a graduate level service-learning course on-site at Upper Dublin Middle School. This course centered on completing an individual service-learning project that was based on the needs of a local middle school. To determine the needs of the school, the researcher read through Upper Dublin Middle School's school improvement initiative to better their school, spoke at length with Dr. Smith, Upper Dublin Middle School's principal, and considered where the researcher's strengths and interests could best be put to use.

This service-learning project and discussions with Upper Dublin Middle School administration and faculty led to the decision for the researcher to complete further research surrounding parents' perspective of the school transition from elementary school to middle school. The lack of existing data on parents' perspectives across a school transition is consistent with Parker's (2013) statement that, "transition literature primarily focuses on students' experiences with and perspectives of the move from an elementary to middle grades school" (p. 496). Since there has been limited research on parent perspectives regarding supports of and barriers to family engagement surrounding the school transition from elementary school to middle school, a gap in the literature exists for the researcher to explore.

This study shed light on parent perspectives that could prove useful to Upper Dublin Middle School administration and faculty. The results of this study could also be useful for elementary and middle schools looking to alter their family engagement experiences related to the school transition from elementary school to middle school to better meet the needs of their families. Finally, this study may inform the middle grades literature about the supports and barriers parents perceive that may or may not be occurring across the elementary school to middle school transition process.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to explore parent perspectives of family engagement during their child's school transition from fifth grade in an elementary school to sixth grade in a middle school. Specifically, the researcher examined parents' perspectives of supports of and barriers to their attempts to be engaged with their young adolescent child at both the elementary school and middle school during this time period. The participants in this study included parents from three elementary schools that would attend the same middle school in an urban setting in northeastern Georgia. A qualitative case study approach was used to gather and share parents' perspectives and experiences of the supports of and barriers to family engagement across the school transition from elementary to middle school. This case study was grounded in constructivist theory. The methods used were interviews and a collection of physical artifacts.

Research Questions

The purpose of the study was to explore parent perspectives of family engagement across their child's school transition from fifth grade in an elementary school to sixth grade in a middle school.

The guiding research questions were:

- (1) What are parent perspectives regarding the supports of family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school?
- (2) What are parent perspectives of barriers to family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school?

By allowing participants to describe and reflect on their experiences, this study will identify ways that middle level schools and teachers could better support family engagement experiences in their schools and minimize the barriers that inhibit parents' efforts to be actively engaged.

Framing the Study

To frame a study that explores parent perspectives of family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school, the researcher incorporated a framework that acknowledges the roles of individual attitudes, values, and prior experiences and interactions surrounding family engagement (Ziniewicz, 2012). Constructivism offers such a framework for how people construct their understandings and knowledge of the world through experience and reflect on those experiences (Dewey, 1933 & 1938; Piaget, 1976).

Constructivism is not a theory but rather an epistemology or philosophical explanation that contends individuals form or construct much of what they learn and understand (Schunk, 2008). Constructivists do not believe knowledge as truth but is a working hypothesis in which knowledge is formed by each individual's constructions, which differ from person to person, based on their beliefs and experiences in situations (Schunk, 2008). All knowledge is then considered to be subjective and personal and a product of our cognitions (Simpson, 2002).

In reading Dewey's works (1933, 1938), the researcher was struck by the importance he places on experience. Greene (2007) provided the researcher with a direction to interpret the experiences of transitioning parents.

Dewey's ideas about social inquiry are rooted in his transactional or relational view of knowledge or understanding. The meaning of human experience, that is, resides neither exclusively in the objective real world nor exclusively in the internal mind of the knower, but rather in their interaction or transaction. Moreover, the truth of this meaning is enacted in the consequences of action. In other words, action is constitutive of truth, meaning, and knowledge. And inquiry is initiated by a felt difficulty a perceived indeterminacy, an imbalance between organism and environment. Everyday inquiry, just like more disciplined and well planned scientific inquiry, is undertaken to pursue and learn about or resolve this indeterminacy or unease. Distinctive to scientific inquiry is that the actions and inferences made are embedded in a conceptual network. (Greene, 2007, p. 84)

Experience, according to Dewey (1938), takes place when there is purposeful reflection after an action. For the purpose of this research, parents reflected on their actions, as well as the school's actions regarding family engagement as they transitioned from an elementary school to middle school. The significance lies in the learning of their lived experiences through a constructivist lens. In this research, participants were offered a space to reflect on what they perceived to be supports and barriers across their school transition from elementary to middle school. By providing a space for individual voices to be heard and valued, this study created a space for parents to use experiences to develop their perspectives and the researcher to view how parents

constructed their own understanding and knowledge of family engagement through experience and reflecting on those experiences.

In this study, parent participants were considered the learners as they sought to navigate themselves and their children through the school transition from elementary school to middle school. Participants had pre-existing perspectives of what family engagement meant to them that were based on their prior experiences with schools. Experience differs from person to person; each person feels and acts differently. Each has a different angle of vision that touches upon a common world (Ziniewicz, 2012). Because each person experiences life, interactions with schools, and family engagement differently, it was important that the researcher interview more than one parent from each elementary school site. By learning from their individual experiences, the researcher was better able to understand how parents individually experience and perceive the supports of and barriers to family engagement across the school transition from elementary to middle school.

When thinking of supports and barriers that aid or hinder parents efforts to be actively engaged in middle schools, the researcher realized, as Dewey (1938, p. 28) that, “it is not enough to insist upon the necessity of experience, nor even the activity in experience. Everything depends upon the quality of the experience which is had.” By interviewing parents and learning from their experiences, the researcher was able to uncover parents’ perspectives of family engagement experiences, whether those experiences served as supports or barriers, and the overall quality of the transition events and experiences provided by the schools.

One final consideration regarding Dewey’s thoughts on experience is that, “every experience is a moving force. Its value could be judged only on the ground of what it moves toward and into” (p.38). Since every experience is a moving force, the researcher paid particular

attention to parents' perspectives. The researcher noted if the moving force was going in a direction parents wanted family engagement to move toward. The researcher discovered if each experience was a support or barrier and how it moved and shaped family engagement, experiences, and interactions between parents and schools.

Overview of the Methods

This study explored parent perspectives of family engagement across their child's school transition from fifth grade in an elementary school to sixth grade in a middle school. The design of this study was qualitative in nature, focused on purposeful sampling, collection of open-ended data, analysis of text, and personal interpretation of the findings to inform UDMS sixth grade faculty and staff about the perspectives incoming parents have about family engagement as they transition to middle school (Creswell, 2014).

To explore parent perspectives of family engagement across their child's school transition from 5th grade in an elementary school to 6th grade in a middle school, the researcher use case study (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2009). Parent participant interviews were conducted the summer following their child's final year of elementary school (fifth grade) and twice in their child's first year of middle school (sixth grade). In addition, parent participants were asked to identify physical artifacts from the school that made them feel welcome and embraced as part of their child's education (support) and/or what made them feel unwelcome or unwanted as part of their child's education (barrier).

In total, four parents of children entering Upper Dublin Middle School from three elementary feeder schools were recruited to participate in this study. Participants came from a pool of parents/guardians who attended a Upper Dublin Middle School transition meeting in April of 2016.

Data were collected at three points and the researcher engaged in data transcription and/or data analysis during each point. Data from the first interview were used to help shape questions for the second semi-structured interview. After all data were collected and analyzed, the researcher coded the data using the constant comparative method to compare different pieces of data (Creswell, 2014). Using the constant comparative method allowed the researcher to make comparisons and develop themes from the data.

Significance of the Study

A relevant, informative study is crucial to provide the field with a better understanding of the reality of parents as they transition, along with their children, from elementary school to middle school. This study is also crucial due to the need for a greater understanding of why parents engage or disengage from middle schools.

This study shed light on the supports and barriers to family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school. The information garnered could be used in conjunction with similar research that has been performed about students and teachers to gain better insight in to how to meet students and their families' needs during this significant time. The positive or negative experiences of family engagement across the transition to middle school may impact family engagement for the remainder of parents' middle school experiences, yet evidence of current research in this area continues to be lacking. Furthermore, the existing literature, while informing that there is a decline of family engagement at the middle school level, does not delineate when the shifts occur during the middle grades, what specific grade levels, or offer detailed insight from families. The field surrounding transitions and family engagement may certainly benefit from further exploration of parent perspectives of family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school. The findings

are of significance to researchers or other school faculty who desire to learn more about parent perspectives. To date, research in this area is lacking. This research will help illuminate how to better meet the needs of parents who are an integral group in aiding young adolescents' academic success during middle school.

The supports and barriers parents perceive of family engagement across the transition to middle school may impact how parents interact with their children and the school. To date, it is difficult to tell if family engagement is impacted because current research in this area is lacking. Furthermore, the existing literature primarily focuses on benefits and barriers and is not specific to this transitional time period but to schools in general. This study holds significant implications for sixth grade teachers at Upper Dublin Middle School who expressed a desire to increase family engagement.

The findings regarding parent perspectives of family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school will also benefit elementary school and middle school family engagement specialists and school administrators. Administrators could look to the barriers to see what should be adapted to meet the needs of families and look to the supports to be aware of what parents believe is working, as well as whether experiences could be strengthened or expanded upon.

Assumptions

Assumptions are present within every case study. This study makes multiple assumptions regarding the context and its participants. First, a basic assumption of constructivism is that people are active learners and must construct knowledge for themselves. To understand material well, learners must discover the basic principles for themselves. Constructivists differ in the extent to which they ascribe this function entirely to learners. Some believe

that mental structures come to reflect reality, whereas others (radical constructivists) believe that the individual's mental world is the only reality. Constructivists also differ in how much they ascribe the construction of knowledge to social interactions with teachers, peers, parents, and others. (Schunk, 2008, p. 237)

While the researcher believes that each person's truth and understandings differ from the next person, she does not believe that the individual's mental world is the only reality because we all still communicate and interact with others to form joint or group perspectives and realities.

While developing this study, the researcher had multiple assumptions regarding the participants, their perspectives, and what this study would uncover. The researcher assumed that all of the participants would be eager to share and discuss their experiences and perspectives during each interview and would gather artifacts to display as perceived supports and barriers to family engagement. The researcher assumed all participants would be actively engaged with the elementary and middle schools. The researcher realized that the participants might not wish to discuss all aspects of their experiences, that they might not have time to gather and save artifacts, and that being actively involved with a school may be different for each participant and the researcher. These assumptions are based on the researcher's prior experiences as a middle grades teacher and an educational researcher.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined within the context of the study. These definitions are presented to help the reader understand the meaning of critical terms.

Barrier- For the purpose of this study, a barrier is something, an act or artifact that influences the functioning of family engagement in a negative manner as perceived by the parent.

Family engagement- Family engagement is collaborative, culturally competent, and focused on improving children's learning (NAFSCE, 2016). Family engagement is defined by the National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group (2010) as:

- A shared responsibility in which schools and other community agencies and organizations are committed to reaching out to engage families in meaningful ways and in which families are committed to actively supporting their children's learning and development.
- A continuous across a child's life and entails enduring commitment but changing parent roles as children mature into young adulthood.
- Effective family engagement cuts across and reinforces learning in the multiple settings where children learn – at home, in prekindergarten programs, in school, in after school programs, in faith-based institutions, and in the community.

Middle School- In the state of Georgia, a local school system that has organized its schools to house grades six, seven, and eight, and has a full-time principal, qualifies as a middle school (O.C.G.A. 20-2-290).

Parent- For the purpose of this study, parent refers to the natural parent, legal guardian or other person standing in *loco parentis*, including, but not limited to, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, or stepparents who the child lives with, or is legally responsible for the child (United States Department of Education, 2004).

School transition- For the purpose of this study, school transition a process that prepares all partners – students, families, schools and communities to develop knowledge, skills, and relationships that help students move from one educational setting to another (Georgia Afterschool Investment Council et al., 2012).

Support- For the purpose of this study, a support is something, an act or artifact that influences the functioning of family engagement in a positive manner as perceived by the parent.

Limitations of the Study

The study was limited by the number of parents who participated in the study. While 32 parents were recruited, only four parents participated in the study. Therefore, only a small portion of the school's incoming sixth grade parents shared their perspectives of the supports and barriers to family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school. Given the sensitive nature of the data, another limitation of the study was protecting participant identities.

Organization of the Dissertation

The dissertation is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 provided an introduction of the research by describing the background of the study, the statement of the problem and purpose of the study. Additionally, the first chapter addressed the conceptual framework included an overview of the research methods, detailed the significance of the study, described the researcher's assumptions, provided definitions of key terms, and described the study's limitations.

Chapter 2 presents a review of the related literature relevant to the context of the study. The review begins with a historical overview of families and schools, followed by a review of the barriers, supports, and benefits to family engagement. The research method and how the study was performed are presented in chapter 3. Chapter 4 presents the case study findings. The fifth chapter will conclude with a discussion of the findings and implications for future research.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

The term family engagement is often used interchangeably with parent or family involvement; however, the terms, while similar, are not synonymous. To clarify confusion associated with these terms, this chapter will review the shift from parent involvement to family engagement. What is family engagement and how is it defined? Family engagement is collaborative, culturally competent, and focused on improving children's learning (NAFSCE, 2016). Family engagement is defined by the National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group (2010) as:

- A shared responsibility in which schools and other community agencies and organizations are committed to reaching out to engage families in meaningful ways and in which families are committed to actively supporting their children's learning and development.
- A continuous across a child's life and entails enduring commitment but changing parent roles as children mature into young adulthood.
- Effective family engagement cuts across and reinforces learning in the multiple settings where children learn – at home, in prekindergarten programs, in school, in after school programs, in faith-based institutions, and in the community.

The purpose of the study was to explore parent perspectives of family engagement across their child's school transition from fifth grade in an elementary school to sixth grade in a middle school.

The guiding research questions were:

- (1) What are parent perspectives regarding the supports of family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school?
- (2) What are parent perspectives of barriers to family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school?

Bringing families and schools together has long been acknowledged as a factor that has a positive correlation with a young adolescent's academic achievement (Brough & Irvin, 2001; Epstein, 1990; Sheldon, 2016). At the same time, much research shows families become less engaged with schools during the middle grades (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Stormshak et al., 2016).

This chapter presents the review of related literature in which this study was grounded. First discussed is a historical overview of the connection between families and schools because it is important to chronicle the changes of involving and engaging families over the last 50 years. Next, the benefits, supports and barriers to family engagement are detailed. Lastly, school transitions for young adolescents are discussed.

Families and Schools: A Historical Overview

For over thirty years, the impact of partnerships between families and schools has been studied, and while there are differences among some researchers, most conclude that engaging families plays a pivotal role in the academic success of students (Epstein et al., 2009). Today's focus on engaging families in a student's education is a result of several decades of research establishing its importance to a student's success in school (Denner, Laursen, Dickson & Hartl, 2016; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Hill & Taylor, 2004) and led to legislation tasking schools to develop and implement meaningful family engagement. The U.S. Department of Education has

helped foster engagement through federal programs such as Title I, Head Start, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Berger, 2008).

President Bill Clinton signed *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* (Public Law 103-227) into law in March 1994 (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). The act states that by the year 2000, “every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children” (U.S. Department of Education, 1996, p. 1). During this time, parental involvement increased and was viewed by many as the most important factor in the education of children (Berger, 2008). More recently, under the Obama administration (U.S. D.O.E., 2010), a blueprint for the reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* was released, which supports school, district, and state efforts to engage families by:

- Supporting comprehensive district approaches to family engagement
- Enhancing district capacity around family engagement
- Providing for a new family engagement and responsibility fund
- Identifying and supporting best practices of family engagement

Partnerships between families and schools have evolved over the past 50 years to engage families in more meaningful ways to benefit students academically (U.S. DOE 1996, 2004, 2010). Parent involvement, family involvement, and family engagement models are described and contrasted below. The discussion of the evolution of engaging families continues with a look at the direction in which family engagement is headed. The section is rounded out with a description of how family engagement intersects with young adolescents and the school transition from elementary school to middle school.

What is Parent Involvement?

A review of the literature on parent involvement results in broad findings that vary when describing how parents are involved in their children's middle schools (Cripps & Zyromski, 2015; Hill & Tyson, 2009). Defining parent involvement, then, becomes difficult. The term itself, however, delimits who is or should be involved in children's education (Hidalgo, 1998).

The literature on parents and schools shows that schools can involve parents in a multitude of ways (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hill & Tyson, 2009). Generally, however, parent involvement has been viewed as getting parents to participate in schools and building parent-school connections. Some studies (Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002) describe parent involvement as a combination of activities including helping children with homework, volunteering in the classroom or school office, and being involved in the school's PTA.

Shifting toward Family Engagement

Family involvement and family engagement are terms that continue to be defined in similar ways in education literature, which can be problematic because it can lead to misunderstanding of expectations between families and schools. Coleman and Churchill (1997) found it hard to agree on the meaning of family involvement and noted that ambiguous definitions of family involvement can be problematic. Without consensus from the field on a definition of family involvement, the result is often, "programs that are merely a series of disconnected activities with little relevance to family or classroom environments" (Coleman & Churchill, 1997). Despite the ambiguity, these related and overlapping definitions share the common objective of supporting student learning and growth through partnerships between home and school (Epstein, 1995; Weiss, Lopez, & Rosenberg, 2010).

Parent involvement models focus more on school programming, school activities, and priorities identified by the school (Christenson, 2004; Epstein, 1995). Under a parent involvement model, parents who are involved serve the school's agenda by volunteering, parenting in positive ways, and supporting students' learning at home (Clayton, 2016), whereas family involvement and family engagement expand and elaborate on the parent involvement models. Family involvement and engagement both expand and elaborate on the notion of parent involvement by including other family members or caregivers in a student's life and incorporating a wider range of student and family outcomes (Halgunseth, 2009). For example, "when schools engage parents and families, ideas come primarily from the conversations between families and communities based on their needs and priorities that are reflected in the data" (Clayton, 2016).

Halgunseth and Peterson (2009) remind us that the, "concept of family engagement (versus parent involvement) recognizes all members of a child's family (not just parents) and emphasizes the importance of the reciprocal relationship between families and schools." Engaged family members are considered to be valued stakeholders and share a common vision and goal with the school as opposed to a top-down parental involvement approach in which schools dictate how parents are to be involved.

One of the most comprehensive pieces of literature dealing with family involvement and student achievement is a synthesis of 80 studies and literature reviews compiled by Henderson and Mapp (2002). The report was compiled to aid principals, teachers, legislators, school board members, and parental leaders in learning more about family involvement activities and their effects on student achievement. This study refers to the activities of parents as involvement, though these activities go well beyond the traditional definition of involvement activities. For

example, one non-traditional parental involvement practice that proves to be effective is holding workshops on topics that families suggest, like building their children's vocabulary, developing positive discipline strategies, and supporting children through crisis (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Family involvement models focus on how families support their child's development both academically and socially (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Wilder, 2014). While the models recognize that families and teachers share responsibility for a child's academic learning, family engagement models go further in nurturing relationships with families and students within the overall school community (Weiss et al., 2010). Ferlazzo (2011) best explained what the differences between family involvement and engagement are.

To create the kinds of school-family partnerships that raise student achievement, improve local communities, and increase public support, we need to understand the difference between family involvement and family engagement. One of the dictionary definitions of involve is to "enfold or envelope," whereas one of the meanings of engage is "to come together and interlock." Thus, involvement implies doing to; in contrast, engagement implies doing with.

A school striving for family involvement often leads with its mouth – identifying projects, needs, and goals then telling parents how they can contribute. A school striving for family engagement, on the other hand, tends to lead with its ears – listening to what parents think, dream, and worry about. The goal of family engagement is not to serve its clients but to gain partners.

It's not that family involvement is bad. Almost all the research says that any kind of increased parent interest and support of students can help. But almost all the research also

says that family engagement can produce even better results – for students, for families, for schools, and for their communities. (Ferland, 2011)

Regardless of the model being used in schools, leaders in family involvement and engagement work describe the current landscape of practices in schools as consisting of random acts of involvement or engagement (Weiss et al., 2010). Many researchers (Berger, 2008; Weiss & Lopez, 2009) recommend that when developing family-school partnerships, schools should not only offer activities for engaging families, but also develop school environments that are welcoming to all families and convey trust. In more recent years, work by many researchers discusses a shift, which, regardless of formal terms used, represents family engagement (Halguneth et al., 2009; Weiss et al., 2010). Researchers (Halguneth et al., 2009; Weiss & Lopez, 2009) compiled, reviewed and synthesized past models that conceptualized and measured family engagement while discussing the need to broaden existing perspectives on family engagement to one that focuses on strengthening the relationship between families and schools to foster a student's academic and social well-being.

The next section shifts to the development and fleshing out of family engagement primarily focusing on the Harvard Family Research Project.

What is Family Engagement?

It is the belief of the Harvard Family Research Project (HRFP) (Weiss & Lopez, 2009) that “a clear and commonly shared definition of family engagement can and will inspire policy investments in family engagement, which will, in turn, contribute to school improvement and student success.” To come to a shared definition, Weiss and Lopez collected, analyzed, and built a framework based on existing models. Their framework was primarily built on an earlier model

by Weiss and Lopez (2009), which the Family, School and Community National Working Group used to define family engagement. It is centered on three principles (Weiss & Lopez, 2009):

- (1) Family engagement is a shared responsibility in which schools and other community agencies and organizations are committed to reaching out to engage families in meaningful ways and in which families are committed to actively supporting their children's learning and development.
- (2) Family engagement is continuous across a child's life and entails enduring commitment but changing parent roles as children mature into young adulthood.
- (3) Effective family engagement cuts across and reinforces learning in the multiple settings where children learn – at home, in prekindergarten programs, in school, in after school programs, in faith-based institutions, and in the community.

For the purpose of this study, family engagement is a reciprocal framework which focuses not only on involving families in student learning but also on how schools and families can work together to better support student learning (Weiss, Lopez & Rosenberg, 2010, p.5). HRFP, which as of January 1, 2017 transitioned to the non-profit Global Family Research Project gives an expanded definition of family engagement as one that focuses on the multiple contexts in which children grow and learn from birth to adulthood. Family engagement is about promoting children's learning anywhere, anytime. Effective family engagement cuts across the multiple settings where children learn – at home, at school, in afterschool programs, at faith-based institutions, and in the community (HRFP, 2016; NAFSCE, 2016).

School Transition

School transition is defined as a process that prepares all partners – students, families, schools and communities to develop knowledge, skills, and relationships that help students move

from one educational setting to another (Georgia Afterschool Investment Council et al., 2012).

There are three groups of people who primarily make up the transition from elementary school to middle school: students, teachers, and parents. While research has focused on all three groups involved in the transition process, most of that research has been done surrounding the transition from middle to high school. Below is a brief description of existing literature surrounding each group regarding transitions from elementary to middle grades schools.

Students

By far the most studied of the three groups, research on student transitions from elementary to middle grades schools appears to have encompassed all facets surrounding young adolescents including peer acceptance, young adolescent character strengths, student discipline problems, extracurricular activities, and gender and race variables.

Researchers (Kingery, Erdley, & Marshall, 2011) examined several aspects of young adolescents' social lives including peer acceptance, number of friends, quality of a specific mutual friendship, loneliness, depression, self-esteem, and involvement in school. The researchers found that the pre-transition peer variables contributed significantly to the prediction of post-transition adjustment, indicating that adolescents' pre-transition social interactions play a key role in their academic success following the transition. To better prepare students for the transition to middle school, Kingery et al. (2011) suggest it is important to focus intervention efforts on children with "low peer acceptance to increase their social support network. The strong links between peer acceptance and school adjustment suggest that school officials may positively impact students' school attitudes and achievement by introducing programs focused on improving peer relationships." They also concluded that establishing and sustaining middle school intervention programs that include a peer component would likely lead to improved

psychological adjustment and experience a more positive school adjustment during this transitional time.

Shoshani and Slone (2012) also focused on the social well-being of young adolescents during the transition from elementary to middle school when they studied young adolescents' character strengths, subjective well-being, and school adjustment. Similarly to Kingery et al. (2011), Shoshani and Slone also performed a quantitative study using questionnaires. The researchers found a correlation between character strengths and middle school adjustment and interpersonal strengths were strongly related to social functioning at school.

Continuing along the vein of strong interpersonal skills and peer relationships being beneficial for young adolescents as they transition from elementary to middle school, Akos (2006) found that extracurricular participation has the potential to influence student belonging and promote positive academic and psychosocial outcomes; combatting the many negative academic and social student outcomes associated with the transition to middle school. Students transitioning from elementary school to middle school who participate in extracurricular activities have a strong correlation with multiple factors including GPA, students' feelings of connectedness, and student perceptions of the transition from elementary to middle school.

While it has been found that extracurricular activities and strong interpersonal skills can help a child adjust well during the transition from elementary to middle school, researchers (Theriot & Dupper, 2010) found it important to examine students struggling with disciplinary problems during this time of transition. The authors suggest implementing interventions to reduce peer-on-peer conflict, which they assert will lessen the number of students disciplined for fighting. Intervention programs that have demonstrated effectiveness in lessening peer-on-peer conflict include Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) and Resolving Conflicts

Creatively Program (RCCP). These programs promote emotional and social competencies and reduce aggression and behavior problems. The authors, who used statistical data about a school's discipline referrals, note it is important for transition programs to be sensitive to the common and unique needs of its own students and "should extend beyond the school building to help students handle problems originating at home or in their community (Theroit & Dupper, 2010)."

As Theroit and Dupper spoke of student differences, Akos and Galassi (2004a) addressed gender and race as variable in the psychosocial adjustment to middle school. The authors spoke of the negative outcomes surrounding school transition, including decreases in self-esteem and academic motivation, and found that gender and race can play a role in school transition outcomes. Because of gender and race differences, the researchers believe schools should develop transition programming for different groups of students.

Teachers

Midgley, Anderman, and Hicks's (1995) research studied the differences between elementary and middle school teachers. Middle school teachers perceived that the school culture was more performance focused and less task focused than elementary school teachers did. The authors were unsettled by the school culture being more performance based because they believed that "when task focused, students try harder, persist longer, take more challenging work, and are more creative than when they are performance focused," and that when performance focused, students were more apt to use surface-level strategies that included reading text, memorization, and guessing.

While Midgley et al.'s (1995) research focused on the differences between elementary and middle school teachers, Schumacher (1998), focused on specific challenges teachers

believed students faced across the school transition from an elementary school to a middle level school (Table 2.1). The 19 challenges listed included,

Table 2.1

Teacher Beliefs on School Transition Challenges for Students (Schumacher, 1998)

Student Challenges Across the Transition from Elementary School to Middle School	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changing classes • Reduced parent involvement • More teachers • No recess or free time • New grading standards and procedures • More peer pressure • Developmental differences between boys and girls • Cliquishness • Fear of new, larger, more impersonal school • Accepting responsibility for their own actions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dealing with older children • Merging with students from multiple elementary schools • Unrealistic parental expectations • Lack of experiences dealing with extracurricular activities • Unfamiliarity with lockers • Following the school schedule • Longer-range assignments • Coping with adolescent physical development • Social immaturity

Of the 19 specific challenges teachers believed students faced, a majority of them dealt with socialization and not academics. Socialization challenges support researchers' findings (Kingery et al., 2011; Shoshani & Slone, 2012) that socialization, support services, and transitional programs for young adolescents are vital for transitioning students in aiding their academic success and an overall better social well-being.

Searching for recent literature from teachers' perceptions was difficult to find. Akos and Galassi (2004b) confirmed "that in most of the transition research, the voices of those who are most directly involved – the students along with their parents and teachers – have been heard only infrequently. In the authors' well-rounded research that surrounded parents, teachers, and students, they found that middle school teachers appeared to have different perceptions from

parents and students about the most influential transition concerns. Middle school teachers focused mostly on students' ability to navigate the school's physical and social environment. While their focus on what is important may differ from parent and student perceptions, it is clear that six years after Schumacher's findings on teacher beliefs about transition challenges, teachers continue to focus on the same concerns.

Parents

The least amount of research has been done on this group surrounding the transitions from elementary to middle grades schools. Parker (2013) stated that, "transition literature primarily focuses on students' experiences with and perceptions of the move from elementary to middle grades schools (p.496)."

Researchers (Akos & Galassi, 2004b) studied how middle school transitions were viewed by parents. When developing parent questionnaires for their study, researchers (Akos & Galassi, 2004b) based the questionnaire on the experiences of counselors, teachers, and administrators because there was limited existing research about parent perceptions on the transition process. The questionnaire, which was a checklist, included a space for parents to add additional information. Parents' biggest transition concerns for their children were the amount of homework (academic), getting lost (procedural), fitting in, making new friends, and dealing with pressures. According to the above research on transitioning middle grades students, parents' latter concerns align with what appear to be large factors in a nurturing a child's academic success and social well-being.

Duchesne and Ratelle's (2010) research on parental behaviors and adolescents' achievement goals at the beginning of middle school found that family involvement predicted lower scores of anxiety and depression. Socialization with families, peers, and educators aid

children in their social well-being. At the same time, Duchesne and Ratelle found parental control that is “characterized by an emphasis on obedience and punitive disciplinary strategies” appears to negatively impact the emotional life of young adolescents. The researchers found the presence of involved parents to be “related to achievement goals centered on mastery, which are known to be associated with a high level of academic functioning.” They also implied that while it is necessary to continue to inform parents of the importance of family involvement, which can be done in many ways such as showing interest in their children’s schoolwork and results, congratulating them on their achievements, and discussing their plans for the future, it is equally, if not more important to make parents aware that putting too much pressure on their children can elicit symptoms of anxiety. Duchesne and Ratelle’s (2010) research supports the Association of Middle Level Educations’s (AMLE) belief outlined in its position paper, *This We Believe* (2003, p. 4), that while young adolescents’ desire for peer acceptance and the need to belong, parent support is also important. It is vital for parents to “take care to keep their end of the communication line open,” and “remember that young adolescents hunger for positive relationships with caring adults and opportunities for informal interactions and conversations with them.”

While much research details how vital family involvement is to the academic and social well-being of children, most research does not seek parents’ perceptions of their experiences of involvement during school transitions. Research involving parents tends to focus on how parents can best support their children; keeping the focus on the child.

Literature on school transitions primarily focuses on student and teacher experiences with and perceptions of the move from an elementary school to middle school (Parker, 2013). Due to the lack of parent perspectives in the school transitions literature, this research study explored

parent perspectives of family engagement during their child's school transition from fifth grade in an elementary school to sixth grade in a middle school in an effort to contribute to the gap in the transition literature.

Family Engagement and School Transition

Transitioning from an elementary school to a middle school is experienced by more than 88% of U.S. public school students (Smith, 2006). According to the Georgia Afterschool Council (2012), a student having a positive school transition into middle school is the first and most significant step to ensuring a successful academic middle school experience. Two aspects of a student's positive school transition experience are having family support and having their family be engaged with the school community during the transition. Hill and Tyson's (2009) meta-analysis of fifty studies related to engaging families in middle school found that engaging families, both school based and home based, was positively associated with academic achievement for students from all backgrounds.

While it is clear through research (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Pomerantz et al., 2007) that family engagement is beneficial during a child's school transition to middle school, family engagement has been shown to decline as children progress through the education system despite the academic and social benefits for students of continued family engagement (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Since family engagement tends to drop off after elementary school (Stormshak et al., 2016) but also correlates to higher academic achievement for students in the middle grades (Pomerantz et al., 2007), it is vital that families be engaged during the school transition from elementary school to middle school. In the next section, barriers, supports, and benefits of family engagement are fleshed out.

Barriers to Family Engagement

A review of family engagement literature shows that during the process of building relationships between families and schools, missteps, miscommunication, and misunderstandings are bound to happen. Compiled below are possible barriers based on previous research (Griffin & Galassi, 2010; Murray, Finigan-Carr, Jones, Copeland-Linder, Haynie, & Cheng, 2014; Velsor & Orozco, 2007). While not an exhaustive list, table 2.2 lists three factors that can act as barriers to family engagement.

Table 2.2

Barriers to Family Engagement

Family Factors acting as Barrier	Examples
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Language and culture• Perceptions of invitations for parent involvement/not knowing how to contribute• Current life contexts	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Family has a different home language than the teachers and school.• When schools do not communicate, or do not communicate clearly, parents can feel alienated or unwelcome.• Stresses from work, finances, and other demands on their time can lead to parents not engaging with the teachers and school.

Today's American families are more diverse than they were fifty years ago, which may contribute to barriers between families and schools (Cohen, 2014; Gonzalez-Mena, 2008). A more diverse family structure, from single parent households to differing language and cultural beliefs, may mean families hold different educational beliefs about schooling or contribute to misperceptions about what is expected of them as parents. Below, three family factors that may act as barriers to family engagement are briefly discussed: language and culture, misunderstandings, and current life contexts.

Language and Culture. A family's beliefs about school and the education of their child, as well as possessing a different home language from the teacher's, can act as barriers to family engagement (Kim, 2009; Murray et al., 2014). Language barriers may hinder families from becoming involved in school because they may not feel they possess the capabilities to navigate school interactions successfully, which persuades them from engaging with their child's teacher or the school (Carreón, Drake, & Barton 2005).

Multiple researchers (Griffin & Galassi, 2010; Van Velsor & Orozco, 2007) found that parents' beliefs about various school-related issues can act as barriers to effective parent engagement. For example, Hornby and Lafaele (2011, p.39) found, "parents who believe that their role is only to get children to school, which then take over responsibility for their education, will not be willing to be actively involved in either school-based or home-based parent involvement." Carlisle, Stanley, and Kemple (2005) found that when the backgrounds of families and teacher differ, parents may not feel their family's culture is understood or respected by the teacher. They also found that some cultures believe it is disrespectful to communicate directly with teachers, as it sends the message they are second-guessing the teacher.

Lack of Understanding. Many families do not know how to contribute to or engage with their child's school (Snell, Miguel, & East, 2009). They may believe they have talents or expertise in an area that could be valued but do not know whether they are needed or welcomed, or how to become better engaged with the school (TATS, 2010). An early study by Epstein (1986) found that a lack of understanding can be due to a lack of adequate communication between teachers and families and that communication can affect the degree to which families are engaged with their child's school. Specifically, their study found that 60% of parents reported never speaking directly to their child's teachers on the telephone, 35% reported never having

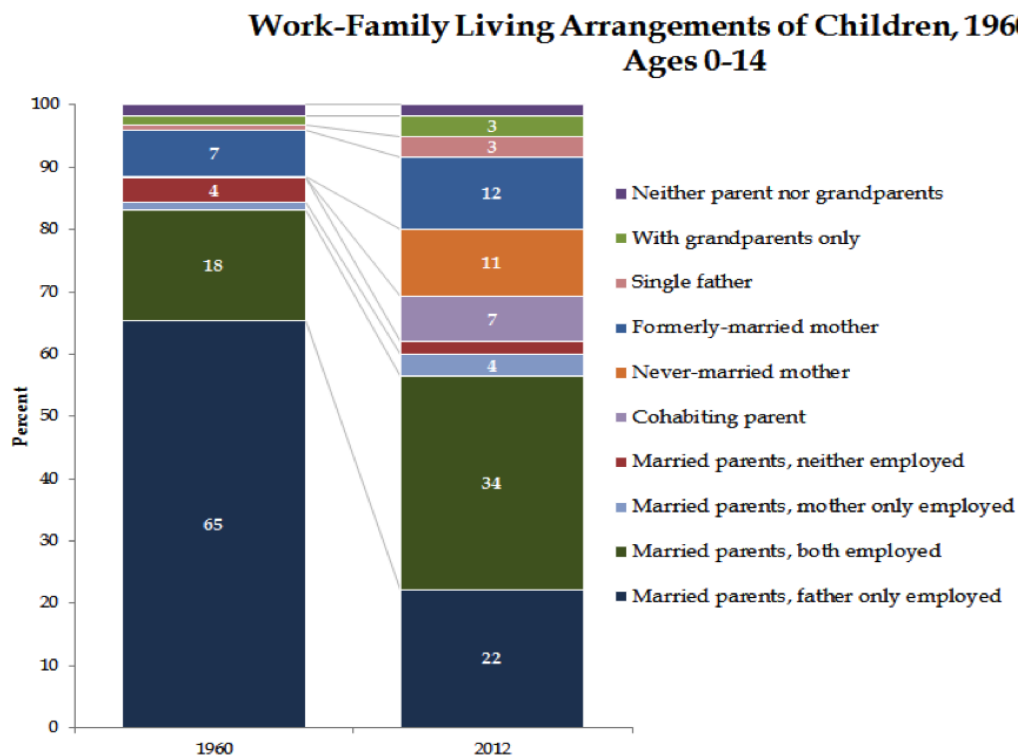
parent-teacher conferences, and 16% reported never corresponding with their child’s teacher.

When families feel alienated or unwelcomed after not hearing from their child’s teacher or school, they may remain quiet, further alienating themselves from the school community (Hill & Tyson, 2009).

Current Life Contexts. There are many aspects of a family’s life contexts that can act as barriers to family engagement. The family structure, parents’ level of education, and a family’s economic status can all be contributing factors (Griffin & Gallasi, 2010; Kim, 2009). The number of single parent families is growing. Table 2.3 displays the change in the household work structure over fifty years, displaying a rise in single-parent households and steep decline of married households. Family stresses with jobs, finances, and the demands on their time may also serve as contributing factors as to why families are not actively engaged with schools.

Table 2.3

Change in family dynamics (Cohen, 2014)



According to Green et al. (2007) and Hornby and Lafaele (2011), a parent's level of education will influence their beliefs on whether they have the appropriate skills and knowledge to engage with the school community. Hornby and Lafaele (2011, p.41) stated, "Parents who did not complete high school may be diffident about helping their children with homework once they get to secondary school." Carlisle, Stanley, and Kemple (2005) also found the level of education of the parent can affect the academic knowledge necessary for parents to assist children with their academic schoolwork. This lack of knowledge can affect parent efficacy and, in turn, affect their willingness to engage with schools.

The number of families living in poverty is rising (Layton, 2015). Stresses from finances, jobs, non-traditional work hours, and demands on their time may be reasons families are not actively engaged with schools (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Kim, 2009). Research (Coleman & Churchill, 2009) shows parents with a higher socioeconomic status are significantly more active in their child's education. Murray et al. (2014) reported work and scheduling issues were the most frequently reported barriers to family engagement. Families' work schedules and lack of paid leave benefits meant they could not afford to take time off to be further engaged with their child's school.

Supports to Engaging Families

To bridge gaps and break down barriers that hinder family engagement in middle schools, a multitude of strategies and programming aimed to incorporate all stakeholders in the educational community is required (Epstein et al., 2009; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Wilder, 2014). Stakeholders include administrators, faculty, parents, and students. As the leaders of their schools, administrators have a responsibility to lead the charge of creating and maintaining a welcoming school environment and a culture that values and includes the beliefs and input of all

stakeholders (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, & Sandler, 2005). While researchers have not agreed on one right way to engage families (Domina, 2005; Murray et al., 2014; Wilder, 2014), there are many examples of how schools can create welcoming environments to engage families.

Focusing on Epstein's (2009) six types of parental involvement, Epstein's framework, which has been adapted below (Table 2.3), is meant to aid educators in developing a more comprehensive, deliberate program to engage families. Additionally, each type of involvement includes many different practices of partnership (Table 2.4). Every type of involvement has its own challenges or barriers that must be overcome to involve all families. All types of involvement should be adapted to best meet the needs of the family. Although Epstein used the term involvement, it is understood that he was shifting towards engagement. This shift is seen based on Ferlazzo's (2011) notion that engagement means to come together and that the goal is not to serve parents and families but to gain partners.

Table 2.4

Adapted from Epstein et al. (2009) Framework of 6 Types of Involvement

Type of Involvement	Expectation
Parenting	Assist families with parenting and child-rearing skills, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions that support children as students at each age and grade level. Assist schools in understanding families.
Communicating	Communicate with families about school programs and student progress through effective school-to-home and home-to-school communications.
Volunteering	Improve recruitment, training, work, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences at the school or in other locations to support students and school programs.
Learning at home	Involve families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework and other curriculum-linked activities and decisions.
Decision Making	Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy through PTA/PTO, school councils, committees, and other parent organizations

Collaborating with the community	Coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school with businesses, agencies, and other groups, and provide services to the community.
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Parenting. The first type of involvement is parenting and includes helping families with basic parenting skills and encouraging a positive home environment to support children in the educational process. Schools can assist families in meeting their responsibilities as parents of young adolescents by providing activities that increase knowledge and strengthen their skills to influence their child's growth and development (Epstein et al., 2009). Three practical ways for schools to help families with basic parenting skills and encouraging a positive home environment to support children in the educational process are:

- Offer parent education and other courses or trainings for parents.
- Provide family support programs to assist families with health, nutrition, and other services.
- Conduct home visits at transition points to elementary, middle, and high school.

Communicating. Communication refers to both family and school initiated contact regarding students and family engagement programs and events hosted by the school. Two-way communication encourages cooperation and helps build relationships between families and schools in an effort to meet the needs of the student (Epstein et al., 2009). Three practical ways to incorporate family-school communication are:

- Conferences with every parent at least once a year.
- Language translators to assist families as needed.
- Regular schedule of useful notices, memos, phone calls, newsletters, and other communications.

Volunteering. Epstein (2001) defined volunteering as recruiting and organizing people to assist and support the school and the students. Three practical ways to incorporate volunteering include:

- School/classroom volunteer program to help teachers, administrators, students, and other parents.
- Parent room or family center for volunteer work, meetings, and resources for families.
- Annual postcard survey to identify all available talents, times, and locations of volunteers.

Learning at home. “Learning at home” refers to providing families with ways to assist students in academic activities outside of the school (Epstein et al., 2009). “Learning at home” activities should encourage students to share and discuss schoolwork and assignments with family members. These activities should also support two-way connections between families and the school about the curriculum and overall learning at school (Epstein, 2001). Three practical ways to incorporate this type of involvement include:

- Provide information for families on skills required for students in all subjects at each grade.
- Provide information on homework policies and how to monitor and discuss schoolwork at home.
- Family participation in setting student goals each year and in planning for college, technical training, or work.

Decision-making. The importance of including families in decision making at schools helps develop and encourage family leaders and representatives within the school (Epstein et al.,

2009). When schools encourage families to take on school leadership roles, it allows for families and schools to work as partners to support student learning (Epstein, 2001). Two practical ways to incorporate this type of involvement include:

- Establish and encourage active PTA/PTO or other parent organizations, advisory councils, or committees for parent leadership and participation.
- Develop and sustain networks to link all families with parent representatives.

Collaborating with the community. Epstein (2001) defined community as those interested or influenced by the quality of education, not just families with children in school. Therefore, community is comprised of anyone influencing the educational experiences of students, not just people living in neighborhoods near or around the school. Researchers (Epstein et al., 2009) refer to collaborating with the community as a way to coordinate all resources and services from the school and community for families, students, and the school to better support overall student learning. Two practical ways to incorporate this type of involvement include:

- Provide students and families with information on community health, cultural, recreational, social support, and other programs/services.
- Provide students and families with information on community activities that link to learning skills and talents, including summer programs for students.

Student Benefits of Family Engagement

For many young adolescents, the middle grades years are marked by a decline in academics, along with increases in problematic behavior, and social struggles with peers (Eccles, 2007; Wang & Eccles, 2012). Fortunately, positive impacts of family engagement that negate the aforementioned young adolescent struggles have been recognized by stakeholders and the U.S. Department of Education (Graves & Wright, 2011; Larocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011; Title 1,

Part A). “The idea that parents can change their children’s educational trajectories by engaging with their children’s schooling has inspired a generation of school reform policies” (Domina, 2005, p. 245). This subsection explores the academic, behavioral, and social benefits to family engagement in the middle grades.

Academic benefits. Wilder’s (2014) meta-synthesis of nine meta-analyses found that regardless of a family engagement definition, measure of achievement, grade level, or ethnic group, family engagement has a positive impact on a child’s academic achievement. Some research (Murray et al., 2014) shows outcomes including higher grades in core academic classes such as mathematics, language arts, social studies, and science, while other research shows an increase in overall GPA (Wang, Hill, & Hofkens, 2014) and high-stakes test scores (Hill & Tyson, 2009).

Findings also revealed that while there was a consistent positive impact on academic achievement, the impact was weakest if family engagement was defined merely as homework assistance. The impact was strongest if family engagement was defined as parental expectations for academic achievement of their children. Hill and Tyson’s (2009) meta-analysis on middle school students supports Wilder’s (2014) findings that assisting young adolescents with homework did not have a significant impact. However, “home activities that provided appropriate structure, environment, and material conducive to learning did have a significant positive impact on academic achievement” (Hill & Tyson, 2009).

Behavioral benefits. For some young adolescents, middle school can be a time when there are decreases in motivation and increases in behavioral problems both in and outside of school (Wang & Eccles, 2012). Problem behaviors include, but are not limited to, skipping school, stealing, fighting, getting in trouble with police, and vandalism (Wang et al., 2014).

Researchers (Grolnick, Kurowski, Dunlap, & Hevey, 2000; Hoeve, Dubas, Eicelsheim, van der Laan, Smeenk, & Gerns, 2009) agree that family engagement is associated with lower levels of problem behaviors among students. Research shows (Grolnick & Farkas, 2002; Wang et al., 2011) that emotional support from families is positively associated with a young adolescent's motivation to take on positive behaviors expected by their families. More specifically, when families communicate regularly, provide structure at home, and link education to future success, there is a decrease in problem behaviors for young adolescents (Wang et al., 2014

Chapter Summary

The chapter began with a historical overview of the shift from parent involvement to family engagement in schools over the last thirty years. The purpose of reviewing different ways schools have involved and engaged families was to show the different models and meanings education stakeholders have given to a few terms. Ambiguity in the definition and understanding of family engagement can lead to confusion regarding stakeholder expectations and responsibilities.

Next, family engagement and school transitions from elementary school to middle school were explored. The researcher reviewed the definition of school transition and how school transitions can affect young adolescents. In the last section, a review of barriers, supports, and benefits of family engagement were explored. The section discussed larger, more general factors and how different contexts may help or hinder family engagement and student learning.

Chapter 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The research design and methodology provided in this chapter detail the research process applied from the beginning of the study to the course of the study. This chapter will address the (1) purpose of the study, (2) research question, (3) theoretical framework that guided the study, (4) description of the research design and rationale for the study, (5) data sources, (6) data collection, (7) overview of data analysis, (8) trustworthiness of the study, and (9) limitations of the study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore parent perspectives of family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school. The scope of this study was focused on parents of young adolescents transitioning from fifth grade to sixth grade. The guiding research questions were:

- (1) What are parent perspectives regarding the supports of family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school?
- (2) What are parent perspectives of barriers to family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school?

Theoretical Framework

Qualitative case study research was selected because it can provide “an intensive, holistic, description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit” (Merriam, 1998, p.xiii). Thus, exploring parent perspectives

of the supports and barriers to family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school was best achieved through a heuristic qualitative approach.

To adequately frame this study that explores parent perspectives of family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school, one must incorporate a framework that acknowledges the roles of individual attitudes, values, and prior experiences and interactions related to family engagement (Ziniewicz, 2012). Conceptualized by multiple researchers, including Dewey (1933, 1938) and Piaget (1976), constructivism offers a framework for how people construct their understandings and knowledge of the world through experience and reflect on those experiences (Dewey, 1933 & 1938; Piaget, 1976).

Constructivism

Constructivism contends that individuals form or construct much of what they learn and understand (Schunk, 2008). Constructivists do not believe knowledge is truth but is a working hypothesis where knowledge is formed by each individual's constructions of reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) based on their beliefs and experiences in situations (Schunk, 2008). All knowledge then differs from person to person and is considered to be subjective and personal and a product of our individual cognitions (Simpson, 2002).

Constructivism focuses primarily on identifying multiple values and perspectives through qualitative methods. Constructivists "believe that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences – meanings directed toward certain objects or things" (Creswell, 2014, p.8). For this study, constructivism was relevant in exploring parent perspectives of the supports and barriers to family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school.

Researchers (Creswell, 2014; Schwandt, 2000) believe the goal of constructivist research is to reach an understanding of meaning from the perspective of the participants' views of the situation being studied. For example, while there were instances in this study in which all participants attended the same family engagement event, the participants experienced the event differently, with some seeing the event as a support while others viewed it as a barrier.

Experience

Experience, according to Dewey (1938), takes place when one reflects after an action. For the purpose of this research, parents reflected on their actions, as well as the school's actions regarding family engagement as they transitioned from elementary school parents to middle school parents. The significance of interviewing parents through a constructivist lens lies in the learning of their lived experiences, focusing on supports and barriers to family engagement. In this research, participants were offered a physical space to reflect on what they perceived to be supports and barriers across their school transition from elementary school to middle school.

Experience of the same event differs from person to person (Ziniewicz, 2012). Because each person experiences life, interactions with schools, and family engagement differently, it was important the researcher interview multiple parents. By learning from their individual experiences, the researcher was better able to understand how parents individually experience and perceive the supports of and barriers to family engagement across the school transition from elementary to middle school.

"It is not enough to insist upon the necessity of experience, nor even the activity in experience. Everything depends upon the quality of the experience which is had" (Dewey, 1938, p.28). By interviewing middle school faculty and parent participants, this study was able to

uncover the quality of school transition experiences and activities based on parent participant reflections.

Rationale and Research Design

During the spring of 2014, the researcher took a graduate level university service-learning course on-site at a local school, Upper Dublin Middle School. (UDMS) This course centered on completing an individual service-learning project based on the needs of the school. To determine the needs of the school, the researcher read the UDMS school improvement initiative to better their school. The initiative was a document developed by Upper Dublin Middle School students, faculty, and families that described what their ideal version of UDMS would be. The researcher also spoke at length with the school's principal, and considered where the researcher's strengths and interests best aligned with the school's needs.

After multiple discussions with the school's principal, the researcher identified improving family engagement at the 6th grade level as a need to be addressed. To gather information about the identified need, the researcher constructed and administered a needs assessment to 6th grade students, teachers, and parents. The principal, family engagement specialist, and 6th grade teachers were able to use results from the needs assessment to assess their current family engagement activities for students and parents transitioning from 5th to 6th grade and make changes to their family engagement activities based on the needs, wants, and concerns of stakeholders involved.

The university course-based service-learning project the researcher implemented at HMS and meetings the researcher had with HMS administration and faculty led to recommendations for further research related to parents' transition from elementary school to middle school. The lack of existing data at HMS on parents' transition from elementary school to middle school is

consistent with Parker's (2013) statement that, "transition literature primarily focuses on students' experiences with and perspectives of the move from an elementary to middle grades school" (p. 496). Since there is limited research on parent perspectives regarding supports of and barriers to family engagement surrounding the school transition from elementary school to middle school, a gap in the literature existed for the researcher to explore.

This study used a basic interpretive and descriptive design (Merriam, 2002) for the purposes of exploring the supports to and barriers of family engagement that families experience across the school transition from elementary school to middle school. Embracing the idea that each parent's reality of this transition differs (Creswell, 2013), the researcher used qualitative research methods to explore parent perspectives across this student transition, along with perceived supports to and barriers of family engagement, while using a constructivist lens to interpret parent experiences. Many characteristics of qualitative research contributed to the richness of this study from a reliance on the researcher as the primary instrument in data collection to the focus on parent perspectives, their meanings, and their multiple subjective views, while uncovering emergent and evolving themes (Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Merriam, 2009).

In this study, qualitative research methods were used to explore parent perspectives of supports and barriers to family engagement across the school transition from fifth grade in an elementary school to sixth grade in a middle school. Qualitative analysis was the ideal research method to explore parent perspectives because it allowed the researcher to form an in-depth understanding of how people perceive their experiences and what meaning they attribute to their experiences (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). Patton (1985) stated

This understanding is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of the setting- what it means for the participants to be in the setting, what their lives are like, what's going on for them, what the world looks like in that particular setting and in the analysis to be able to communicate that faithfully to others who are interested in that setting.

Data analyses involved several procedures, which may be classified as concurrent analyses during data collection efforts and later descriptive analyses. The researcher coded the data using constant comparative methods (Patton, 2002; Merriam, 1998). A number of research strategies were used to ensure validity and reliability using Merriam's (1998) validity and reliability strategies noted below in Table 3.1.

Case Study

The researcher chose to gather data using a qualitative research design to answer the research questions because she was more interested in understanding the meaning participants constructed within the contexts of a given phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). While not an exhaustive list of case study methodologies, she focused on researching three prominent qualitative methodologists to determine which case study methodology would align with her research. The three methodologists were selected because they produced seminal works that provide procedures that aid educational researchers in constructing a case study (Creswell, Hanson, Plano, & Morales, 2007; Yazan, 2015).

Table 3.1

Juxtaposition of three case study approaches

Dimension of interest	Robert Yin's <i>Case Study Research: Design and Methods</i>	Robert Stake's <i>The Art of Case Study Research</i>	Sharan Merriam's <i>Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education</i>
<i>Epistemological Commitments</i>	Positivism	Constructivism and existentialism (non-determinism)	Constructivism
<i>Defining Case Study</i>	Is an empirical inquiry that investigates the case or cases by addressing the “how” or “why” questions concerning the phenomenon of interest.	Is a “study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (p. xi). Defining characteristics: Holistic (considering the interrelationship between the phenomenon and its contexts); Empirical (basing the study on their observations in the field); Interpretive (resting upon their intuition and see research basically as a researcher-subject interaction); Empathic (reflecting the vicarious experiences of the subjects in an emic perspective).	Is “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit” (p. xiii). Defining characteristics: Particularistic (focusing on particular situation, event, program, or phenomenon under study); Heuristic (yielding a rich thick description of the phenomenon under study); Heuristic (illuminating the reader's understanding of phenomenon under study).
<i>Designing Case Study</i>	Is “the logical sequence that connects the empirical data to a study's initial research questions and, ultimately, to its conclusions” (p. 20).	Flexible design, which allows researchers to make major changes even after they proceed from design to research. Researchers need a set of two or three research questions that will “help	Literature review is an essential phase contributing to theory development and research design. Theoretical framework emerging from the literature review helps

	<p>Four types of case study design: Single holistic design, single embedded design, multiple holistic design, and multiple embedded design.</p> <p>Quantitative and qualitative evidentiary sources should be combined.</p>	<p>structure the observation, interviews, and document review” (p. 20).</p> <p>Exclusive use of qualitative data sources.</p>	<p>mold research questions and points of emphasis.</p> <p>Five steps of research design: conducting literature review, constructing a theoretical framework, identifying a research problem, crafting and sharpening research questions, and purposive sampling.</p> <p>Exclusive use of qualitative data sources.</p>
<i>Gathering Data</i>	<p>Case study researchers make use of six data gathering tools: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation, and physical artifacts.</p>	<p>Qualitative case study researchers exploit observation, interviews, and document review as data gathering tools.</p>	<p>Qualitative case study researchers utilize three data collection techniques conducting interviews, observing, and analyzing documents.</p>
<i>Analyzing Data</i>	<p>“Consists of examining, categorizing, tabulating, testing, or otherwise recombining both quantitative and qualitative evidence to address the initial propositions of a study” (p. 109).</p> <p>Five techniques for data analysis: pattern matching, explanation building, time-series analysis, program logic</p>	<p>Is “a matter of giving meaning to first impressions as well as to final compilations” (p. 71).</p> <p>Simultaneity of data collection and analysis.</p> <p>Two techniques for data analysis: categorical aggregation and direct interpretation.</p>	<p>Is “the process of making sense out of the data... [which] involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read – it is the process of making meaning” (p. 178).</p> <p>Simultaneity of data collection and analysis.</p> <p>Six techniques for data analysis: ethnographic analysis, narrative analysis, phenomenological analysis, constant</p>

	models, and cross-case synthesis.	“Each researcher needs, through experience and reflection, to find the forms of analysis that work for him or her” (p. 77).	comparative method, content analysis, and analytic induction.
<i>Validating Data</i>	Case study researchers need to guarantee construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability.	Four strategies for triangulation: data source triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation, and methodological triangulation.	<p>Six strategies to enhance internal validity: triangulation, member checks, long-term observation, peer examination, participatory research, and disclosure of researcher bias.</p> <p>Three techniques to enhance external validity: use of thick description, typicality or modal categories, and multi-site designs.</p> <p>Three techniques to ensure reliability: explanation of investigator’s position with regards to the study, triangulation, and use of an audit trail.</p>

Adapted from Yazan, 2015, p. 148-150

After examining Merriam (1998), Stake (1995), and Yin’s (2009) methodologies, it became clear that Sharan Merriam’s qualitative case study research methodology closely aligned with how the researcher wanted to conduct this study. First, the researcher grounded this case study in parents’ lived school transition experiences through a constructivist lens. By exploring parent perspectives of supports of and barriers to family engagement across their child’s school transition from fifth grade to sixth grade, the researcher was able to better understand the knowledge constructed by parents during this bounded process (Merriam, 1998; Schunk, 2008).

Second, this study was bound by the school transition from elementary school to middle school. School transition aligned with Merriam's (1998) qualification that a case is "a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries" (p. 27).

Data Sources

The purpose of this study was to explore parent perspectives of family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school. Therefore, it was important to select participants who were parents of students who would enter middle school during the 2016-2017 school year.

Sampling

Of the six purposive sampling strategies that achieve representativeness of a particular type of case on a dimension of interest, the researcher chose reputational case sampling as a means for generating a pool of participants (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Reputational case sampling involves selecting cases on the recommendation of a key informant and occurs when the researcher does not have the information necessary to select an appropriate sample (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

Participants

The researcher obtained the recommendation of parent participants from the middle school principal. After meeting with the UDMS principal, the researcher asked her to recommend parents who would be (a) sending their students to UDMS the following year, (b) who may be interested in being a part of the study, and (c) who would be completing the school transition from elementary school to middle school.

The UDMS principal generated a list of 32 potential participants for the study. The list was of parents who attended the recent school transition meeting held at the middle school in

Spring 2016. Next, the researcher contacted all 32 potential parent participants by email. The researcher asked if they would be willing to meet to discuss their possible participation in her study. The researcher provided a copy of the Participant Consent Form to each person. The consent form explained the procedures for keeping their identities confidential if they agreed to participate. Participant responsibilities included being available for three face-to-face, audio-recorded interviews, lasting approximately thirty minutes each. Additionally, participants were asked if they would agree to answer any follow-up questions by email or phone. The final responsibility for parent participants was to collect a minimum of two physical artifacts across the school transition process. One artifact was to represent a support to family engagement and another to represent a barrier to family engagement. Of the 32 potential participants contacted, four parents volunteered to participate in the study.

Aside from parent participants, the researcher conducted one thirty-minute interview each with Dr. Smith (UDMS principal), Ms. Doe (UDMS 6th grade counselor), and Ms. Jones (UDMS family engagement specialist). The purpose of these interviews, conducted before the first parent interviews, was to gain knowledge about the school transition process and family engagement events the middle school provides for families. Two faculty interviews were conducted in May 2016. Based on availability of one faculty member, one faculty interview was conducted in August 2016.

Context of the Study

Parent participants were from three elementary schools that fed into one middle school. The three elementary school sites from which participants were chosen were located in a midsize city that is part of a public county school system that is also home to a major southeastern

university. The demographic data of the four schools are described below using 2012 data from the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics.

School one. Upper Dublin Middle School (UDMS) had approximately 662 students in grades 6-8. The student population of the school was 59% Black, 22% White, 9% Hispanic, 5% Asian, and 5% Multiracial. Free and/or reduced meal services were received by 75.4% of the students.

School two. Stony Creek Elementary School (SCES) had approximately 510 students in grades PK-5. The student population of the school was 45% Black, 36% White, 10% Hispanic, 5% Asian, and 4% Multiracial. Free and/or reduced meal services were received by 68% of the students.

School three. Madison Avenue Elementary School (MAES) had approximately 588 students in grades PK-5. The student population of the school was 81.5% Black, 9% Hispanic, 4% Multiracial, 4% White, and 1.5% Asian. Free and/or reduced meal services were received by 95.4% of the students.

School four. Shady Grove Elementary School (SGES) had approximately 610 students in grades PK-5. The student population of the school was 50% Black, 35% White, 7% Hispanic, 5% Multiracial, and 3% Asian. Free and/or reduced meal services were received by 56.6% of the students.

In the next section, data collection is explained, including a description of methods used, followed by a description of the data analysis. The chapter concludes with detailing the trustworthiness and limitations of the study.

Data Collection

The purpose of this study was to explore parent perspectives of family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school. The design of this study was qualitative in nature. Following Merriam's (1998) exclusive use of qualitative data, the researcher used multiple data collection strategies Merriam suggested. The three data collection methods applied were (1) semi-structured interviews, (2) physical artifacts, and (3) researcher's field notes.

Semi-Structured Interview

According to Merriam (1998), interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them. "The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into another person's perspective" (Patton, 2002, p.340). This study explored parent perspectives, and how they interpreted their family engagement experiences, which made the use of interviews an integral source of data for this study.

To elicit parent perspectives of supports and barriers to family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school, the researcher developed an interview guide with semi-structured interview questions asking the participants to share concerns, questions, and lessons learned about their experiences. The use of semi-structured interviews was employed because this type of less structured interview format allows participants to define the world in their own ways (Merriam, 1998) unlike structured interviews that adhere to predetermined questions and may not allow researchers to access participant perspectives. A semi-structured interview is defined as, "an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena" (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 3).

Parent interview participants were given the opportunity to take part in three interviews – an initial interview before their child completed fifth grade in elementary schools, a second interview shortly after their child began 6th grade in middle school, and a follow-up interview conducted approximately half way through their child’s 6th grade academic year in middle school. During the individual interviews, it was up to the researcher, to use judgment and tact to decide how closely to stick to the guide and how much to follow up on interviewees’ answers and any new directions that opened up (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Before the first interview, each parent was given a copy of a semi-structured interview guide. The guide was developed from literature relating to the research questions. A semi-structured type of interview included “an outline of topics to be covered, with suggested questions” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 130). The first round of interviews occurred at the beginning of the study in May 2016 and lasted thirty minutes. The first round of interviews was face-to-face and took place in each participant’s desired location. Interview locations included UDMS faculty offices, coffee shops, participants’ homes, and by telephone. All interviews throughout this study were audio-recorded, transcribed, and later coded for themes.

Before the second round of interviews was conducted, the researcher developed another interview guide. The second guide was constructed based on field notes and initially discovered themes from the first round of interviews. The second round of interviews was conducted at the beginning of the academic school year, in August of 2016. The second round of interviews was face-to-face and took place in each participant’s desired location.

Lastly, before the third round of interviews was conducted, a final interview guide was developed based on field notes, discovered themes from prior interviews, and physical artifacts provided to the researcher by participants. The third round of interviews was conducted toward

the mid-point of the academic school year in December 2016. The final round of interviews was face-to-face and took place in each participant's desired location.

Aside from parent participant semi-structured interviews, the researcher also conducted thirty minute semi-structured interviews with three UDMS administrators/staff members in April 2016 to garner information regarding the family engagement events and supports the school put in place for families during the school transition from elementary school to middle school.

Table 3.2 summarizes the participation of each parent participant and faculty member during the study. Additionally, the table presents the data collected for each activity and the duration of participation.

Table 3.2

Summary of Participant Participation, Data Collected, and Duration of Participation

Participants	Data Collection	Duration of Time
4 parent participants	3 semi-structured interviews	Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. They were scheduled to be in May 2016, August 2016, and December 2016.
	1 gathering of physical artifacts	Gathering of artifacts took place during the third interview.

Physical Artifacts

Physical artifacts were gathered as part of this study because in a case study they may help “to portray and enrich the context and contribute to an analysis of issues” (Simmons, 2009, p.63). Physical artifacts from parents were first collected in December 2016 at the beginning of the second individual interviews. Artifacts collected at this point were perceived by parents to symbolize supports or barriers across the school transition from elementary school to middle

school. The researcher discussed the collection of artifacts at the third interview, which helped further flesh out parent perspectives.

Field Notes

The researcher kept a journal throughout the study and used field notes from the interviews in the journal to guide both the second and third interviews, as well as the data analysis. The researcher took field notes during interviews while also audio recording the interviews. Taking notes meant that the researcher kept track of the research process and her evolving understanding and thoughts during interviews. Field notes enabled the researcher to highlight issues or possible emerging themes to address in future interviews (Simmons, 2009, p. 53).

Interviews were the researcher's primary source of data collection. Physical artifacts and field notes added depth to interview data and assisted the research in developing a more holistic understanding of parent perspectives of the supports and barriers to family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school. Analysis of the data is described in the following section. The rationale for the chosen analysis will be explained and examples of the analysis are provided. Later, the trustworthiness and limitations of the study are provided.

Data Analysis

To reiterate, the purpose of this qualitative, multi-case study was to explore parents' perspectives of supports and barriers to family engagement across the school transition from fifth grade in an elementary school to sixth grade in a middle school. Because the researcher was exploring individual parent experiences, the constant comparative method of analysis was used to examine the data collected and identify themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Interview transcriptions, physical artifacts, and field notes were analyzed to identify convergence or divergence of the data. Data were analyzed through a complex process. Initial coding was conducted that included revisiting audio recordings and transcripts, field notes, and physical artifacts submitted by participants. Narratives were then written about each participant. As each narrative was crafted, it was compared to the other participant narratives. As the researcher wrote each narrative, she kept a list of cross-case notes in the journal of field notes. During and after finishing the within-case analysis, the researcher developed mind maps to include information contained in the cross-case notes as well as the individual cases. The maps were then re-structured into a list of big ideas. After checking for similarities and differences among the big ideas, the ideas were condensed into themes and sub-sections of supports and barriers to family engagement.

Trustworthiness

The purpose of this study was to explore parent perspectives of family engagement across their child's school transition from fifth grade in an elementary school to sixth grade in a middle school. This study was a qualitative case study; therefore, it was essential to establish trustworthiness (Merriam, 2002). Merriam (1995) stated that trustworthiness is found in how well a particular study does what it is designed to do and that strategies to ensure trustworthiness should be employed including validity, reliability, and generalization. The next three sections explain into the efforts the researcher took to establish trustworthiness in this study.

Validity

"All research is concerned with producing valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner" (Merriam, 2009, p. 209). Multiple measures were taken throughout this study to ensure its validity. The ten months invested in this study show a long-term commitment toward

researching and reporting accurate parent perspectives of supports and barriers to family engagement across the school transition from fifth grade in an elementary school to sixth grade in a middle school. In this case study, validity was ensured by the use of triangulation.

Researchers (Creswell & Miller, 2000) defined triangulation as “a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study” (p. 126). In this study, the researcher collected data from multiple sources:

- (1) Transcriptions from three semi-structured interviews with each parent participant were conducted, totaling 11 individual interviews. Semi-structured interviews lasted about 45 minutes each. Interviews were conducted when students were completing their fifth grade year, at the beginning of their sixth grade year, and approximately halfway through completing their sixth grade year.
- (2) Physical artifacts collected at the final parent semi-structured interview included e-mails from the school principal.
- (3) Field notes, recorded in a researcher journal, were taken before, during, and after all semi-structured interviews.

To further validate the study’s findings, the researcher used respondent validation. Respondent validation, also referred to as member checking, “is the process of verifying information with the targeted group. It allows the stakeholder or participant the chance to correct errors of fact or errors of interpretation” (Simon, 2011). Parent participants were given the opportunity through e-mail to read, clarify, or correct the researcher’s interpretation of the data collected.

Reliability

In qualitative research, reliability is seen as a consequence of the validity of the study (Patton, 2002). Embodied in this term is the idea of replicability and repeatability of similar results or observations (Creswell, 2005). In this type of qualitative study, reliability is difficult to assure due to the variability and specific context of the study (Merriam, 1998). Each participant presented her own unique perspectives and beliefs. While there were common themes, the participants did not represent a majority of the parent population. With the small number of participants, if another similar study was developed with four different participants, the study might reveal different supports of and barriers to family engagement across the school transition to middle school.

Reliability was established during the data collection phase by using researcher-developed semi-structured interview guides. The guides allowed the steps of data collection procedures to be repeated across every participant interview (Yin, 2009). During the interviews, the researcher asked open-ended questions. Doing so allowed participants to give broader answers and not give one particular response (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Finally, respondent validation established accuracy in the findings.

Generalizability

Generalizability depends on whether or not the findings of a study can be applied to a larger population. This study's generalizability was limited by the use of a small, purposeful sample size (Yin, 2009). This study did not attempt to make broad generalized statements about all parents' perspectives. Rather, the purpose was to gather data to explore themes from participants in this perspective-seeking study. Through careful analysis, the findings about parent

perspectives of supports and barriers to family engagement across the school transition from fifth grade in an elementary school to sixth grade in a Title I, urban middle school.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited by the number of parents who participated in the study. While 23 parents were recruited, only four parents participated in the study. Therefore, only a small portion of the Upper Dublin Middle School's transitioning parents shared their perspectives of supports and barriers to family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school. The data may not represent the beliefs of a majority of the parent population because all parents identified as Caucasian, middle class parents. Their backgrounds differ from the majority of the UDMS student population, which is 78% non-Caucasian and 73.4% economically disadvantaged, a term used by government institutions to indicate eligibility for free and/or reduced meal services.

Given the sensitive nature of the data, one limitation of the study was protecting participant identities. Multiple caveats were put on the researcher from participants to protect participant identities. Participants were concerned with who would have access to the research. Participants were also worried about the potential of future negative experiences with school members if their identities were known. Two participants requested the researcher not use portions of what they had shared with her because they thought specific conversations or experiences with the school were too identifying. They were concerned that if their identities were known, it could impact how school members treated them or their children. Consequently, the researcher took multiple steps to protect participants' and their children's identities. First, to protect identities, the research met with participants at their location of choice. During data analysis, the researcher complied with all participant requests to redact data believed to be too

identifying. The researcher also omitted the gender of all the participants' children discussed. Furthermore, the researcher did not include detailed descriptions of participant backgrounds or personal experiences with schools so as to protect participant identities. Some of the physical artifacts that participants shared with the researcher were omitted because they had the potential to identify participants. In other instances, participants declined to share physical artifacts at all for this same reason.

Chapter Summary

Merriam's (1998) case study approach procedures was used to explore parent perspectives of family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school. The parents participated in semi-structured one-on-one interviews with the researcher and agreed to provide physical artifacts that served as supports or barriers to family engagement. Additionally, the researcher conducted a one-time semi-structured interview with the Upper Dublin Middle School principal, family engagement specialist, and 6th grade school counselor to learn what formal and informal family engagement activities were conducted to aid families across the transition to middle school. The parent participants were asked to share their personal opinions and experiences about the supports and barriers to family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school. Upper Dublin Middle School's principal suggested the researcher solicit parent participation for the study from fifth grade parents who attended a May 2016 meeting about the transition to middle school. Of the 23 parents contacted, four volunteered for all data collection activities. The participants were specifically chosen because of their accessibility to the researcher. Their accessibility allowed flexibility when scheduling interviews and observations. Throughout the study, the researcher took the necessary measures to establish trustworthiness, validity, and reliability.

This study used qualitative research methods. Data were collected from the four parent participants during one-on-one semi-structured interviews, a collection of artifacts, and descriptive field notes written by the researcher. Field notes were taken before, during, and after all interviews. Interviews were audio-recorded and were transcribed immediately. The constant comparative method was applied throughout data analysis to determine themes. The study began in March 2016 and concluded January 2017. The review of literature, data collection, and data analysis occurred during this timeframe.

Chapter 4

Introduction

This chapter provides an exploration of the findings that emerged during the data collection and analysis parts of the study. The chapter begins with the purpose of the study followed by an overview of the study. Next, the researcher presents the individual participant case findings on each parent's perspectives of the supports and barriers to family engagement across the school transition from fifth grade in an elementary school to sixth grade in a middle school.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to explore parent perspectives of family engagement across their child's school transition from fifth grade in an elementary school to sixth grade in a middle school.

The guiding research questions were:

- (3) What are parent perspectives regarding the supports of family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school?
- (4) What are parent perspectives of barriers to family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school?

This study was significant because the sixth grade teachers and principal were concerned with engaging families of incoming sixth grade middle school students. This study was also significant because research details the decline of family engagement after elementary school

(Hill & Taylor, 2004; Stormshak et al., 2016) and the positive correlation between family engagement and academic achievement (Brough & Irvin, 2001; Epstein, 1990; Sheldon, 2016).

The participants in this study included four parents whose children were transitioning from fifth grade in an elementary school to sixth grade in a middle school. The parents who agreed to participate were all parents of middle school students for the 2016-2017 school year from a middle school in Northeast Georgia. Participant interviews for the study began in June 2016 and concluded in January 2017. Through one-on-one semi-structured interviews and collection of physical artifacts, the data analyzed the parents' perspectives of supports and barriers to family engagement across the transition from fifth grade in an elementary school to sixth grade in a middle school. Parent participants were interviewed three times, once during Spring 2016, once in August 2016 during the beginning of the school year, and once in December 2016 or January 2017, half way through the school year for approximately 45 minutes each.

Overview of the Study

The study was launched in April of 2016, when the researcher received IRB approval. Participants came from a pool of candidates who attended a Upper Dublin Middle School transition meeting in April of 2016. Thirty-two parents signed-in for the meeting which was being held for all fifth grade parents of three local elementary schools.

The researcher was given the e-mail addresses from the sign-in sheet and was permitted to contact the attendees. The researcher sent a recruitment e-mail to each person on the sign-in sheet in May of 2016. Of the 32 candidates, four parents volunteered to be a part of this study. Of the four, one parent did not respond for a final interview and another had to combine two of their interviews due to extended family emergencies.

The parent participants were diverse in their previous parent experiences with middle schools. For one parent, this was her first time having a child transition to middle school. One parent was new to the area and so was new to Upper Dublin County schools. One parent was sending her second child to Upper Dublin Middle School, while another participant's third child was transitioning to Upper Dublin Middle School. Her older two children had also attended UDMS but each under a different principal.

It is unknown if the participants were representative of the general population of those who attended the Upper Dublin Middle School transition meeting. All the participants in the study identified as white, female, and coming from a middle class background.

Within-Case Analysis

Given that the intent of this research study was to explore parent perspectives of the supports and barriers to family engagement across the transition from elementary school to middle school, each participant represented one case of a multi-case study design. For each case, the unit of analysis focused on how that particular parent made sense of their family engagement experiences with Upper Dublin Middle School. The boundary of each case was established as the supports and barriers to family engagement parent participants experienced across the school transition from fifth grade in an elementary school to sixth grade in a middle school.

From the onset of data collection, the researcher concurrently analyzed data collected from each participant's initial interview and physical artifacts. Each participant's interview was analyzed inclusively using the constant comparative method to identify emergent codes and categories within each case and unit of analysis. As codes and categories emerged, the researcher gained clarity on each individual's perspectives and, in the cross case analysis, established themes.

Individual Perspectives

In analyzing the data collected during each individual parent semi-structured interview, four unique perspectives emerged and both research questions were answered. The perspectives of the parents were varied in many ways while similar in others. An authentic depiction of each parent's experiences of supports and barriers to family engagement across the school transition from fifth grade in an elementary school to sixth grade in a middle school was explored.

Ms. Quinlan

The first interview with Ms. Quinlan took place on a steamy early August afternoon, one week prior to the start of the school year at a local coffee shop. The setting was bustling and noisy with conversations of patrons in the packed shop and continuous whirring of the coffee grinder. Even after an eventful day for the participant, who was dealing with a family emergency, she was eager to converse and seemed genuinely enthusiastic about sharing her perspectives.

After making four attempts to schedule a second interview, the second and third interviews were combined into one interview in early December 2016. Multiple family members' health crises led to combining the interviews to best accommodate Ms. Quinlan. This interview was held in the living room in Ms. Quinlan's home. Her home was very cozy and festive, littered with her children's homemade Christmas decorations and family photographs. As we sat down on her living room couches with coffee in hand, Ms. Quinlan was in good spirits and eager to share her experiences since we last met. The first interview lasted approximately thirty minutes and the second interview lasted approximately an hour.

Ms. Quinlan has a professional background in the field of public education which she believes makes it easier for her to understand school jargon that other parents may not understand.

When they were talking about stuff in school meetings I know what they were talking about whereas some of the parents were like what the heck is that, you know. When they're talking about school improvement plans and that kind of stuff, I knew what that was so it's interesting to have that perspective.

During this study, Ms. Quinlan had one child engaged in post-secondary education, one in high school in the Upper Dublin County School District, and her youngest child was transitioning from elementary school to middle school. Her experiences with Upper Dublin Middle School are plentiful because of the extended time she spent interacting with UDMS over the years. Ms. Quinlan noted

Now onto middle school, round three at middle school. All three of them at Upper Dublin. We had six years in a row and then there's five years between [my middle child] and [my youngest child] so we've had...a two-year gap from Upper Dublin.

Her experience as a parent interacting with Upper Dublin Middle School for six years gave her insight as to how the school historically engaged families but with new changes of school personnel, not certain

Things have changed from what I hear so it will be interesting to see where we go because there's a new principal and a lot of turnover of faculty too. A lot of people that were there when [my oldest child] started have left in the last couple years.

While Ms. Quinlan's background in public education made her more comfortable interacting with schools, she was equally aware that with changes in school leadership and faculty, she did

not fully know what to expect regarding family engagement as her daughter transitioned from elementary school to Upper Dublin Middle School.

Perspectives on Barriers to Family Engagement. In this section, Ms. Quinlan relayed barriers to engaging with Upper Dublin Middle School. The barriers she mentioned mainly focused on school wide communication, communication with teachers, and concerns and experiences she had about the new Upper Dublin Middle School principal.

Communication. “I would say that the communication was not the best.” Ms. Quinlan continually spoke of her struggles to communicate effectively with the school as a whole and with individual teachers. Two recurring barriers to communication with the school and teachers surrounded the amount of advanced notice given letting families know about events or lack of communication and the methods of communication.

School wide. Communication struggles with Upper Dublin Middle School began when Ms. Quinlan was still a fifth grade parent in an elementary school. In the spring, UDMS held a meeting for fifth grade elementary school parents regarding the transition to middle school. The meeting was for parents of students from three elementary schools. She reported about 30 parents attended this meeting. The researcher concurs with this number as there were 32 parents who signed in on the attendance sheet provided by UDMS. Ms. Quinlan noted

The way I found out about it (the transition meeting at UDMS) was because the UDMS PTO president is a friend and she sent out a message to Shady Grove Elementary School parents but it didn’t necessarily come from the middle school in a timely manner. So that was unfortunate. It was kind of last minute, and that was why [my child] wound up not coming.

Throughout the fall of 2016, Ms. Quinlan noted that communication with families had not improved. “I’ll have to say that communication, they haven’t give a lot of leeway time.” For example, “On a Sunday night of that week they tell what’s going on that week.” Providing little advance notice of events and other happenings in the middle school meant that “we haven’t really been able to participate in a lot of them.”

Aside from providing little advance notice, at times the school has sent incorrect information home, which has confused parents and students. Ms. Quinlan lamented, “There was actually some mass confusion school wide because she (UDMS principal) was wrong in the newsletter about whether it was going to be an A day or B day when we came back from a break.” Ms. Quinlan explained the A day/B day schedule

So they run their schedule for their electives. [My child] is in Spanish, Ag, Band, and PE and so she does two each day. On A day she may do Spanish and Ag and on B day she does PE and Band. So Monday’s an A day, Tuesday’s a B day, and that kind of thing. It’s very confusing and it’s very hard for these kids to keep up with, which is why it’s really helpful that the principal puts it in the weekly Warrior newsletter but I think it’s kind of ridiculous. So basically, first and seventh periods are her elective periods and she alternates every other day which one she goes to. It’s confusing to remember because, you know, for PE [my child] has to bring PE clothes, for band they have to bring [their] instrument and so it’s remembering what day.

The added confusion of providing incorrect information caused students to prepare for different classes and bring incorrect school supplies for the day.

Another struggle with school wide communication was where to find it. Ms. Quinlan articulated there were multiple outlets that provided information, including a PTO Facebook

page, weekly Warrior news, e-mails, and physical flyers sent home with students. Unlike when her child was in elementary school, “There is no agenda and there is no weekly folder that comes home with notes and that one source where I knew every week I was going to get a folder home that had flyers or whatever about everything.” She noted

The principal’s newsletter is helpful and Shady Grove Elementary School had a similar one. It wasn’t a principal’s newsletter but the PTO sent something out. It was on a listserv. Basically, I have to go look for the Warrior news whereas at Shady Grove, news came home to me in [my child’s] folder, and so it’s a little bit more on me to go look for the information.

With Teachers. “As far as communication with teachers directly, I haven’t really had a whole lot.” Ms. Quinlan relayed communication with teachers throughout the school transition as minimal. Parent teacher conference night in October “was a little disorganized because there was another teacher using [my child’s] teacher’s room for some reason and so we wound up meeting in the hallway.” It was during this meeting in the hallway that Ms. Quinlan learned about her child’s subpar grade in one class. She spoke briefly with the teacher of that course and later with her child. She learned that her child had forgotten about some assignments. According to Ms. Quinlan, assignments given in class were not necessarily being recorded by students because the school did not supply students with agenda books like they had in previous years. “I learned that they are not using agendas this year, and they’ve used agendas since they were in kindergarten and the school provided them for them and they’re not doing that for them this year in middle school.” Ms. Quinlan learned from her child that the teacher was not allowing students to type assignments in their Google calendar

I asked [my child], “Did you use Google calendar? Did you write your assignments in Google calendar?” and [my child] said, “Well, when they give us our assignments they make us close our laptops so what are we supposed to be writing this on? How are we supposed to be recording this?”

The conversation she had with her child prompted Ms. Quinlan to go to Walmart and purchase an agenda so her child could record assignments. Ms. Quinlan continued

But that was something that was kind of like, oh, they don’t have agendas this year, well, oh, are they not going to teach them some other strategy to use to organize themselves? So they’ve had this one strategy they’ve been using since kindergarten and been taught to use and all of a sudden they’re changing things up.

Students not having agendas and parents not being informed frustrated Ms. Quinlan. She lamented that teachers should have told parents about this change in policy and that they should have found a way to address the change with students

Yeah, so that was kind of a big, well, you missed the boat there. I did say to [my child’s] teacher, “You know, what about using Google calendar?” and she said, “Yeah well we could do that” and I said, “Well [my child] said you make them close their laptops when it’s time to give out assignments” and she was like, “Uhm, I might do that sometimes.” And again, I haven’t followed up on that but I do want to follow up on that. I mean I don’t understand why the teacher just can’t put it as an item in their calendar. You know, in their Google calendar or in their Google classroom or whatever because that’s what everyone’s using and they just learn to check their calendar.

Ms. Quinlan was passionate about addressing this issue and about finding simple solutions to a problem she felt affected all students.

During our conversation, Ms. Quinlan shared that aside from formal events like parent teacher conferences, she did not hear often from some of her child's teachers and never heard from others. "I'm not hardly getting any direct communication with teachers with the Remind app or anything except for her Ag teacher." The Remind app is a communication tool used school-wide by teachers to provide information to students and parents. Ms. Quinlan liked the idea of the Remind app but noted, "I signed up for the Remind thing for [my child's] math class, and I've never gotten anything on it, and I looked back and was like, Is this thing not working? But it still hasn't been used." She realized while the school claimed all teachers would reach families through this app, "whether there is teacher follow through or not is another question." She continued, "Now, it would be nice if they all used that one venue so that I could just keep getting stuff from everybody, but like I said, I'm not getting any information from some teachers."

Changing of the Guard: Problems with a New Principal. Before the 2016 school year began, Ms. Quinlan already had "some concerns about this new principal because I have heard some things about the way she was last year as the assistant principal and some of the discipline methods she used like group contingency punishment." Ms. Quinlan was prepared to speak with the incoming principal about ineffective discipline measures if she continued to implement them as the principal.

There's a whole lot of research about how ineffective it is as a method of discipline and so it really pisses me off when I see people using ineffective methods like that. Again, that's based on what I know because of my field of study. So that's one thing I'm concerned about and I've actually started gathering some information with this new principal if that's what they're choosing to use as a discipline method because I will fight

really hard against that if that's what is happening. One because it will upset [my child] but also because I know it's not an effective research based practice.

Ms. Quinlan was also concerned because she had "heard some rumblings and grumblings from other people in the Upper Dublin community that [the principal's] leadership style is just quite heavy handed." As the school year progressed, Ms. Quinlan noted she did not speak with the new principal about group contingency punishment. She also attempted to keep an "open mind" when it came to Ms. Saunders. She did, however, have concerns with what the principal said to families and her "abrupt" manner of communication.

One concern Ms. Quinlan had surrounded taking ownership for her actions. As principal, it was Ms. Saunders duty to take ownership of the school and her mistakes, according to Ms. Quinlan. At the beginning of the 2016 school year, student schedules were not correct. Some student schedules were not corrected for weeks, leaving families frustrated. Ms. Quinlan disclosed that Ms. Saunders, "blamed the former principal and the registrar for that and I really didn't like it". She struggled with Ms. Saunders blaming others for this mistake but also wanted to give the principal a chance since she was new to the job mentioning, "I think maybe I need to be more aware and understanding of her but I don't know, we'll see."

Ms. Quinlan attempted to be more understanding of the new principal but became frustrated at the response from Ms. Saunders when she asked a question on the PTO Facebook page. The response from the principal was "that was in the Warrior news." At the time, Ms. Quinlan was exhausted from multiple family emergencies that had her attending frequent hospital visits and indicated that she did not have time to check every available resource to search for the answer. She voiced

It's in the Warrior news. Not, here's the link in case you missed it or anything. It's just, it was in the Warrior news. And I'm like, look lady, right now I'm hanging on by a shoe string. I'm not going to go back and look through your damned Warrior news.

Ms. Quinlan thought aloud, "I don't know if it's a cultural thing or just a personality thing but the new principal's style is just a little more blunt and abrupt kind of thing," and "it's not what I'm used to." Ms. Quinlan lamented that she felt like she was being "scolded" and "I was just like lady I don't have time for this right now." She was thankful the "PTO member's response gave me all the information," in a warm and polite manner. The researcher did not expound upon the PTO member's response in order to protect the confidentiality of the participant.

Perspectives of Supports to Family Engagement. In this section, Ms. Quinlan described supports that facilitated engagement with Upper Dublin Middle School. The supports she revealed mainly focused on formal school transition events, school-wide communication from the principal, and a larger school and district-wide effort to listen to parent voices.

School Transition Events. Upper Dublin Middle School held multiple events to help prepare students and their families for middle school. When asked if the elementary or middle school could do more or differently to better prepare her and her child for middle school, Ms. Quinlan expressed

I don't really know that there's a whole lot more they could do. I mean I really felt like they did a really good job because, I mean, they talked to the kids about what the expectations are going to be, they took them for a tour of the school, they had people from the middle school come to their elementary school. I mean, it was a lot better than my other two kids' experiences, put it that way.

Ms. Quinlan was quick to point out that for her oldest child

There was very little, if any, communication from the middle school to the parents until it was time to be there and they went on a tour of the school but it really was just like, yeah, we went to the middle school. Yeah, it was kinda cool they have lockers. You know, it wasn't like coming home gushing about all the cool stuff like they walked down a red carpet like it was with [my youngest child]. And, I can't even remember that they did a parent information meeting of any sort until the week school started so I don't think there was much of anything done in the spring.

After noting that she has recognized that the school has improved school transition experiences from elementary school to middle school over the year, Ms. Quinlan believed the changes have "made a big difference" and that while her youngest child was "still nervous about going to middle school," she did not "feel that [my child] is nearly as nervous" as the older siblings were.

Speaking of formal school transition events, Ms. Quinlan was "excited to see" what Upper Dublin's back-to-school festival, an alternative open-house, would be like. She later reported that it "was all nice to kind of get [my child] comfortable with the school and what was going on." There may have been other events, but Ms. Quinlan only went to the "beginning of the year band concert" which was "fun" but did not participate in any other events, "probably just because of all the craziness of my family with hospital stays" and other family priorities. She noted that while she could not attend other events, that there were "principal's coffees," "one where they talked about Google classroom," and there was "one where my husband went but I can't remember what he said."

School Wide Communication from the Principal. When asked about what positive experiences Ms. Quinlan was having, her first thought was that "communication from the

principal when things have happened,” was immediate and that families were notified, “right away.” She remarked that while she did have one negative communication experience, the Facebook post, with the principal, “I can’t think of any other situation where there has been a negative interaction,” and “I’ve been impressed with how frequently, when things have happened, positive or negative, the principal has communicated immediately. I feel it’s something she understands and values.” Ms. Quinlan believed Ms. Saunders made a genuine effort to reach out to families regarding school wide issues from knives or air soft guns being brought on campus to school wide behavior to accidents.

Ms. Quinlan voiced the importance of immediate contact with families and shared, “I don’t remember getting as many updates when there disciplinary issues,” from former UDMS principals. “Unfortunately, Upper Dublin County Schools tends to be hounded in the press or portrayed in the press in that they frequently will and historically have reported on the negative events in the school” and parents were “seeing it in the media... before we hear about it from the principal.” Ms. Quinlan appreciated Ms. Saunder’s “transparency” and it was “very reassuring” that she gave families immediate information “that helps to put people at ease that I don’t remember getting from either of the past two principals.”

From:
Date: November 28, 2016 at 8:51:57 PM EST
To: Middle School Recipients
Subject: Incident at

Dear [REDACTED] Middle School Parents and Guardians,

We were so glad to see your children back today after Thanksgiving Break. Unfortunately, however, one of our students brought a knife to school today. At no time were any students or adults threatened in any way. A police report has been filed, and this issue will be handled in accordance with our Student Code of Conduct. Thanks for your continued support of our school, and please know that student safety remains our top priority.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]
Principal

One specific situation Ms. Quinlan recalled, “I think somebody brought a pocket knife to school or a kitchen knife but again just a... kid making a stupid choice.”

The e-mail response regarding the knife incident “reassured” Ms. Quinlan that “there was never any threat to any student in the school.”

From: PTO
Date: October 28, 2016 at 1:30:54 PM EDT
To:
Subject: A Note from

Good afternoon,

After receiving several emails, phone calls, and discipline referrals today, I found it necessary to have a talk with the students at [REDACTED]. During the talk, I reminded students of the behavior and academic expectations that are in place for every student at [REDACTED]. I reminded them of how to be kind, the importance of studying, and respecting the staff, themselves and each other.

In an effort to be firm, fair, and consistent, we are reiterating our expectations for behavior and academics. Please speak to your children about the power of uplifting each other and accountability. We want to go higher and we can if we all do our part. Thank you for entrusting your scholar to our staff but more importantly thank you for believing that our staff can make a difference in your child's education.

[REDACTED]
Principal

[REDACTED] Middle School

Ms. Quinlan recalled receiving an e-mail from the principal, “saying we had a rough day today and I’m going to talk with the students. This behavior is not acceptable and it’s not what we expect. This did not meet the expectations that we have here at Upper Dublin.” She thought the principal might have been “venting a little bit” but “it was like something’s going to change,

we're not going to go for this here at Upper Dublin.” Ms. Quinlan appreciated “those e-mails for the most part because I feel like she really is making an effort to keep parents in the loop and ensure our kids are safe.”

From:
Date: December 1, 2016 at 4:48:32 PM EST
To: Middle School Recipients
Subject: Accident in front of

Dear [REDACTED] Parents and Guardians,

This afternoon, two students, and a parent were involved in a car accident in front of our school. Police and emergency personnel were quick on the scene, and the parent and students involved in the accident are being treated at a local hospital. We are very appreciative of the quick response of the school's district and community emergency personnel. Thanks for your support and concern!

Sincerely,
[REDACTED]
Principal

When there was a car accident in front of the school, Ms. Saunders sent an e-mail out to families that was “very straight forward” and “kept it brief.” Ms. Quinlan expressed relief upon receiving this e-mail because her children “were in the car right behind it and they saw the accident happen. They were the next ones in line at the light and it really, they were really upset about it” and “it helped me be able to say, to have that and say, okay, the principal said this and everything is going to be okay.”

“Even when we had tornado warnings a couple weeks ago, we had a couple updates from her. So I did appreciate that.” Ms. Quinlan expressed, “I could tell it is a high priority for this principal, to make sure parents stay in the loop, though sometimes her tone is not the most friendly and open kind of tone.” Regardless of the situation, be it an emergency or update, it was clear that Ms. Quinlan greatly “appreciated” Ms. Saunders efforts to be “transparent” and provide “immediate” information to put families at ease.

Ms. Nahstol

The first interview with Ms. Nahstol took place in a conference room at the local university the researcher attended. The room consisted of a large conference table with approximately ten cushioned chairs surrounding. The table and chairs took up a majority of the space in the room. The participant selected this location because she felt it was a safe space for her to speak openly about her family engagement experiences across the school transition from elementary school to middle school. After two reschedules, the interview was conducted on Wednesday, August 10, 2016, at 10:45 a.m. When Ms. Nahstol arrived, she greeted the researcher in a warm manner and was enthusiastic about being a participant in the research study.

The second interview took place on Thursday, September 1, 2016, at 10:00 a.m. in the same location as the first interview. Ms. Nahstol was relaxed and happy to talk with the researcher about her family engagement experiences since our last interview. Both interviews lasted approximately forty-five minutes. Unfortunately, Ms. Nahstol did not respond to the repeated attempts to schedule the third interview.

Ms. Nahstol had a professional background in the field of public education but is not currently involved professionally with public education. During this study, Ms. Nahstol had one child in transitioning from elementary school to middle school and two in elementary school in the Upper Dublin County School District. This was Ms. Nahstol's first experience as a parent interacting with Upper Dublin Middle School but expected to be engaged for years to come.

While Ms. Nahstol's professional background and activism in public education allowed her to be comfortable interacting with schools, she recognized the need to "tone down" and "be aware" that when she advocated for something within the school setting, that her "frustration

with school” not affect her child’s “experiences.” The “most important thing is that so far [my child] is having a great experience.”

Perspectives of Barriers to Family Engagement. In this section, Ms. Nahstol relayed barriers to engaging with Upper Dublin Middle School. The barriers she discussed focused mainly on how prior school experiences shaped how she now engages with the middle school, her feelings surrounding the school not being prepared for the school year to begin, and concerns and experiences she had about the new Upper Dublin Middle School principal.

Prior Experiences with Upper Dublin County Schools. “We’re making it our mission to win him over and they know us now and they’ve accepted we’re not going anywhere. We’re not a threat; we’re not reporting anybody.” This one sentence summed up Ms. Nahstol’s exhausting experience of spending years trying to build a positive relationship with the principal of a Upper Dublin County Elementary School. She spoke of the principal’s “lack of trust” toward parents at the elementary school. Spending years trying to form a partnership and build trust with this principal left Ms. Nahstol emotionally drained. She was hopeful for a better relationship with the new principal at Upper Dublin

I mean everyone has had this, “Okay, let’s just give it a chance. It’s going to be good. She was in this role, it wasn’t going well but hopefully in this role it will be different and those problems are not fixed at all.”

Feeling the new principal behaved similarly to the principal at the elementary school her child attended, she was “hesitant” to engage and ultimately chose to engage less with Upper Dublin Middle School and its new principal. She lamented, “I’m not in the market right now to take on another relationship like that and nudge it in a positive direction.” Ms. Nahstol was also frustrated with the school district, feeling that they “continue to put people in those positions that

have that mentality so I'm almost deeply hurt by it." She was referring to the belief that the school district put people into administrative positions who were "climbers," that "it's about" themselves, and that these principals have the need to "establish" their "authority" so everyone knows they are "in charge." "I'm just, I'm just tired of that dynamic an all the parents talk about it all the time and after the painful year we had," on a district level with a major incident at another Upper Dublin County school. The lack of transparency from school district employees and resulting push back by parents made Ms. Nahstol feel that "for parents who were active, there was very much this sense that, you know, there's this sense of being broken open."

What frustrated her more was that after major incident involving school district personnel, she thought there was going to be more transparency across the district, including at UDMS

The board is so open, reaching out to us and asking us and saying hey we want to know more. There's this sense that we're all a little bit hurt and we're going to be more responsive to parents and then the same freaking thing. It's just, I can't, I don't have enough mental space in my day and in my mind to take it on.

It appears there was not one instance but many instances over multiple years that left Ms. Nahstol in a place where she did not feel as her voice had been heard or appreciated by the Upper Dublin County school communities she had been a part of.

We're Here and You're Not Ready. "I was livid that on the first day of school the sixth grade schedules weren't ready" and families were not notified. Ms. Nahstol continued, "Of course at the beginning of the year, you might have up to 15 students whose schedules were mixed up or wrong," but she was not expecting most student schedules to be incorrect. Reflecting back to the summer before school began, one of her child's friend's parents kept her up-to-date on things

like, the parent portal which is a “parent thing where you can log in and see your child’s grades and even daily assignments and quizzes, you can see what’s going on,” including the ability to view the child’s schedule. The woman reminded Ms. Nahstol, “Oh you know, make sure you have that set up because schedules are going to be coming out.” Families wanted to know to what classes their students were assigned or “if our kids were going to be on the same team together.” In July of 2016, when the other mother found her child’s schedule to be incorrect, she reached out to Ms. Nahstol to check her child’s schedule on the portal. When she went to log in, she found that she discovered she needed to “contact your school administrator in charge of that.” Ms. Nahstol chose not to contact UDMS in July to get a new password so she could review her child’s schedule online because she “had a feeling if I called this would be low on their totem pole.” There was no doubt in her mind that, “they would have those schedules sorted out by the first day of school and I didn’t really feel the need to be like, “I have to know my kid’s teachers before the first day of school.” She trusted the school would have schedules ready by the first day of school so she did not contact the school to reassign her password or check further into her child’s schedule.

Ms. Nahstol found out about the schedule snafu when her child arrived home from the first day of school. Her child told her, “The teachers said they didn’t have our schedules yet but not to worry about it and it wasn’t their fault.” She was furious when she learned that schedules were incorrect. “The first day of school is so essential for setting the tone, setting the pace, the climate. The sense that, “We are here, and we are prepared for you and understand who you are and where you’re coming from.” Ms. Nahstol was “so bothered” by teachers telling students “sorry we couldn’t do anything about it” because “we need to have a system where teachers say,

‘I know you [administrators] have 15 professional development lectures lined up for this week but the very first day of school is important and we don’t have schedules.’”

Aside from the situation itself, Ms. Nahstol was not happy that families were not notified. Ms. Nahstol spoke with other Upper Dublin Middle School families and “they were like, “We totally hear you, it’s really bad.” Other Upper Dublin Middle School parents told Ms. Nahstol that Ms. Saunders’ response about the snafu “was not really appropriate and she basically threw Ms. Teague under the bus.” Ms. Teague was listed as a registrar on the UDMS website. She and other parents felt Ms. Saunders was “not taking ownership of the situation.” She continued

I don’t care how bad your IT problem is, I mean 20 years ago okay, do it on paper if you have to. It was like it was a computer glitch or they didn’t understand the program or it was too complicated. It’s just, to me, it’s another example of a huge systematic fail.

The problem of schedules not being complete on the first day of school also affected her child’s learning. They had “some classes with three students and some with 34.” Scheduling problems were not resolved by the end of the first several days and Ms. Nahstol felt students were losing learning time when “we already waste so much time in school just by the nature of school.”

The Saturday prior to the start of the school year, Upper Dublin Middle Schools hosted a back-to-school carnival. Ms. Nahstol thought, “It was super hot” which “was kind of a barrier” and that idea of the festival seemed “wonderful”. She thought the event contributed “to that whole positive feel but it kind of contributes to this idea of chaos.” If she “were a brand new parent with no contacts, it’s like, “There’s the goats, and there’s the teachers, and there’s the guy rapping.” She found it to be unorganized. “You have tents, and the teachers are sweating balls, and they’re all crowded under one tent, and then you’re all trying to meet them.” She continued, “In that situation, the degree of informality and the structure didn’t lend itself to the most

effective perception of teachers and everything.” Ms. Nahstol found herself reaching out to teachers but felt, “a lot of parents are more needing to be reached out to more,” especially families of incoming sixth graders. “I’m not sure how parents, who didn’t know folks, how comfortable they were to figure it all out.” In the end, the heat and perceived lack of organization did not help Ms. Nahstol feel more prepared for the upcoming school year. Ms. Nahstol offered suggestions for future back-to-school carnivals, including hosting the event on a Friday evening when it’s cooler or holding a separate, more formal and organized event for incoming sixth grade parents. “Do something with just sixth grade parents because I think people realize that that whole parent involvement piece starts to drop off a little bit,” but, “you’ve got this captive fifth grade audience.”

We’re open to hear what you have to tell us. You’ve got that captive, brief moment of an audience that’s like I’m ready to hear what you have to say so you might as well take advantage of that. Have a sixth grade parent night where you can go around to the classes and that would be great.

It would be helpful for the school to provide an experience for incoming sixth grade parents to “connect with teachers” in a “true, valuable, sit down” way.

Who? How? and When? are the questions Ms. Nahstol has asked herself in regard to communicating with UDMS teachers. She found some teachers want to communicate using the Remind app, others through Google classroom, “a few just like, ‘See you if you need me,’” and no idea from others. One neighborhood parent of a child in eighth grade stopped to vent to her about this topic while she was out for a walk. He told her, “I’ll tell you what. If you’re going to have me sign up for this parent portal then there’d better be something in there, and these

teachers need to use it.” With so many ways to communicate with families using technology, Ms. Nahstol felt

It would be fantastic if there was a team handout like, “This is the team members; this is what they use.” Just a one page cheat sheet because there’s A days and B days. So just a one page cheat sheet. These are the days; these are the team members. Here’s how to get in touch with the teachers. That would be awesome. What a simple idea. Sometimes I feel like with all the bells and whistles, we forget the fundamental simplicity of structure.

Structure is what Ms. Nahstol was looking for at UDMS as well as follow through from the school.

Changing of the Guard: Problems with a New Principal. “Well that was a bust,” Ms. Nahstol voiced about her first interaction with Ms. Saunders at a principal’s coffee time with fifth grade parents at the elementary school Ms. Nahstol’s child attended. The Upper Dublin Middle School principal at the time, Dr. Smith, could not make the event so Ms. Saunders, then serving as assistant principal, was asked to meet with families in her stead

Ms. Saunders came, as well as the Upper Dublin Family Engagement Specialist. And this was right around the time where there was a lot of stuff happening, really coming out about the [disciplinary incident] at [another] Upper Dublin County school and then all of this issue of really trying to cover up or stifle referrals or really putting a lot of pressure on teachers not to write referrals.

A parent at the meeting asked Ms. Saunders, “thinking that she was really aware of how aware the public is of everything that’s going on, asked her what she felt about transparency with discipline referrals.” Ms. Saunders replied with an answer that Ms. Nahstol “was just really unsatisfied with.” Ms. Nahstol thought, “Well, if she felt a referral was worthy of processing, she

would [process it], and if it basically was something she thought was trivial and the teacher had not gone through the steps, then she wouldn't." Ms. Nahstol understood "that some people don't go through the steps but I felt like she didn't acknowledge the elephant in the room." She also did not appreciate when Ms. Saunders told the attendees, "I'm here because it's 'duties and responsibilities as assigned,'" implying that she attended the parent meeting only because she was told to do so by the principal. Ms. Nahstol reflected, "Not like hey, 'I'm so excited to be here. I'm so sorry Dr. Smith can't be, but here's what's great. Here's what's going on at Upper Dublin.'" How Ms. Saunders spoke to families at that meeting disheartened her. Ms. Nahstol voiced in a shocked tone, "And now she's going to be the principal! And so that contributed to... really, my heart sank when I heard that news that she was going to be the principal." She continued, "I think many, many people have gone through recovery" on coming to terms with Ms. Saunders becoming the UDMS principal.

Following this fifth grade parent meeting, Ms. Nahstol spoke with families of students who attended Upper Dublin Middle School at community events. Ms. Nahstol also recalled being discouraged to learn that one of the UDMS teachers she knew had decided not to return for the following school year, partially based on the choice of the new principal. She relayed a conversation between a group of local community members that included UDMS incoming parents, current parents, and teachers. "On the day that they announced Dr. Smith was leaving, one of the parents said, 'Oh I hope it's not the assistant principal,' and the teacher said, 'I'm really relieved to hear you say that because, whew, it's bad.'" Ms. Nahstol was disheartened by parents and a UDMS teacher's thoughts about Ms. Saunders becoming the UDMS principal. She hated "to even utter these words right now because we don't dwell on this anymore, but just to

reiterate, just describing that terrible feeling that everyone had and the teacher ended up leaving the district.” She felt that very often

We lose good families, and we lose good teachers, and we just, you know, lose momentum with these staff changes. And, you know, people leave, and maybe she truly was the best candidate. There’s many, many factors, but it was just—it interrupted the positive momentum for sure.

Ms. Nahstol’s interactions with Ms. Saunders from before she was a parent at UDMS and since becoming a parent at UDMS have shaped her current view of the principal. She was frustrated that she had experiences that made her feel exhausted and “hesitant to even begin to get involved.”

Perspectives of Supports to Family Engagement. In this section, Ms. Nahstol recalls supports that facilitated engagement with Upper Dublin Middle School. The one area of support she did expound upon was the support of the PTO network, which proved invaluable to her as a new middle school parent. Although she did not speak in depth of many supports, she did list multiple, which are detailed below. The researcher would also like to note that Ms. Nahstol did mention multiple times that “overall” her child “has been happy with her [transition] experience.” She also shared that she “felt empowered in the sense that I feel like my kid has got it and [my child] can navigate it and I think that’s good” and that Ms. Nahstol is “friends with parents who are a little ‘helicopter’ so it’s like. ‘That’s good,’ and I feel self-excused from being super involved. At some point you have to be like, ‘Okay, I’ve got this,’ so that’s different.”

Ms. Nahstol pointed out that her child is involved in FFA. The agriculture teacher has used the Remind app to keep in touch with families. She noted that FFA has been “the most positive piece” of her child’s middle school experience to date. Ms. Nahstol also engaged with

FFA by agreeing to host and help her child take care of a bunny for two weeks. “I am going to pick up that bunny next week and that will be my first interaction with Upper Dublin” since the back-to-school festival that took place the Saturday before the school year began.

Speaking of the back-to-school festival, Ms. Nahstol commented that “it’s this lovely festival idea,” and that the “idea seems wonderful contributing to that whole positive feel,” and that it “was good except for it being chaotic.” She shared, “One of the things parents have talked about was, ‘Oh maybe doing Upper Dublin’s back-to-school carnival in the evening with an orientation packet.’” The orientation packet could include information about the “teachers on the teams [and] this is what A day and B day means. There are the options for the specials. Here are all the clubs.”

Other school transition events Ms. Nahstol believed supported family engagement across the transition to middle school included the “positive” field trip to visit UDMS and when Dr. Smith, then UDMS principal, “came to talk to us at one of our principal coffees and talked to parents.” She thought, “That was great, and it was really well attended. People asked questions; she answered questions.”

Regarding communication with teachers, Ms. Nahstol noted that she was in text groups with the Remind app, “so I’m on the band one, the FFA one, the Ag one, English, Social Studies.” While she did not elaborate on how often she communicated with the teachers of these courses, she did make a point to state that the teachers of these courses were ones who reached out to her.

Families Supporting Families. “So, coming into a situation where I feel there are a lot of strong parents who are very vocal already” in support of and are engaged with children, teachers, and the whole school allowed Ms. Nahstol to relax about how much she engaged with UDMS.

She hasn't had to "do anything as far as volunteering and stuff, so I don't feel like there's going to be any great pressure or need." She was able to take on a smaller participatory role than in previous years at the elementary school level where there was not as much family engagement. She discussed, "When you talk about family engagement, I'm coming from this perspective of being one of the involved parents and that is definitely not what it means for everyone, you know, at all."

One specific way families support other families at Upper Dublin Middle School is through their PTO. Ms. Nahstol spoke of the PTO having a Facebook page to share information and answer questions from families. UDMS administrators also have access to the page to share information and answer questions from families. Ms. Nahstol said, "I get information from other parents and the Facebook page." She elaborated, "So I would say Facebook would be my main point of contact with what's happening with the school stuff. Most of the stuff on the Facebook has been parents asking questions... I think parents get the idea of, 'Hey there's this community. I'm enough of a member where I can post'" and receive an immediate response. Ms. Nahstol continued

I think I was so pleased to see that partnership between PTO and Dr. Smith and I think that was a huge step towards positive stuff happening. So I think they have gotten to where it's really both [families and UDMS employees] posting. Admin will post and the parents [post]. All kinds of parents will just ask a question and stuff. So you see just as frequently, you'll see parents posting, "Hey, remember there will be a delay today" or about fundraisers. Or the librarian will post stuff so I feel like there's a lot of interplay there between parents, teachers, and admin on that page.

While the PTO Facebook page was created by families for families, it heartened Ms. Nahstol to know that there was a space for families, teachers, and administrators to interact and share information with each other surrounding Upper Dublin Middle School.

Ms. Pyle

The first interview with Ms. Pyle took place over the phone on August 5, 2016. The researcher was at her home recording the conversation held over speaker phone. Ms. Pyle was at her office, speaking between meetings. She chose to interview by phone as her location in an effort stay on her work schedule. Due to Ms. Pyle's extremely busy work schedule, the phone interview began forty-five minutes later than scheduled. She was apologetic but eager to discuss her experiences with family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school.

The second interview took place over the phone on August 30, 2016 in the early afternoon during her lunch break. Again, Ms. Pyle was in her office at work and the researcher was recording the conversation at home over speaker phone. Ms. Pyle openly shared her experiences with the middle school since the school year began three weeks prior.

The final interview with Ms. Pyle took place on December 10, 2016 at approximately 2:30 p.m. The interview time was delayed by thirty minutes due to Ms. Pyle's family commitments. This interview was also held over the phone. Ms. Pyle phoned the researcher from her home, and the researcher recorded the conversation over speaker phone from her home. During the final interview, Ms. Pyle came across as more relaxed and comfortable in speaking with this researcher. The three interviews all lasted approximately thirty minutes.

Ms. Pyle has a professional background in the field of public education and has been highly participative in school committees and events. She had been engaged with the middle

school for years because she has two children, one attending a Upper Dublin County High School and one transitioning from elementary school to UDMS. Being involved with Upper Dublin Middle School's Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) led Ms. Pyle to realize the PTO was not reaching all families at the middle school. The organization struggled with how to help "increase engagement in the lower socio-economic status families and families whose kids are struggling and families whose kids have behavior problems, the types of families who wouldn't normally be engaged in coming to PTO meetings or what have you." Ms. Pyle conceded

It is a bit of a cycle because the people who volunteer for PTO are going to be the people who have more discretionary time or more flexible jobs or what have you and that is going to correlate with a particular demographic and so PTO ends up looking the same year to year.

While she didn't "have a good answer" for how to help better engage families who do not tend to engage in formal committees like the PTO, it is something the PTO was actively working to improve upon. Ms. Pyle expressed enthusiasm for this research study because she hopes it will glean new information on how to better engage all families.

Perspectives on Barriers to Family Engagement. In this section, Ms. Pyle expressed barriers to engaging with Upper Dublin Middle School. The barriers she mentioned primarily focused on school wide communication and communication with her child's teachers. Ms. Pyle briefly discussed barriers with the school district, the new middle school principal, and with Upper Dublin Middle School's back-to-school festival, which took place the Saturday prior to the start of the school year.

Communication. Ms. Pyle repeatedly spoke of communication struggles and confusions with the school as a whole and with her child's sixth grade teachers. Two recurring barriers to

communication with the school and teachers surrounded the confusion of who was responsible for communication and a lack of consistent communication.

School wide. When Ms. Pyle recalled her first elementary to middle school transition with her older child, she said, “It felt harder or felt like more of an unknown” than the transition with her younger child. Still,

What I wish they had done more of was give us guidance on school supplies, give us info on specifics. You know, we don’t need generics about make sure they get to bed on time and eat a good breakfast. We know those things. How do they organize information for all these different classes? How to keep track of different assignments and different due dates?

Shortly before the beginning of the school year began, Ms. Pyle had not “gotten any information from the school this year about ‘Here is information to help your transitioning sixth grader.’” She felt there was “probably some info we needed” to be prepared for the start of the year, things “that they could have put out sooner.” Broadly she thought,

[We need] some communication coming out in June or July and, you know, when you’re ready for it. “Here’s a link to our guide for a successful sixth grade transition.” Then, whenever parents are ready for that or think about it, they have that. That’s info that doesn’t change that much year to year and I think that would be really helpful.

She continued, “That transition when you are first coming in to middle school, I think, is a really big one” and it would be helpful for families to have information from the school and would help make families and students less nervous for the beginning of sixth grade at a new school. Ms. Pyle provided further suggestions to aid families of students transitioning to UDMS

I would say having some sort of a “frequently asked questions” sort of thing that people could access online somehow or that could be sent out. And this could be something even that current sixth grade parents and students are asked about. Get their input on what are things that would have been helpful. “What do you know now that you didn’t know last year that would have been helpful?”

Families, for example, “[were not] given a lot of info on school supplies... even just how to stay organized. What sort of folder systems work? Different kids come up with different solutions. Having some examples to look at would be really helpful.”

Ms. Pyle pointed out that helping her child stay organized for seven different classes with “different tasks, different tests, different due dates” from seven different teachers proved difficult. “I struggled with how to help with that. I wish there had been a little better advice for how to support kids in that transition.”

Once the school year started at UDMS, Ms. Pyle was confused by where to look for information, who was sending what information, and what methods they were using. “One thing that hasn’t been clear to me... is what communication comes from the PTO and what communication comes from the school?” She was “under the impression the PTO channels” were a “fairly separate thing from the general school communication” but it was a “sort of muddy mess [as] to who is the messenger.” Historically, “PTO, their job is not to distribute information for the school about the school’s academic mission or the school’s program.” The PTO “is supposed to be about “Here’s what PTO is doing to support the school.” And some of that has been muddied.” She questioned, “What information is then going to come from the school? What’s going to come from PTO?” and would that information come from the Remind app, e-mail, text message, physical flyer sent home or on a Facebook or blog post?

With Teachers. By the end of August Ms. Pyle reflected, “I am not hearing from every teacher, but I am hearing from several.” She thought with more time, this would change; however, by December she recalled, “I haven’t had as much consistent communication from all of my [child’s] teachers as I would like to. I know that some teachers have been pretty good about it, [but] some have not been good.” She thought that it would “probably be helpful for new parents” to have a “very consistent communication game plan for all the teachers so parents can know predictably where are you going to get information” and when. She wanted something put in place that would make communication expectations for teachers clear so parents would know what to expect from every teacher. She finished with, “The main thing I can think of from my perspective is having more consistency, more predictability for every teacher to be using the same system of communicating with parents and being accessible.”

Ms. Pyle also worried about communication with teachers during parent-teacher conference night

In the past, conferences were where you’d walk around and meet with different teachers in different rooms. This year, at least the time that I came, it was really just with one teacher, the homeroom teacher. She didn’t have a lot of information from my child’s other teachers so she was just sort of having to guess about how [my child performed academically]. If I would have been able to talk to all of her primary subject matter teachers, I would have liked for there to have been an opportunity to hear from more than just one person.

She expected to be able to speak with all her child’s teachers to better understand how her child was performing academically and getting along socially in all classes. This change to the structure of the parent-teacher conference night prevented Ms. Pyle from effectively

communicating with her child's teachers. She believed the parent-teacher conference night should be adjusted for families to meet with all teachers on their children's schedules.

From Macro to Micro. Ms. Pyle touched upon multiple barriers to her engaging with UDMS. She spoke briefly of experiences with the district and school to a smaller scale about one UDMS event and her personal life.

Ms. Pyle relayed, "There were some things at the district level that happened in Upper Dublin County schools this past year," that had not gone over well with her and other families. "I don't know how aware you are of some of the events of the past year but there were some decisions made by the superintendent and the school board that were a little wrong-headed." She chose not to elaborate on these events stating, "That's too long of a story to go into."

At UDMS, Ms. Pyle had a few reservations about the new principal. Her first reservation surrounded Ms. Saunders' people skills. She felt that the new principal did not possess the same people skills as the previous principal and that "[Ms. Saunders] might even agree with that assessment." She felt Ms. Saunders "has a different skill set that she's bringing." One of Ms. Pyle's "concerns as a parent" was that it was important "for that first impression" with parents to be "strong and positive" and that "it's important to set parents at ease and I don't think that comes naturally to [Ms. Saunders]." She also stated, "I'm not averse to a change in leadership. I think when you're a confident leader you don't need to remind everyone you're in charge." She then compared Ms. Saunders' tone to that of another principal in Upper Dublin County School District who spoke to incoming parents

The first words out of this person's mouth were something like we're not the best high school in town but we're really working on it. It was something horrendous. I mean, they (parents) were just looking at each other like, "Oh my God. Did nobody give you any

advice on how to frame this?” So, I think, that [for] new kindergarten parents, new sixth grade parents, new ninth grade parents, it’s important to [be aware of the tone they are setting]. But [for] kindergarten and sixth, it might be the most important time [for parents] to really have confidence that the person in charge is a leader and is positive and loves kids and is upbeat about the school.

By December, Ms. Pyle recollected, “the new principal has a learning curve in a lot of areas” and “it just felt to me that for a while there was a little bit of a reactionary mode, a little bit of crisis management than a real, sort of, positive, forward position.” She was “hoping over time that will change.”

Ms. Pyle was also concerned with how the principal handled certain situations. Before elaborating, she asked the researcher

Will this info be shared in any way that will get back to the school or get back to the principal? There is something I have an opinion about that I don’t want to express in a way that could be read by the principal. So if it’s all right with you I will give an answer and then can I tell you something else off the record that you won’t print?

Regarding the new principal, Ms. Pyle relayed, “the schedules weren’t ready at the beginning of the year” and “the first week was probably a little more chaotic than it should have been.

Although we all expect some chaos at the beginning, I feel like some of that could have been prevented.” Regardless of Ms. Pyle’s experiences to date with the new principal, she was hopeful that, with time, Ms. Saunders would become more comfortable in her position as principal and leader of the school and school community. “There are some growing pains, but we’ll get there eventually.”

When Ms. Pyle thought of specific events that could be improved to better support family engagement, she brought up Upper Dublin Middle School's back-to-school festival that took place the Saturday prior to the beginning of the school year. She believed the event itself was amazing; however, it did not meet the needs of incoming sixth grade families. The back-to-school festival is open to families of all middle school grades. Ms. Pyle suggested that incoming sixth grade students and families "would probably benefit from a kind of an orientation thing where you would get to walk around and see your classrooms, talk to your teachers in the rooms. Just have little 'get to know each other' games." She thought that holding an event "for the new incoming sixth graders and the new transfer students where they can come and get the lay of the land" without everyone else and provide "more specific info for that school transition" would better benefit students and families.

Perspectives of Supports to Family Engagement. In this section, Ms. Pyle described supports that facilitated her engagement with Upper Dublin Middle School. The supports she revealed mainly focused on prior experiences with the school transition to UDMS, opportunities to connect with the middle school, and Upper Dublin Middle School's PTO.

Former School Transitions. Ms. Pyle spoke often of her prior middle school transition experiences. She believed the experiences she had with her older child help her better prepare for her younger child. Advice offered from her older child to her younger child also helped make the family feel prepared for the beginning of the school year. She felt prepared for her younger child's transition, "Well, I have some experience with this already since I've already had kids go through middle school."

Ms. Pyle recalled her first middle school transition experience with UDMS. "To me my first transition from elementary to middle school felt harder or felt like more of an unknown."

She discovered her older child struggled with organization, how to keep track of assignments and due dates. Her older child tried “to hold it all in [their] head and that obviously doesn’t work. I didn’t figure out for a while” that the middle school had not prepared incoming sixth graders for a change in the elementary school routine. Across the school transition she felt, “There are logistics and, you know, even things like managing gym clothes,” that incoming sixth grade students had to learn about. When the information was not clear or children got a lot of information at once, life became stressful for her family. For the second go-around, Ms. Pyle felt she and her child were logistically prepared for middle school because of her prior experiences. For example, information about lockers was not supplied to families of incoming sixth graders before the beginning of the school year, but Ms. Pyle recalled having to purchase a lock and practice opening it with her older child. With her younger child, she knew to “buy your kid a locker or a combination lock and have them practice it, have them get good at that before the first day of school.” Doing this over the summer instead of at the beginning of the school year alleviated some of her child’s anxiety. “I mean that was one thing my [child] was worried about, ‘Oh yeah let’s go ahead and you that lock.’ I knew that from previous experience.”

Opportunities to Connect with the Middle School. Ms. Pyle stressed that there were many opportunities available for families to connect with Upper Dublin Middle School. While she shared some opportunities to connect with UDMS that she was aware of, Ms. Pyle did not attend many. Between exhaustion from playing an active role in elementary and middle school organizations and personal and family needs, Ms. Pyle chose to engage with the school less for the 2016-2017 school year. “I’ve just had a lot going on with my particular life and my family’s particular life, but that’s about me and not about the school.”

For incoming sixth grade parents, Ms. Pyle noted that there were “fewer PTO sponsored activities in middle school,” than in elementary school, but “there are more clubs and sports and things like that [for kids] to do.” She said the main difference between family engagement in elementary school and middle school was “it’s a little bit more student-led than PTO and parent - led, but overall, I feel like for parents who want to be involved in the school, there are still ways to do that.” While not always engaging with the middle school, Ms. Pyle was aware of events and activities hosted by the school or PTO. She stated

It seems to me there are multiple opportunities and different types of activities for people to participate in. In fact, just last night, there as a coffee hour and there was a parent drop-in visitation thing in the early evening before the science fair projects were presented. I keep hearing about either morning coffees or this drop-in. This coming Monday night is the band winter concert, and so I’ll go to that. So, it feels to me as a parent who tries to pay attention to things, that there are a number of opportunities for parents to come if they want.

Ms. Pyle chose to engage with UDMS in ways that focused on her children. Her sixth grade child was in band, so she attended the band concerts. She also was engaged with the science fair since her child had advanced to the district level science fair.

Before the school year began, Ms. Pyle also attended the back-to-school festival, which she described as a great event. Although she found it to be a bit chaotic at times, the back-to-school festival was “really helpful in terms of being able to go on tours of the school.” While she found the event to be a “little bit overwhelming because there’s so much that’s new,” she thought “it’s good that they have that sort of open house festival thing for kids to be able to come and walk around and have kind of a party sort of atmosphere.”

PTO Supporting Parents. Ms. Pyle was actively engaged with PTO at Upper Dublin Middle School. She shared that the PTO was a great organization to obtain information about the school and have any questions surrounding UDMS answered in a timely fashion. She believed she got “30 to 40%” of information about UDMS, its events and activities, from the PTO.

To help prepare incoming sixth grade parents, “the PTO has worked hard to communicate with parents about the policies of the school and to help facilitate communication between the principal and the parents to answer questions.” The PTO held a meeting at the beginning of the school year that was attended by UDMS parents, the principal, assistant principal, and faculty members. She recalled, “The PTO meeting was a good chance to hear about some things going on at the school. To hear from the principal and meet the vice principal.” Ms. Pyle continued, “I felt like I had an opportunity to connect to things going on at the school.”

Aside from the PTO sharing information at meetings, Ms. Pyle shared that the PTO had a Facebook group where families can find information and ask questions to other families. She is on Facebook “several times a day so I do get a chance to see communications that are on the [Upper Dublin] Facebook group,” which has allowed her to stay up to date with what is going on at UDMS. The PTO also communicated with families using the Remind website. “With Remind, people just sign up themselves and are able to opt in,” to receiving e-mails and/or text messages from the PTO.

Ms. Ofchinick

Ms. Ofchinick’s first interview took place early in the morning on Tuesday, June 1, 2016, in a local coffee shop within walking distance of the office where she worked. The coffee shop was quaint with only ten tables scattered throughout and a couple of couches off in one corner. It was easy for Ms. Ofchinick and the researcher to meet for the first time as the shop was

relatively quiet and empty. As she settled down with a coffee in hand, she seemed ready to share her experiences.

Our second interview occurred on Tuesday, August 30, 2016 at 8:30 a.m. in the same coffee shop by her workplace. We chose the only empty table in the middle of the bustling shop. Ms. Ofchinick was bright, bubbly, and eager to relay her family's latest experiences with Upper Dublin Middle School.

The third interview with Ms. Ofchinick was delayed multiple times due to illness and childcare issues. Ms. Ofchinick and the researcher were finally able to connect on Tuesday, January 10, 2017, at 2:00p.m. in the same local coffee shop. It was clear, as Ms. Ofchinick arrived a few minutes late, that she was having a busy day at work but she was still excited to share her most recent experiences. All three interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes each.

Ms. Ofchinick has a professional background in the field of public education and is relatively new to the Upper Dublin County School District. She and her family moved to the UDCSD in 2016. When they entered the district, one of her children began school at UDMS and the other at a local elementary school. Her first experiences with UDCSD schools were frustrating, mostly due to the time of the school year that she enrolled her children. Ms. Ofchinick's earliest struggle surrounded communication with new teachers. She lamented, "I was a little frustrated at the beginning because I was trying to set up a meeting with [my child] and the prospective teachers because of her anxiety issues." She understood "that the timing was not ideal but we couldn't help it. It's when our house sold," and "initially I was a little frustrated by the response that I got from the school." While Ms. Ofchinick shared experiences of her children's mid-school year transition to UDCSD schools, she primarily chronicled the school transition of her younger child from fifth grade in an elementary school to sixth grade at UDMS.

Perspectives on Barriers to Family Engagement. In this section, Ms. Ofchinick discussed barriers to engaging with Upper Dublin Middle School. The barriers she mentioned mostly surrounded communication, a lack of organization surrounding school-led events, and the school's climate. In particular, she detailed her communication struggles with the UDMS guidance counselor and sixth grade teachers. She also expounded on Upper Dublin's back-to-school festival, the science fair, and a school wide open house being unorganized. Regarding school climate, Ms. Ofchinick believed that the climate is set by the principal, and that it was not positive.

Communication. Ms. Ofchinick spoke often of communication struggles and confusions with the guidance counselor and sixth grade teachers. She struggled early on with whom to contact, when to contact them, and her child's homework assignments. Ms. Ofchinick's views of barriers with the guidance counselor and sixth grade teachers were present at her early June 2016 and end of August 2016 interviews. By January of 2017, she experienced a positive change in her experiences with school faculty. This positive change is discussed in the supports section.

UDMS Guidance Counselor. Ms. Ofchinick's child struggles with a disability. The researcher did not disclose whether the disability was mental or physical to protect the identity of the child and participant. Due to her child's disability, the elementary school guidance counselor and fifth grade teachers encouraged Ms. Ofchinick to contact the sixth grade guidance counselor to discuss how best to prepare her child for sixth grade and for Ms. Ofchinick to speak with her child's future teachers so they "know what we're dealing with". When Ms. Ofchinick e-mailed the UDMS guidance counselor toward the end of the 2016 school year, she was disheartened not to hear back from the counselor until August of 2016. She recalled,

So I wish I had gotten a faster response from the counselor but I also understand that it was the end of the year, there was testing going on, there was a lot going on on their end. I am just a stickler about e-mails so I like to try and e-mail somebody back by the end of the day even if I'm just saying I got your e-mail, I will get back to you a.s.a.p. so I know that they got my e-mail.

Ms. Ofchinick was "a little frustrated by the fact that I didn't hear back from her," because one of her "big goals in life is to try and make things easier for [her child] and easier for [her child's] teachers too." She continued that she knows her child is not a "joy, a ray of sunshine in the classroom all the time, but if we're starting from this point, and we all know what [my child's] struggles are from day one, I think it just makes things easier for everyone."

Over the summer, Ms. Ofchinick made another attempt to contact the UDMS counselor because she had tried to

talk to the school about [my child's] transition and had been encouraged to wait closer until the school year to talk to the counselor because they didn't know who her teachers would be at that point. So, I made a point at the end of the summer to e-mail the counselor at Upper Dublin and say that I wanted to, if possible, meet with her teachers before school started... I didn't hear back anything for a really long time.

Later, Ms. Ofchinick realized it was possible the counselor did not check her e-mail over the summer break so she followed up with another e-mail the week before school started. Due to a student scheduling mix-up, the counselor did not know who Ms. Ofchinick's child's teachers would be. The counselor also suggested that "we wait until a few weeks into school to meet to talk about [her child's disability]." The counselor told Ms. Ofchinick they should wait to meet, "because that gave everybody a chance to interact with [my child] before we met. It wasn't really

my ideal, the way I would have liked to have handled it at the time.” Ultimately, Ms. Ofchinick “would just like a little more responsiveness going in,” before the school year begins.

Ms. Ofchinick was left frustrated with her initial face-to-face informal meeting with the counselor at the back-to-school festival. She “just wanted to introduce myself to her face-to-face. So I told her who I was. I was pretty profuse in my thanks for her help and trying to be nice and just say ‘Thank you for answering my questions.’” She recollected

Well, you know, it was funny because I traded these e-mails with her right before [the back-to-school festival] and when I met her at [the back-to-school festival] I could see this look come over her face like, “Oh, you’re the one who’s been e-mailing me.” Now, I think I’m a pretty good reader of people. I think I could tell that she was a little bit annoyed so that was a little frustrating for me because I’m going to advocate for [my child] no matter what it takes. I don’t care if I tick people off. I mean I’m going to try not to, I’m going to try to be kind and not make anybody mad, but you know, I just had a lot of questions and they weren’t being answered so I was having to e-mail her back, e-mail her back, e-mail her back. I could tell she was just like, “Oh, so you’re the one,” but I don’t care.

Since their initial meeting, Ms. Ofchinick has been in communication via e-mail and had meetings with the counselor and her child’s sixth grade teachers. She does believe it would be helpful to inform incoming sixth grade parents about when to or when not to contact the sixth grade counselor.

With Teachers. “The whole teacher aspect of it (the transition) has been the most depressing part. Communication with them and figuring out everything with the teachers.” Ms. Ofchinick shared that communication with sixth grade teachers was minimal after three weeks of school.

She first learned who her child's teachers were the Saturday before the school year when she attended Upper Dublin's back-to-school festival. The school posted a paper at the event that listed what teams students were on. Ms. Ofchinick made a concerted effort to meet her child's teachers at the event. She did meet her child's math teacher at the back-to-school festival, "but it was just, you know, five minutes and then we were out of there. But he's the only one of her teachers that I can really say that I met." After three weeks into the school year she recalled,

I have not met her science teacher, I have not met [my child's] language arts teacher. I think I met [my child's] social studies teacher, and I know I met her math teacher. But those are the only teachers that I've met so that's a little bit frustrating.

This frustrated Ms. Ofchinick because she wanted the teachers to be prepared to handle her child's disability. Fortunately, from conversations she had with her child and with two of her teachers, she learned things were "going fine and there aren't any issues." She felt that since things were fine, she didn't "necessarily need to meet with [my child's] teachers. I mean I do have some questions but they are more general questions, like homework."

Homework was a concern for Ms. Ofchinick and her child. At times, her child struggled with comprehension of assignments or completing assignments and Ms. Ofchinick struggled with assisting with homework.

See, homework is confusing to me in middle school. They use Google classroom, which is fine. So [my child] and I go through every night and I'll see something in Google classroom. To me, if it's in Google classroom and it has a due date on it, that means it's homework. But [my child] says, "No we do that in class," or, "He didn't say anything about this, I don't know if I'm supposed to do this or not." I'm confused because I don't know if it's due or not. I don't know if it's something [my child] is supposed to be

working on and, you know, they don't say anything to [my child] about it. The whole way that homework works is not clear to me at all. What needs to be done every night or if what is in Google classroom is homework, what is not homework.

She believed homework was, "not clearly defined," and that it was "confusing and it causes frustration at homework time." Ms. Ofchinick recalled a conversation at homework time between her and her child

"Oh, you need to do this," and [my child] says, "Well, he didn't say anything about it. He didn't even tell us it was there." So it's sort of a "he said [my child] said" kind of thing. I don't know who to believe and I don't want [my child] to get a bad grade because [my child] didn't do something. So I don't know.

Ms. Ofchinick later contacted one teacher, and he told her, "We're kind of running behind on the content in class right now so it's not matching up." This made sense to Ms. Ofchinick because her child had told her, as they looked at Google classroom one evening that "we haven't even covered any of this." The assignments not aligning or being corrected online stressed out her child because her child did not know the answers. It also stressed Ms. Ofchinick because, "well, I don't know what [my child] is supposed to do. It's just not been communicated clearly in my opinion." She elaborated on her conversation with the teacher. "He said, 'Don't worry about [your child]; [your child] is doing fine in class.' So I was like, 'Okay.'" But, Ms. Ofchinick wished

they were more forthcoming about how all the homework works. It says in the syllabus there will be homework, but it doesn't say anything about specifics or what. Like this thing called DSP. I forget what DSP stands for. But then the syllabus didn't reference anything specific about DSP.

She noted, “It’s just the confusion over what’s due, what’s not due. What the actual assignment is. That sort of thing.” She thought, “Some teachers do a better job of explaining it, but it’s still—overall, it’s a very confusing process. And we’re just frustrated almost every night because we don’t know what we’re doing.” By January of 2017, homework expectations had been clarified, but Ms. Ofchinick believed all teachers should be clear about those expectations from the beginning of the school year.

Lack of Organization. “It looked like chaos” were Ms. Ofchinick’s first words about the back-to-school festival. “It wasn’t laid out in any way that I could figure out.” There was “one piece of paper that had the team and the homeroom, but it was taped down and then all these people,” were trying to look at one paper. “Trying to match up the name of the team with the homeroom and group of people who were standing there was confusing.” Once finding out which team her child was on, she sought out the sixth grade teachers. There was a sixth grade tent “where you could go and meet the teachers but there was just a whole group of teachers there. It wasn’t clear to me which one’s weren’t [my child’s] teachers.” Ms. Ofchinick reflected, “It was dangerously hot that day... it was so hot and confusing to me. I felt like there were a lot of stops I needed to make, and I just didn’t have a clear concept of where to go.” It took her a while to find the correct tent. She referred to this experience as a “bruhaha of people wandering around the field trying to meet your teachers,” when it was extremely hot.

Another event Ms. Ofchinick felt was disorganized was the open house UDMS hosted in September 2016. “They didn’t have a great turnout to this. Very few people me and so that was a little disappointing,” Ms. Ofchinick stated. Unfortunately, she felt the event was not well attended because “it wasn’t explained very well.” Some families “thought it was a drop-in thing, but it wasn’t. You had to be there at the time it started because you had a schedule of teachers

you went around to see.” For example, “One of my [child’s] friend’s mom came late and so she missed part of the thing. It wasn’t fully explained that it wasn’t drop in.” She noted, “In previous years, I think it was more of a drop-in open house kind of thing, and this year it wasn’t.” When families arrived, they were given “a color-coded block and you went to different teachers at different times. They sort of gave you a quick overview of how the class works.” Ms. Ofchinick felt she did not get enough time with teachers at this event.

It was so fast. I didn’t really feel like I got a chance to understand how things worked. I think that it would be better for sixth grade parents if they spent more time with sixth grade parents and didn’t feel so rushed to get through things so that parents can ask questions. Because, you know, when you finished up with one class, you had to immediately go to the next classroom to their little spiel and you didn’t really have time to ask questions of the people in this class. So it was, it felt very hectic and rushed. She wished more time was built into the event so she could have had “a little more time in each classroom so that parents could ask questions or get to know the teachers.” The event was set up in an odd way to her. “All the math teachers were in one class so you went there and saw all the math teachers. Then you went and saw all the language arts teachers.” Afterwards, “you went and saw all the social studies and they went over, sort of, the social studies curriculum.” Aside from feeling hectic and rushed, it was difficult to speak with teachers because she did not always know which teacher in each room was her child’s teacher.

But, you know, like the [back-to-school festival], it was so confusing I never really got a good feel for who my [child’s] teachers were because they weren’t all there when I stopped by. So even this, there’s three teachers in a room. I’m not 100% sure which one is my [child’s] teacher.

In the end, Ms. Ofchinick felt the event was helpful, “but it could have been more helpful.”

By January, Ms. Ofchinick was exhausted and frustrated from her and her child’s experiences with the school science fair. “Science fair this year was a complete and total disaster in my opinion.” While she shouldered some of the blame, she felt, “part of it was communication from the school.” UDMS had a different faculty member coordinate the science fair and Ms. Ofchinick did not believe this person was prepared to do the job. She thought, “there was a very sharp learning curve for her, and, I think, well, she and I have communicated via e-mail about it and she said she’s realized a lot of things she needs to do differently next year.”

Ms. Ofchinick was originally informed that all work on science fair projects would take place at school, aside from performing the actual experiment, which needed to be completed at home. Unfortunately, her child’s “teacher had some issues and had to be out for a really long time and [my child] was not getting a lot of guidance from him about what she should do for the project.” Ms. Ofchinick helped her child as best she could. “We did our project, we turned it in on time, and [my child] was actually selected for district.” This recognition excited both Ms. Ofchinick and her child. Then, “an e-mail went out right before winter break telling some of the kids, ‘Make sure you have all of these things done,’ but [my child] didn’t get that e-mail.” When students returned after the winter break, the “coordinator e-mails me and says I’m sending some paperwork home with your kids. It has to be completed by tomorrow.” After reviewing the paperwork that was sent home, she saw her child had “ten things highlighted on it that [were] to be completed and turned in by the next day on top of [my child’s] regular work.” Ms. Ofchinick was very frustrated because the amount of work to be completed was overwhelming for her child. “And so I said, you know what, we’re not doing this. We’re not going to go on to district because this is ridiculous that we’ve been given this the day before.” Her child

was a little disappointed but at the same time was relieved not to have to do all of that stuff in one night. Plus, it was on a Wednesday night. Wednesday nights are the nights [my child] has music lessons. So by the time we did music lessons and came home and ate dinner it was like seven o'clock and [my child] goes to bed at nine. Plus [my child] had to do homework so that was very stressful.

Ms. Ofchinick promised her child they would work hard and be sure to complete everything for the science fair next year. She was relieved after throwing in the towel on science fair preparations because, "I hate science fair anyway and so that was just, sort of, the icing on the cake."

For next year, Ms. Ofchinick recommended parents be given, "more information from the get-go about what is due and when and how much is completed at school and what needs to be completed at home." Doing so means that parents will not be "under the assumption that everything was being done at school when obviously, that's not the case."

School Climate. Over the first six months of the 2016-2017 school year, Ms. Ofchinick was aware of the school climate. "I think our school climate is terrible, frankly. It is terrible. It is like a heavy cloud of discipline hanging over our school." She continued, "Now, that's not to say we don't need discipline, but I think, there needs to be a different form of discipline at the school. Yelling doesn't work and that's the sort of go-to mode." When referring to yelling, Ms. Ofchinick was referencing how she felt the principal spoke to faculty and students. She implored, "I want [my child's] teachers to be happy. I feel like happy teachers are good teachers." She thought, "If you feel appreciated you're going to do your best. If you start to feel not appreciated, you know, it affects morale, it affects performance."

According to Ms. Ofchinick, the school climate was so negative that, “some people have written letters of complaint to the superintendent.” She voiced, “but what good does that do because what is an interim superintendent going to do? Is an interim superintendent going to do anything?” Ms. Ofchinick was concerned nothing would change until a new superintendent is hired for the 2017-2018 school year. She lamented that at UDMS there needed to be a school climate where “teachers can teach without the fear of retribution. They need to improve the atmosphere at the school.”

Perspectives of Supports to Family Engagement. After three weeks into the start of the 2016-2017, the researcher asked Ms. Ofchinick to discuss positive experiences she had when she engaged with UDMS. Her response was, “nothing super positive. I can’t think of anything.” By her interview in January of 2017, she was happier with some forms of communication than she had been. She briefly elaborated that communication with the teachers and principal had improved.

Teachers. By January of 2017, Ms. Ofchinick felt that her child’s “teachers are very responsive.” When she reached out to teachers, she found the teachers were, “always immediate in getting back or within two or three hours of getting back with me, even at night.” She noted teachers checked “their e-mails and responded to questions, so the teachers are very responsive.”

For example

This week [my child] has an assignment that’s past due. I tried to get information out of [my child] about what it is and [my child] wasn’t very forthcoming and why [my child] hasn’t completed it. So I e-mailed the teacher last night at like eight o’clock to say, ‘can you give me some information about this assignment? Y’all are working on it in class, is that true?’ and the teacher e-mailed me back within 15 minutes and clarified all of that for

me. So now I know how to guide [my child] in what [my child] needs to do to finish the assignment.

Ms. Ofchinick believed communication with some teachers had improved and was relieved at how flexible and accommodating some teachers were by their quick responses, regardless of the time of day.

Principal. In January of 2017 the researcher asked Ms. Ofchinick to discuss positive experiences she had when she engaged with UDMS. Her reply was, “I would say having the principal reach out to me and be willing to meet with me to address my concerns. That was positive.” Ms. Ofchinick “felt like my concerns were heard.” She was also pleased with Ms. Saunders’ quick response. “I mean, from the time I sent the e-mail to the time we met, it was probably two or three days.

This within-case analysis section provided an overview of the study, as well as an introduction to each participant. Every parent participant’s experiences and perspectives were brought to life through the data. Each case unearthed not only common supports and barriers to family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school but also the wide range of perspectives on the given topic. The following section will use this data to present common themes that emerged throughout the analysis.

Cross-Case Analysis

Again, the purpose of this study was to explore parent perspectives of family engagement across their child’s school transition from fifth grade in an elementary school to sixth grade in a middle school. The following research questions were used to guide this study 1) What are parent perspectives regarding the supports of family engagement across the school transition

from elementary school to middle school? 2) What are parent perspectives of barriers to family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school?

After having presented each participant's case, including her background and her experiences of the supports and barriers to family engagement across the school transition from fifth grade in an elementary school to sixth grade in a middle school, the researcher now presents a cross-case analysis of the four parent participants. The researcher situated the findings around three overall themes. Supports and barriers to family engagement among the cases will be examined as they relate to communication, school climate, programming, and events, and prior experiences. The researcher used a mind map to develop themes from participant responses (Figure 4.1).

Careful analysis of each audio-recorded analysis highlighted categories within each theme. Every experience, the researcher discovered, led back to a person or group within the Upper Dublin County School District. Within each theme, the following categories emerged: school district, school wide, administration, faculty, and families. The cross-case analysis below presents the data with these themes and categories in mind.

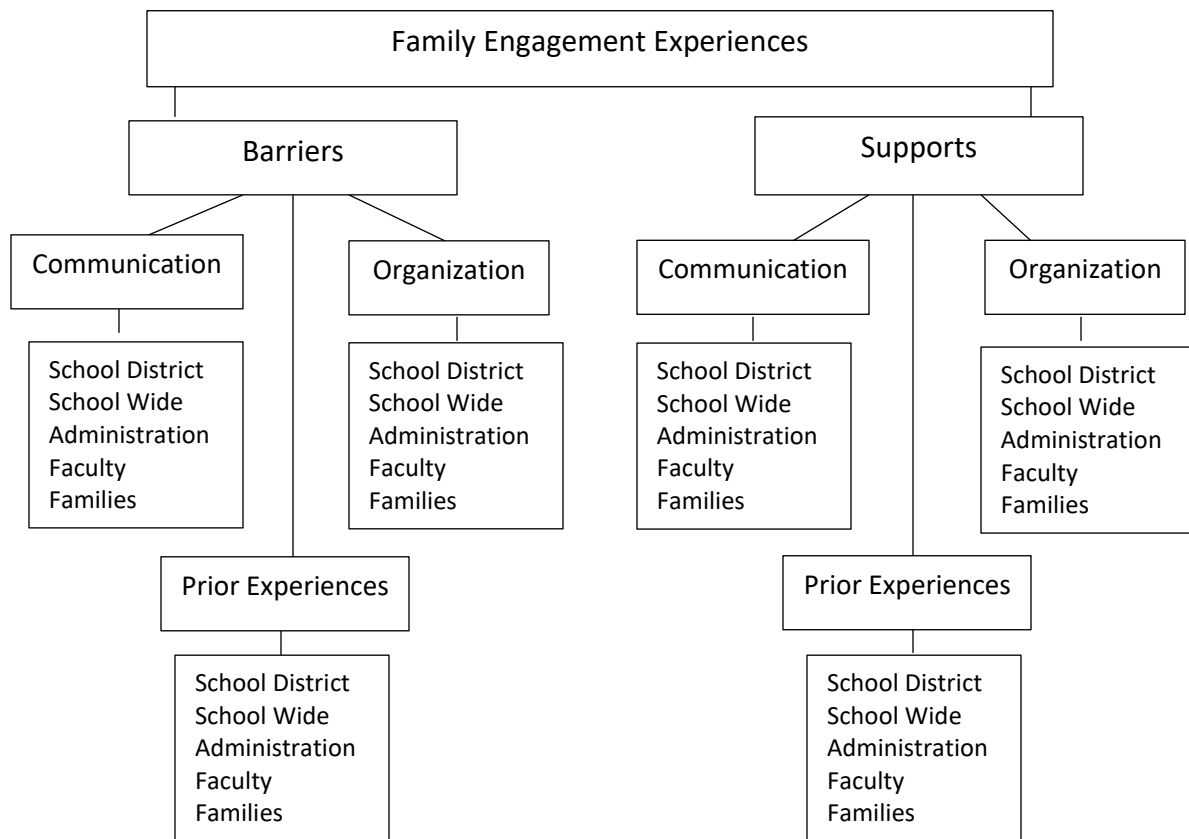


Figure 4.1

Example of Constant Comparative Method and Mind Mapping to Develop Themes

Barriers: Communication

The theme with the most data was communication. As the researcher read through the rich data, categories within the theme emerged. The categories parent participants addressed when discussing communication barriers to family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school were school wide, administration, and faculty.

School Wide Barriers to Communication. Three of the four participants spoke of school wide barriers to communication. Two parents, Ms. Pyle and Ms. Nahstol, were both concerned about the lack of communication from the school about student schedules not being prepared for all students by the first day of school. Ms. Pyle recalled, “the schedules weren’t ready at the beginning of the year.” She was frustrated that no one communicated the mix-up to families and

believed the first week of school was “more chaotic than it should have been.” Ms. Nahstol elaborated more about the situation. She spoke with other parents who agreed, “It’s really bad.” Ms. Nahstol was not pleased with different excuses she later heard. Teachers told her child, “not to worry about it” and “It wasn’t their (the teachers’) fault.” She heard there was a technology glitch from other families. She reflected, “I don’t care how bad your IT problem is... do it on paper if you have to.”

Ms. Quinlan and Ms. Pyle both found school wide communication with families to be confusing and unorganized. Ms. Quinlan commented early on that “communication was not the best.” Meetings and events led by UDMS were not well advertised. Ms. Quinlan noted, “On a Sunday night of that week [the school] will tell [families] what’s going on that week.” Ms. Pyle concurred “that [the school] could have put out [information] sooner.” Ms. Pyle spoke more than once about the lack of notice of communication. She discussed a lack of school wide communication for families as they transitioned to sixth grade at UDMS. She recalled that she had had not received information from the school about the upcoming school year. She felt the school had dropped the ball. Participants believe that, in the future, UDMS needs to reach out better to families of transitioning sixth grade students regarding information about how to have “a successful sixth grade transition” to UDMS.

Administration Barriers to Communication. All parent participants felt the principal at UDMS was a barrier to families engaging with the middle school. All participants thought the tone Ms. Saunders used when speaking to people was a barrier. They recalled her being abrupt, and they worried about her leadership style.

Personally, Ms. Quinlan mentioned a time when Ms. Saunders had been abrupt when speaking to her on the PTO Facebook page. Ms. Quinlan posted a question and the principal

provided a brief, abrupt response and she was not used to a principal communicating with her in that manner. Comparably, during Ms. Nahstol's first meeting with Ms. Saunders, she recalled being unsatisfied with the language and tone Ms. Saunders used when speaking with families. From conversations with other UDMS families to her own personal experiences, Ms. Nahstol found herself hesitant to engage with the school. Ms. Pyle, was also disheartened by Ms. Saunders' demeanor. She believed Ms. Saunders to be in a "reactionary mode" rather than being positive and warm but was "hoping over time that will change."

Ms. Quinlan agreed with Ms. Nahstol that the principal's leadership style was not positive. She recalled conversations she had with other members of the Upper Dublin community. She heard that the principal's leadership style was "quite heavy handed." Ms. Quinlan did not approve of the principal blaming others for mishaps at school instead of taking ownership herself.

Faculty Barriers to Communication. Every parent participant felt UDMS faculty were a barrier to family engagement. The biggest struggle for all parents was a lack of communication from sixth grade teachers. Outside of no contact, parents also lamented that contact with teachers needs to be more structured.

All parents commented at some point about a lack of communication from sixth grade teachers. Ms. Quinlan commented, "As far as communication with teachers directly, I haven't really had a whole lot." Ms. Ofchinick and Ms. Nahstol concurred that with some teachers, communication was limited to non-existent. She reflected, "You've got that captive, brief moment of an audience that's like I'm ready to hear what you have to say," and she was concerned that sixth grade teachers are not taking advantage of that. Ms. Pyle's experiences align with Ms. Nahstol's that sixth grade teachers are not communicating with incoming sixth grade

families. “I haven’t had as much consistent communication from all of my [child’s] teachers as I would like to.” Ms. Pyle agreed with Ms. Nahstol regarding a lack of consistency. She would like to have “more consistency, more predictability for every teacher to be using the same system of communicating with parents and being accessible.”

Aside from a lack of communication, parents struggled with communication methods. At times, it was unclear to parents what tools or devices they should use to keep in contact with teachers. For example, Ms. Nahstol found some teachers wanted to communicate using the Remind app, while others used Google classroom, and she had no idea from others. She also found, regardless of methods she was being told to use, teachers were not always using them. She commiserated with another UDMS parent who told her, if teachers are going to ask him to “sign up for this parent portal then there’d better be something in there and these teachers need to use it.”

Barriers: School Climate, Programming, and Events

Parent participants were concerned with the organization of school wide events. Parents noted that multiple events were chaotic, not well advertised, and unorganized. Events that stood out to participants were the back-to-school festival, school wide open house, parent teacher conference night, and the science fair.

School Wide Barriers to School Climate, Programming, and Events. Ms. Nahstol, Ms. Pyle, and Ms. Ofchinick all noticed the back-to-school festival was not well organized. Ms. Nahstol noted that the festival was a wonderful and positive idea, but she found it to be unorganized. Ms. Pyle liked the event, but believed the event itself did not meet the needs of incoming sixth grade families. Ms. Ofchinick summed up the event by sharing that it was chaotic, hot, and unorganized. In the end, all the parents either liked the back-to-school festival

or liked the idea of a festival but believed it needed to be better structured so it was less chaotic and restructured to meet the needs of incoming sixth grade families.

Ms. Ofchinick found the open house evening was not well structured for families. Aside from not being organized, she noted there was not a great turnout for the event and that the open house would be better served occurring during the first or second week of school as opposed to a month into the school year. Ms. Quinlan found the parent-teacher conference night to be disorganized. She had to meet with a teacher in the hallway because another teacher was using her classroom. She also discovered, upon arrival, that she would not be able to meet with all of her child's teachers. The event had been set up for her to meet only with her child's homeroom teacher. Ms. Quinlan felt this structure was not helpful because the homeroom teacher could not elaborate fully on how her child was performing in all other classes.

Finally, Ms. Ofchinick found the ongoing work for the school's science fair to be unorganized. "Science fair this year was a complete and total disaster." At times Ms. Ofchinick was misinformed or not informed about what her child needed to do to complete the project after her child's project had been selected to compete at the district science fair. In the end, Ms. Ofchinick told her child they were not going to complete the science fair project. Ms. Ofchinick chose not to help her child complete the project because she was informed multiple times that her child needed write something else or add something else to the project with less than 24 hour turn around. The added stress of extra work made her child anxious. For the future, Ms. Ofchinick believed more detailed information needed to be given to families, detailing every step of the science fair project with deadlines and expectations for those who advance to the district science fair.

Barriers: Prior Experience

Not all participants spoke of previous positive or negative experiences with schools; however, two parents discussed how their previous experiences served as barriers to their engagement with Upper Dublin Middle School. The categories parent participants addressed when discussing barriers to family engagement due to prior experiences with schools were district wide and administration.

District Wide Barriers from Prior Experience. Ms. Quinlan and Ms. Nahstol both recalled prior experiences in which Upper Dublin County District and its schools lacked transparency. Ms. Quinlan commented, “Upper Dublin County Schools tend to be hounded in the press or portrayed [poorly].” Unfortunately, historically, Ms. Quinlan often found out negative news about schools or the district from the press and not from the district. This lack of transparency frustrated UDCSD families. Ms. Nahstol’s statements about the district aligned with Ms. Quinlan’s. She noted that the district had a painful year and that the lack of transparency from the district about a major incident resulted in pushback from families.

Administration Barriers from Prior Experience. Ms. Nahstol spoke at length about negative experiences she had had with a Upper Dublin County Elementary School principal. These experiences exhausted and frustrated her. Upon meeting the UDMS principal, she believed Ms. Saunders to possess similar negative character traits as the elementary school principal. Due to this supposition, Ms. Nahstol commented, “I’m not in the market right now to take on another relationship like that and nudge it in a positive direction.” Her beliefs about the middle school principal led her to be hesitant to engage with UDMS.

Supports: Communication

While transitioning families often struggled to communicate with UDMS, there were instances in which parent participants felt there was strong communication between themselves and the middle school. The categories participants addressed while discussing communication supports to family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school were with administration, faculty, and families.

Administration Supports to Communication. Two participants spoke at length about how the new principal, Ms. Saunders, excelled at engaging with them in a positive way. Ms. Quinlan focused on times during which Ms. Saunders relayed information about events in a prompt manner. Ms. Ofchinick spoke of a personal experience when Ms. Saunders promptly scheduled a meeting with Ms. Ofchinick to discuss concerns she had.

When asked about what positive experiences Ms. Quinlan was having, her first thought was that communication from the principal was immediate when crises happened. She felt families were notified in a timely manner. This was very important to Ms. Quinlan. She believed Ms. Saunders was being transparent and kept families in the loop. Ms. Saunders' messages also reassured families that appropriate measures were being taken based on the emergency, that students were safe, and that school policy was being followed. Ms. Quinlan listed multiple instances in which the principal contacted families 1) a student brought a knife to school, 2) a traffic accident involving school members in front of the school, 3) a student brought an air soft rifle to school, and 4) updates about tornado warnings. Ms. Quinlan "could tell it is a high priority for this principal to make sure parents stay in the loop."

Ms. Ofchinick was impressed with Ms. Saunders when she reached out to Ms. Ofchinick to discuss a matter that concerned her. The researcher chose not to detail the matter in order to

protect the privacy of the parent participant. Ms. Ofchinick was pleased with Ms. Saunders' quick response.

Faculty Supports to Communication. One participant glowed about teacher responsive in her January 2017 interview. Ms. Ofchinick, who was frustrated with communication between her and UDMS faculty from June 2016 through the end of August 2016, noted a positive turnaround by January 2017. After more than five months into the school year, teachers became much more responsive and took great effort to reply to e-mail communication within a few hours of receiving it, regardless of the time. Immediate responses in the evening were very helpful to Ms. Ofchinick who, on occasion, struggled to assist her child with homework. She was able to e-mail a teacher for further explanation regarding assignments and be able to assist her child the same evening.

Families Supports to Communication. A major way families supported each other was through Upper Dublin Middle School's Parent Teacher Organization (PTO). All four parent participants mentioned their interactions with the PTO as being positive. All participants discussed being a part of the PTO Facebook page, which helped them keep track of events and served as a place to pose general questions and receive immediate feedback from fellow parents or, on occasion, UDMS faculty members.

Ms. Pyle and Ms. Nahstol spoke at length about how the PTO had aided them. Specifically, the PTO held meetings that were attended by families, the principal, and faculty during which families could ask UDMS administration and faculty questions. Ms. Pyle shared that meetings were an example of how the PTO worked to "facilitate communication between the principal and the parents to answer questions."

Supports: School Climate, Programming, and Events

There were not many events hosted by the school that parent participants felt were well organized. One specific support stuck out in participants' minds. The number of events and activities UDMS organized for families was appreciated. While events were often viewed as chaotic or disorganized, participants recognized the lengths UDMS members went to to put together meaningful events on their behalf.

School Wide Supports to School Climate, Programming, and Events. Even though her family's commitments outside of school prevented them from engaging with the middle school as much as she would like, Ms. Pyle remained aware of the many opportunities Upper Dublin Middle School provided to engage with families. "I felt like I had an opportunity to connect to things going on at the school." An adjustment for incoming sixth grade parents, she noted, might have been the types of activities and events that are offered. In elementary school, more events were PTO and parent-led but in middle school, more events are student-led. For example, in middle school "there are more clubs and sports and things like that" for students to do, leaving less time for PTO-sponsored activities.

Supports: Prior Experiences

Two of the four participants had prior experience with school transitions from elementary school to UDMS. Those two parent participants spoke of how those prior experiences supported their child's school transition to middle school.

School Wide Supports to Prior Experiences. Ms. Pyle and Ms. Quinlan were both able to use their prior experiences of transitioning from elementary school to middle school with their older children to better prepare themselves and their younger children for Upper Dublin Middle School. Ms. Pyle and Ms. Quinlan agreed that the school transition was easier because there was

less of an unknown. For example, Ms. Pyle talked about being aware of school logistics that weren't shared out with incoming sixth grade parents. She knew to purchase her child a lock and have her child practice the combination over the summer so when the school year started her child would not struggle with something as basic as how to open a lock on their locker. Knowledge like this, Ms. Pyle believed, eliminated some stress for her child. Ms. Quinlan also felt her child was not as nervous for middle school as her older child had been because she and her older child were able to share more knowledge about what life is like as a sixth grader at UDMS.

Case Summary

After within case and cross-case analysis, three themes were generated from the data; communication, school climate, programming, and events, and prior experiences. The researcher found these three themes central to all parent participant experiences surrounding the supports and barriers to family engagement across the school transition from fifth grade in an elementary school to sixth grade in a middle school.

Chapter 5 presents a summary of the research design for this study. Next, the themes that emerged during the analysis of the data are discussed in relation to the literature. Implications for future research involving administrators, teachers, families, and researchers are discussed. The chapter ends with concluding thoughts about the present study.

Chapter 5

Summary, Discussion, and Implications

The purpose of the study was to explore parent perspectives of family engagement across their child's school transition from fifth grade in an elementary school to sixth grade in a middle school. The guiding research questions were

- 1) What are parent perspectives regarding the supports of family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school?
- 2) What are parent perspectives of barriers to family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school?

This chapter presents the summary, discussion, and implications of the study. First, a summary of the research design is provided. Next, the three themes that emerged from the cross-case analysis are discussed in relation to the review of relevant literature. After the discussion sections, the implications of the findings from this study for future research involving administrators, teachers, families, and researchers are explained. The chapter ends with concluding thoughts about the study.

Summary of the Research Design

This study used a basic interpretive and descriptive design (Merriam, 2002) to explore the supports to and barriers of family engagement that families experience across the school transition from fifth grade in an elementary school to sixth grade in a middle school. Embracing constructivism, the researcher understood that each parent's reality across the transition to middle school would differ (Creswell, 2013). The researcher also understood that since each

participant's experiences would differ even when attending the same events, the parent participants had to be separate, individual cases, as opposed to being one case together.

A qualitative research approach was used to explore how parent perspectives of family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school. Specifically, a multi-case study design was preferable because it allowed the researcher to form an in-depth understanding of how parent participants perceived supports and barriers to family engagement across this transition period. This particular study design was also used because the researcher's goal was to understand the meaning participants constructed within the contexts of a given phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). A multi-case study design was well suited for an exploratory analysis. The design also provided the researcher with a bigger picture of dynamics that influence the supports and barriers to family engagement across the school transition to middle school.

The researcher collected data via semi-structured interviews, the collection of physical artifacts, and field notes. Within-case and cross-case analysis was used to examine the collected data. The researcher applied the constant comparative method to both the within-case and cross-case analysis to understand the meaning participants constructed around the supports and barriers to family engagement across the transition to middle school. Themes and categories were generated to present and discuss the results of the data analysis.

Current and seminal literature was reviewed prior to the start of this study to ground the researcher's perspective. Initially, the review focused on defining family engagement and examining supports and barriers to family engagement using empirical research. Next, the literature review centered on the benefits of family engagement. Each section of the literature

review assisted the researcher in designing, implementing, analyzing, and discussing this research study.

Discussion

Referencing the review of relevant literature in Chapter 2, several themes emerged from the case study analysis. Before discussing the specific themes, it is important to note that the themes centered on the family engagement experiences across the school transition to middle school. Family engagement is collaborative, culturally competent, and focused on improving children's learning (NAFSCE, 2016). Family engagement is defined by the National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group (2010) as:

- A shared responsibility in which schools and other community agencies and organizations are committed to reaching out to engage families in meaningful ways and in which families are committed to actively supporting their children's learning and development.
- Continuous across a child's life and entails enduring commitment but changing parent roles as children mature into young adulthood.
- Cutting across and reinforcing learning in the multiple settings where children learn – at home, in prekindergarten programs, in school, in after school programs, in faith-based institutions, and in the community.

School transition was defined as a process that prepares all partners – students, families, schools and communities –to develop knowledge, skills, and relationships that help students move from one educational setting to another (Georgia Afterschool Investment Council et al., 2012).

Therefore, based on the family engagement experiences across this school transition, supports and barriers to engagement were examined. For the purpose of this study, a support was defined

as an act or physical artifact that influenced the functioning of family engagement in a positive manner perceived by the participant and a barrier was defined an act or physical artifact that influenced the functioning of family engagement in a negative manner perceived by the participant.

Three themes emerged within the data via individual cases and cross-case analysis of the parent participants. When examined together along with the physical artifacts collected, three significant themes and five categories surfaced. The three themes were:

1. Communication
2. School Climate, Programming, and Events
3. Prior Experiences

Each of these themes was further analyzed alongside the relevant literature to look for agreement based on the findings of the study.

Theme 1: Communication

Epstein et al.'s (2009) parental involvement framework showcased communication as one of the six major types of parent involvement practices critical to establishing strong working relationships between teachers and families. Strong communication between families and schools is essential to establishing, sustaining, and maintaining an effective partnership (Epstein et. al, 2009; Graham-Clay, 2005).

Participants found there were supports and barriers to communication with the school at large, administration, and sixth grade teachers. All participants expressed a desire for more communication to maintain a more effective partnership between families and schools. Ms. Nahstol's views about the importance of reaching out to incoming sixth grade families align with Epstein et al.'s (2009) research to establish, sustain, and maintain an effective partnership.

“We’re open to hear what you have to tell us so you’ve got that captive, brief moment of an audience that’s like I’m ready to hear what you have to say. So you might as well take advantage of that.” She continued to express a desire for a “true, valuable, sit down [experience to] connect with teachers.”

Seminal research (Epstein, 1986) found that parents may not understand how best to engage with their school when there is a lack of adequate communication between teachers and parents. This lack of communication can cause families to be disengaged from a school. When families feel isolated from their child’s school due to lack of communication, they may remain distant (Hill & Tyson, 2009).

The above-mentioned research aligns with participant experiences surrounding communication with UDMS. All participants agreed with Ms. Quinlan, “that the communication was not the best.” Both Ms. Quinlan and Ms. Ofchinick recalled making an effort to reach out to teachers during the school year via e-mail because neither had received contact from some of their children’s teachers. Ms. Ofchinick reflected, “I think they’ve done an okay job. The whole teacher aspect of [communication] has not been the most depressing part. Communication with them and figuring everything out with the teachers.” Even after sending e-mails to teachers, Ms. Pyle shared, “I’m not hardly getting any direct communication with the teachers.” These experiences could foster a lack of engagement with many families; however, the participants both mentioned, like Ms. Pyle had, that “we are always going to be involved no matter what.”

Maintaining clear and consistent lines of communication could lessen the disconnect parents feel with sixth grade teachers. Participants, like Ms. Quinlan, suggest teachers should have “one venue for all information” like the Remind App. “I think the idea is that Remind

should be the primary form of communication because not everybody has Facebook, but presumably, everyone has text message or e-mail.”

Theme 2: School Climate, Programming, and Events

A middle school must employ different strategic programming and events for and with families to bridge gaps and break down barriers that can stifle family engagement (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Wilder 2014). Epstein et. al.’s (2009) framework of six types of involvement provides examples of how schools can create welcoming environments that are needed to engage families better. At the heart of strategically organizing events and creating a welcoming environment is school leadership. Administrators hold the responsibility to create and cultivate a culture that values families (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, & Sandler, 2005).

In relation to the current study, the school did employ different strategic events for families. Participants spoke of the back-to-school festival, sixth grade orientation, open house, parent coffees, family science night, science fair night, parent-teacher conferences, and the band concert to name several. Parents, like Ms. Pyle, were quick to point out that UDMS organized many events for families to connect with the school. “It feels to me, as a parent who tries to pay attention to things, that there are a number of opportunities for people to come if they want to.” She continued,

It seems to me there are multiple opportunities and different types of activities for people to participate in. In fact, just last night, there was a coffee hour and there was a parent drop-in, visitation thing in the early evening before the science fair projects were presented. And I keep hearing about either morning coffees or this thing to drop-in on. This coming Monday night is the band winter concert.

Some events were well organized and well received. At other times, participants struggled with events, particularly at the beginning of the school year, that they believed were not well organized. Upper Dublin Middle School attempted to use non-traditional events to engage families more effectively, which some participants perceived as being supports to family engagement. However, when participants perceived that these events were not well-organized, the events were seen as barriers to family engagement. Specifically, a returning UDMS parent participant thought the back-to-school festival “was great. The [back-to-school festival] is really helpful in terms of being able to go on tours of the school.” Ms. Pyle also thought, “It is good that they have that sort of open house festival thing for kids to be able to come and walk around and have kind of a party sort of atmosphere.” She did agree with an incoming UDMS parent that the event was “a little bit overwhelming because there is so much that is new.” For a new parent, like Ms. Ofchinick, the back-to-school festival “looked like chaos. It was not laid out in any way that I could figure out.” She admitted to feeling “stressed out” by the event, “trying to find everyone I needed to meet for an hour.” She thought the back-to-school event was “designed to be a fun day for kids to meet their teachers,” but was “so chaotic” that there were “some hits and misses.” Ms. Ofchinick suggested the event should be “held at night” to avoid high temperatures in August and to have “more opportunities for incoming sixth graders to meet with their actual teachers ahead of time would be helpful.”

Researchers (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, & Sandler, 2005) noted that administrators need to cultivate a welcoming school environment. Parent participants agreed with this notion. Parent participants at Upper Dublin Middle School believe the school environment needs to be more welcoming. Ms. Ofchinick felt the “school climate is terrible,” and “is like a heavy cloud of discipline hanging over our school.” She concurred that there needs to be discipline at the

school, but “there needs to be a different form of discipline at the school. Yelling does not work and that’s sort of the go to mode.” She continued that the “school atmosphere” needs to be one where “teachers can teach without fear of retribution.” She also noted that the district, as a whole, “need[s] to improve the atmosphere at every school.”

Ms. Nahstol shared that the “trust is broken” between the UDMS administration and the UDMS PTO. She informed the researcher that “things have happened, administration wise, with the Facebook page.” She was told by other UDMS parents that “key deletions” had been made by “someone high in administration” of another PTO Facebook member. She elaborated, “There’s a situation where someone high in administration was pretty much, definitely, according to this parent, had been lying to key people in PTO and how that trust is broken.” She “hope[s] it can be repaired. I am going to be there five years... I don’t want to go to a negative place.” Ms. Nahstol chose not to elaborate more on the specifics she was told about for two reasons. First, because “it’s that tough balance to criticize the system because we’re in the system. So we’d better not call it that bad or then who am I to be sending my kids there if I’m saying this is terrible?” She also chose not to elaborate because she was worried about the identity of the parent who told her the information being discussed. She asked me to “tell me more about the information being used. So names are totally redacted?” and said, “Let me go back to the parent... and ask her [for her permission to speak more about this topic].”

Theme 3: Prior Experiences

Often when research (Coleman & Churchill, 1997) discusses a family’s prior experiences with schools in relation to family engagement, it is to mention it as a deficit, a barrier. For example, Carlisle, Stanley, and Kemple (2005) found the lack of knowledge about academic schoolwork or poor prior experiences with schools could hinder parents from engaging with

teachers and the school. However, in the instance of this study, the researcher found parents' prior experiences, specifically prior experiences surrounding the school transition from elementary school to middle school, had a positive impact on future elementary to middle school transitions.

For instance, Ms. Pyle shared that her younger child was not as nervous for middle school as her older child. After completing the school transition from elementary school to UDMS with her older child, Ms. Pyle now possessed knowledge on how to prepare her younger child for middle school. Logistically, she knew what general supplies she could purchase in advance, and she knew to purchase a lock early in the summer before the start of the 2016-2017 school year so her child could practice how to open a lock over the summer. Ms. Pyle affirmed that her prior experiences with the elementary to Upper Dublin Middle School transition aided her in providing a smoother school transition for her child. While not every parent can have this prior experience, Ms. Pyle suggested that Upper Dublin Middle School could reach out to parents who already transitioned to middle school with a child. Parents and UDMS school members could write down and distribute advice from former sixth grade parents and students about back-to-school basics and what to expect during the transition. The anecdotes could help other families as they prepare for the school transition to middle school.

For Ms. Nahstol, her prior experiences with elementary school administration and the overall school district, proved to be a barrier to family engagement with UDMS. "I have just been really hesitant to even begin to get involved." Her experiences align with Coleman and Churchill's (1997) findings that prior experiences can serve as a barrier to family engagement. Ms. Nahstol was "deeply hurt" by the way Upper Dublin School District responded to incidences over the past two years. She is "very aware of how painful the whole year" was for the entire

Upper Dublin School District community. She believed that the school district, including the school board, were not as “open, reaching out to us,” as the assured parents they were going to be. Ms. Nahstol was exhausted and frustrated that the school board was doing, “the same freaking thing. It’s just, I can’t, I don’t have enough mental space in my day and in my mind to take it on.” On top of her frustrations at the school district level, Ms. Nahstol and her children’s experiences with Stony Creek Elementary school administration pushed her not to engage with Upper Dublin Middle School. She spent years making it her “mission” to “win over [the principal].” The years it took to do this left her “tired of that dynamic” and not “in the market right now” to establish relationships with UDMS administrators.

Implications for Researchers, District Personnel, Administrators, Teachers, and Families

There are numerous implications for future research, district personnel, administrators, teachers, and families given the findings of the current study. First, the literature on parent perspectives surrounding the school transition from elementary school to middle school is minimal (Parker, 2013) and has not critically examined the experiences of families during this period of time. Research on parent perspectives across this time is significant because a child having a positive school transition into middle school is the first and most significant step to ensuring a successful academic middle school experience (Georgia Afterschool Council, 2012). Research also abundantly reaffirms that family engagement correlates to higher academic achievement for middle school students (Pomerantz et al., 2007) but tends to drop off after elementary school (Stormshak et al., 2016). Since family engagement is crucial to helping middle school students academically and behaviorally, there is a need to capture diverse perspectives about what parents’ experiences are with school across this transition to try to understand how to improve current engagement experiences between families and schools.

This study attempted to address this gap in the research and contribute to the body of literature on parent perspectives of family engagement across a school transition. The study attempted to explore the parent perspectives of four parent participants surrounding the supports and barriers to family engagement across the school transition from fifth grade in an elementary school to sixth grade at Upper Dublin Middle School, a Title 1 school in Northeast Georgia with nearly 700 students. This study was limited to the perspectives of four participants. No parent perspectives of their experiences across a school transition are completely identical, so another case or multi-case study of parent perspectives of the supports and barriers to family engagement across their transition to middle school may not have the same results. Other contexts could be explored to find out if the feelings, beliefs, and experiences of this study's participants are commonly held feelings and beliefs about supports and barriers to family engagement across the transition to middle school.

Although much can be learned from the findings of this study, the multi-case study approach explored the perspectives of only four participants and was conducted only at one middle school. The implications for future research surround the ideas of applying different research methods and a broader number of participants to discover further the supports and barriers families experience across the school transition from elementary school to middle school.

Implications for District Personnel

This perspective-seeking study shed light on supports and barriers families encountered across the school transition from elementary school to middle school. Before listing an implication, it should be understood that there were instances across the district over the last two years that cultivated a seeming “lack of transparency” from parents’ perspectives. One parent

remarked that she was “very aware of how painful the whole year” was. She felt a “sense of being broken open” and had a “sense that we’re a little hurt” from the 2016-2017 school year. Another participant expressed that “some decisions made by the superintendent of the school board were a little wrongheaded.” She alluded to “events of the past year” but did not delve further, lamenting, “that’s too long of a story to go into.” An implication for district personnel is to be aware of how the tenor of the times can impact how families perceive and interact with schools and the school district. District personnel should seek to alleviate parent concerns and work towards a position where families believe district personnel are communicating with families in a transparent manner. For example, after instances over two years that were painful, one parent stated, “the board is so open, reaching out to us and asking us, and saying, hey, we want to know more,” and felt that the board “is going to be more responsive to parents.”

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that district personnel solicit information from parents and be responsive to their concerns. It is important to note that over the course of this study, there was a change of superintendent in the school district, resulting in an interim superintendent being named for the remainder of the school year. This change was important to this study because parents were uncertain whether any school or district-wide concerns, if they arose, would be addressed by an interim superintendent. A suggestion for school districts during a time of superintendent transition is to provide families with clear information regarding whom to contact when they have questions, comments, or concerns about the school district. According to Ms. Ofchinick, “I know some people have written letters of complaint to the superintendent but what good does that do? Is an interim superintendent going to do anything?” She did acknowledge and appreciate that families had been broadly contacted

by the district to complete a survey about the school district. She did “fill out the survey” given by the district.

Implications for Administrators

This study indicated that parent participants worried about a change in school administration, and as the year progressed, parents had mixed feelings about the new principal and how she engaged with families. Two parent participants asked the researcher not to disseminate some information they had shared out of concern that Ms. Saunders would “figure out” who they were. Words and phrases used to describe participant interactions with the principal included “abrupt communication,” “tone is not the most friendly,” “blamed others,” “set a bad tone,” “negative climate,” and “didn’t like how she speaks to people.”

To alleviate worry and uncertainty over a change in administration, participants suggest incoming administrators set a warm, welcoming, and transparent tone. Ms. Pyle was aware the incoming principal had a “learning curve in a lot of areas,” but felt Ms. Saunders was in “a little bit of a reactionary mode, a little bit of crisis management rather than a real, sort of, positive, forward position.” She was “hoping over time that will change,” as Ms. Saunders settles into her new role as principal. Ms. Nahstol agreed that the principal has “to set that tone.” Ms. Ofchinick agreed that the principal needs to set a positive “atmosphere.” She believed that a positive atmosphere needs to be one in which “teachers can teach without fear of retribution,” and not one in which it feels like “a heavy cloud of discipline [is] hanging over our school.”

When an administrator is transparent and proactive, parents feel reassured. Ms. Quinlan, a parent who has experience with three principals at UDMS, shared she felt Ms. Saunders is “definitely more transparent” than others. “I do not remember getting as many updates when there were disciplinary issues.” Ms. Quinlan particularly appreciated when situations arose at the

middle school, Ms. Saunders notified families in an immediate, brief, concise, explanatory e-mail. She expressed information was provided to parents in a “timely manner,” and gave “an explanation that helps to put people at ease that I don’t remember getting from either of the past two principals.” For example, “it was an air soft gun, it was in the back pack, it was seen through an open zipper. It was dealt with right away. Very reassuring that there was never any threat to any student in the school.” Ms. Quinlan discussed multiple instances she felt the principal handled well. When a child brought a knife on campus, when there was a tornado warning, and when there was an accident in front of the middle school that involved members of the school community, the administrator followed up with information via e-mail to all families.

Finally, this researcher believes school districts should take a proactive role to inform parents of the qualifications of incoming administrators. In this study, one parent referred to the new principal as the “whole [Saunders] situation.” By not extolling the reasons why Ms. Saunders was selected as principal or publicizing her qualifications, parents’ only knowledge of the incoming principal came from either personal experiences with her in a different role or comments made by other parents.

Implications for Teachers

Based on participant perspectives, it is recommended that sixth grade teachers communicate consistently with their students’ families. In this study, every participant commented that she would like to have had more clear and consistent communication with their child’s sixth grade teachers. In December 2016, Ms. Pyle stated, “I haven’t had as much consistent communication from all my [child’s] teachers as I would like to. I know that some teachers have been pretty good about it, some have not been good.” She thought having, “a very

consistent communication game plan for all the teachers so parents can know predictably where are you going to get information,” would be helpful for new parents.

Participant perspectives indicated that, if teachers requested parents sign up for or use communications applications and websites, teachers should follow through by using those communication methods. Ms. Quinlan shared, “I’m not hardly getting any direct communication with teachers with Remind or anything except for [my child’s] Agriculture teacher.” She worried when, “I’ve never gotten anything on it [from other teachers] so I looked back and was like, ‘Is this thing not working?’” Ms. Nahstol recalled another middle school parent’s frustration. “If you’re going to have me sign up for this parent portal, then there’d better be something in there and teachers need to use it.” Ms. Nahstol thought it would be fantastic if there was a team handout, to which parents could refer to tell them, “Here’s how to get in touch with the teachers... sometimes I feel like with all the bells and whistles, we forget the fundamental simplicity of structure.”

It can be helpful to parents for sixth grade teachers to communicate clearly about homework assignments. If a school has students use computers daily to complete assignments, it is recommended that teachers clearly state expectations for classwork and homework. For instance, Ms. Ofchinick felt, “homework is confusing to me in middle school.” She elaborated,

The whole way that homework works is not clear to me at all. What needs to be done every night or what in Google Classroom is homework, what is not homework. It’s not clearly defined in my opinion and that’s confusing. It causes frustration at homework time.

Ms. Ofchinick reached out to teachers to discern what was due and when. She learned that the site had not been updated and was not accurate. She still felt, “It’s not carefully explained and it

wasn't matching up and that always stresses [my child] out because [my child] doesn't know the answers." Informing families at the beginning of the school year regarding homework expectations and keeping homework sites up-to-date might alleviate parent and student frustration and confusion related to homework. If a teacher's unit or lesson falls behind schedule, the teacher could post an announcement on the site to make families aware of the change in plans.

Implications for Families

Multiple participants expressed that their backgrounds gave them "a bit of a privileged position" at Upper Dublin Middle School while other parents may not have a "privileged position." Participants expressed how they felt more privileged than other parents in different ways but did not explicitly give reasons why other parents at UDMS would not have the same privilege. Regardless of perceived privilege, participants did not feel they always had power over their child's education.

Speaking first on privilege, when Ms. Nahstol discussed how much money she spends on school related expenses, she spoke of the school band and why she enrolled her child in band class at Upper Dublin Middle School.

It costs money to be in band, but you know, that's why they say, "I don't care if your kid has no musical talent whatsoever, yeah, they have to be in band." That is the standard thing the parents tell each other. You're like, okay, you know, my kids are not musical. Unfortunately, we passed on zero musical genes but [my child] is in band because they're all like "You can't be in Art; it's too chaotic in there. You cannot be in Chorus. A major part [about choosing band] is that it self-selects, to some degree, because you have to rent the instrument, you have to buy the shirt, then you buy all the junk that goes with that.

Ms. Nahstol was unaware if the middle school provided resources or funded students in band class who were not able to afford course necessities such as instrument rental or band t-shirts. “I wonder if they do. If there was anything that said ‘Hey, if you want your kid in band and you can’t afford the instrument, here’s what you do.’” Ms. Nahstol’s financial privilege allowed her to place her child in a class, with no musical talent, where she could “self-select” what children were going to be in a class based on the ability to afford to take the class. Based on her experience, school districts, administrators, and teachers should be conscious of the possibility that courses “self-select” based on a family’s economic ability to afford to take a class. To alleviate the possibility of self-selected courses, school districts could provide resources or access to families so all students are able to take courses that traditionally self-select based on socioeconomic status of families.

Ms. Pyle commented about how her background “automatically earns some respect.” She continued, “I’m speaking frankly with you. I wouldn’t say this in polite conversation, but you know, we’re the kind of family that’s involved. We’re going to support the school.” She later reaffirmed, “I’m not trying to say this as an entitled person, but parents like me, we are always going to be involved no matter what.” Ms. Ofchinick had a similar view of always being present and advocating for her child. “I’m going to advocate for my [child] no matter what it takes. I don’t care if I tick people off. I mean, I’m going to try not to. I’m going to try to be kind and not make anybody mad.”

Being aware of her own privilege, Ms. Pyle was also aware that her experiences with schools may not be the same as other parents.

There are probably a lot of reasons that have to do with my own privilege for want of a better word that make school a place that feels very welcoming to me and my kids and so I recognize that people may have very different experiences.

She also believed there is a need “to help increase engagement in the lower socio-economic status families, families whose kids are struggling and families whose kids have behavior problems, the types of families who wouldn’t normally be engaged.” Ms. Pyle was adamant that she doesn’t “have the answers yet, but I think addressing it and being honest with it is the first step. And actually, trying to focus on [increasing engagement] and not just even being aware of it happening.”

While multiple participants in this study were aware of and felt they experienced a form of privilege other parents did not, the researcher believes the participants’ privilege did not extend to being able to fully share how they felt about UDMS. Multiple participants did not share information out of concern that school members would recognize who they were. This concern was evident when parents asked the researcher to omit potentially identifying information or asked for reaffirmations about confidentiality. For instance, Ms. Nahstol queried, “So again, tell me more about the information being used. So names are totally redacted?” It appears participants feel privileged in some areas of schooling but still do not feel fully comfortable with schools to publicly speak their minds in all areas surrounding their child’s education. This researcher finds parents often walk a tight rope of attempting to advocate for their children, while fostering a healthy partnership between themselves and schools. Participants were concerned with the amount and way they critiqued schools their children attended. As Ms. Nahstol put it, “It’s that tough balance to criticize the system because we’re in the system so we’d better not call it that bad.” Schools should be aware of this tight rope that some families

walk. Families and schools should actively work to establish, maintain, and sustain an effective partnership (Epstein et. al, 2009; Graham-Clay, 2005). Veteran families, teachers, and school administrators could form a transition team to better support families transitioning from elementary school to middle school by including input from all groups.

Current middle school families and the school's PTO should make an effort, both formally and informally, to reach out to families transitioning to middle school. Particularly, "veteran" parents and the PTO should serve as a source for advice to families who have never transitioned from elementary school to middle school with a child. Ms. Nahstol, a first time middle school parent, shared, "I rely so much on other parents." Families can request that the elementary school PTO contact the middle school PTO to organize a meeting in which middle school PTO members share their school transition experiences with elementary school families, including students. Families can also find out if the middle school PTO has a Facebook page, listserv, or other form of online communication platform that future middle school families can join to have access to more information about what is going on at the middle school. If none of these exist, families can suggest that schools create online forms of communication.

Implications for Future Research

To further investigate the impacts of supports and barriers to family engagement as families transition to middle school, researchers could apply different research methods, draw on a broader number of participants, and explore parents' perspectives in varied contexts. The findings in this study illustrated that parents seem to struggle primarily with communication between themselves and the school district, the middle school as a whole, the school administrators, and the sixth grade teachers.

This study shed light on the difficulties, need, and worry of participants surrounding protecting parent participant and the participants' children's identities. Multiple participants asked about the anonymity of the research. Ms. Pyle questioned, "Will this information be shared in any way that will get back to the school? There is something I have an opinion about that I don't want to express in a way that could be read by the principal." Due to participant concerns about maintaining anonymity, participants chose not to speak about certain instances or have their words redacted from the data. There is much data that the researcher was not able use due to the many caveats put on the researcher. When conducting future research, researchers should be conscious of the complexities of data collection when gathering data on parents at schools. Given the dynamic topic and context, researchers need to work diligently to protect not only every parent participant's identity, but of their children's as well. There is a need to capture diverse parent perspectives about the supports and barriers to family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school to try to understand how schools, administrators, and teachers could form better partnerships with families.

When developing future research in relation to parent perspectives and school transitions, researchers should consider whether the results would have been different had this study been conducted with more parent participants at Upper Dublin Middle School. What about at a middle school without a new principal? Would the results have been the same across all Upper Dublin County School District's middle schools? Would the results be similar for parents across the state of Georgia? What about the results being comparable to other states that have an elementary to middle school transition? Most likely the results would not be the same as other studies with a broader scope. This is why the presented multi-case study cannot be generalized.

This study was grounded in constructivism, including experience, while using a basic interpretive and descriptive design (Merriam, 2002). It is possible that if different methods had been used for collecting and analyzing data that the results would have been different. For example, the researcher did not interview parents who had not attended the elementary to middle school transition meeting that Upper Dublin Middle School held in April 2016. The school district permitted the researcher to recruit parents from this event. Families had been informed of the event less than a week in advance, which potentially minimized the number of participants. What if parent perspectives of parents who did not attend the school transition meeting had been included? All participants identified as white, middle-class women. What if perspectives of parents from different backgrounds had been included? What if fathers, grandparents, or other caregivers who serve as a parent/guardian had been included?

For future research, all the above questions could be considered in adapting the current study. This researcher suggests future research build off this study. The next study should have a larger number of participants and have multiple parents that represent every elementary school that feeds into the target middle school. The researcher also suggests a mixed-methods study should be conducted in which an informational questionnaire is sent to all families making a school transition from elementary school to middle school along with a smaller group of parents who are interviewed repeatedly across a school transition.

Implications for Practice

There are multiple recommendations surrounding family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school that school districts, schools, administrators, teachers, and families can take away from this research. The researcher recommends that:

1. School districts establish clear methods for communicating with families.

2. School districts provide resources or access to transitioning families so all students can take courses that traditionally self-select based on socioeconomic status of families.
3. School administrators set a warm, welcoming, and transparent school atmosphere.
4. Middle schools ensure that school transition events are organized and effective by including veteran families in the planning of events and asking for feedback from families who attend the events.
5. Middle schools give logistical information to families the spring before families enter middle school. Logistical information can include information particular to the transition including, but not limited to, providing locker information.
6. Teachers provide clear, consistent communication to transitioning parents and students.
7. Teachers communicate clear homework expectations to transitioning parents and students at the beginning of a school year.
8. Families who are transitioning to middle school for the first time seek support from families who have already transitioned to middle school.
9. Schools work with veteran parents to develop school transition information handouts for new transitioning families.
10. Veteran families, teachers, and school administrators form a transition team to better support families transitioning to middle school by including input from all groups.

Concluding Thoughts

The purpose of this study was to explore four parent perspectives of the supports and barriers to family engagement across the school transition from fifth grade in an elementary school to sixth grade in a middle school. Through a multi-case study design, four parent participants of sixth grade middle school students in Northeast Georgia, during the 2016-2017

school year, described their experiences. The participants were parents of fifth grade elementary school students from schools in the Upper Dublin County School District and experienced many of the same family engagement events across the school transition from elementary to middle school. Their perspectives were analyzed using the constant comparative method, as defined by Corbin and Strauss (2015). The participants' perspectives were first investigated separately using within-case analysis to gain insight into their family engagement experiences with Upper Dublin Middle School and what experiences they believed served as supports and barriers to their engaging with the middle school. The participants' perspectives were next investigated in a cross-case analysis to determine what similarities and differences of supports and barriers to family engagement across the school transition from elementary to middle school existed. The themes discovered through this study are relevant to family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school. More specifically, the implications are relevant to Upper Dublin County School District (UDCSD) administrators, Upper Dublin Middle School teachers and UDMS families.

Related literature discussed the historical overview of families and schools. The literature followed the transformation of parent involvement to family engagement over several decades. Participants reported that there was an abundance of formal family engagement experiences hosted by UDMS. Upper Dublin Middle School's family engagement events align with how the National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement defined family engagement. Upper Dublin Middle School's family engagement was, at times, collaborative, culturally competent, and was focused on improving children's learning (NAFSCE, 2016). Also noted in the literature were the difficulties of building relationships between families and schools. Research noted that missteps, miscommunication, and misunderstandings are bound to

happen (Griffin & Galassi, 2010; Velsor & Orozco, 2007). For example, UDMS school members made a concerted effort, through events like the back-to-school festival, to engage with families, local community members and organizations. A goal for experiences like the one mentioned above was to foster communication and increase engagement between the middle school, families, and community members. Participants appreciated the effort the middle school made to reach out to families, noting, “the whole [back-to-school festival] idea seems wonderful, contributing to that whole positive feel.” At the same time felt, “it kind of contributes to this idea of chaos.”

The perspectives of the parent participants in this study present a unique finding related to parent perspectives when encountering an unexpected change in administrative leadership across the school transition from elementary school to middle school. Several participants expressed unease with the change in leadership while others were upset that the school district did not notify families early on about a change in leadership and that families had no voice in selecting the new leadership. Participants had mixed opinions about how the district hired administrators at all UDCSD schools. One participant was frustrated with the district as a whole because she believed the district “continue[d] to put people in those positions that have that mentality,” the mentality being one that is “a climber” and “establish[es] [their] authority” over families. Another participant noted, “I mean they chose [the principal] so I assume they chose her for a reason. She must have been the most qualified candidate, so I’m placing my trust in the hiring committee.” Both of these parent views are evidence of one complexity schools and districts encounter with families when staffing school leaders.

The limits of this study, including four parent participants from multiple elementary schools make it nearly impossible to generalize the findings beyond the scope of the study and

the research setting. Another limitation to this study, and potentially to researchers of families in schools, is excluding rich information shared by participants to protect their and their children's identities.

The biggest takeaway from this research is that schools involved in school transition should focus on clear, consistent, concise communication between families and schools. According to participants, schools should reach out to parents for assistance and advice to improve family engagement across the transition from elementary to middle school. When participants in this study discussed barriers and supports to family engagement, they oftentimes provided suggestions on how to address or improve existing supports and barriers to family engagement. Parent voice and input could prove to be an invaluable resource for schools as they welcome and support incoming students.

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APPENDIX A

Semi-Structured Parent Interview 1 Protocol

1. Describe your family engagement experiences at XXXXX Elementary School this year as a parent.
2. Tell me about any positive experiences, specific ones, you can think about from this year that stand out in your mind?
3. Tell me about what has not worked well for you and share any experiences you may have had this year.
4. How do you think your family engagement experiences in elementary school will be different in middle school?
5. How do you think your family engagement experiences in elementary school will be similar in middle school?
6. What do you believe your school is doing well to prepare you and your child for middle school?
7. What do you believe your school could be doing differently to prepare you and your child for middle school?
8. Have the elementary school or middle school reached out to you about the transition to middle school?
9. Tell me about your biggest concerns you have for your child as you transition to middle school.
10. Tell me what you are most excited for your child as you transition to middle school.

APPENDIX B

Semi-Structured Parent Interview 2 Protocol

1. Describe your family engagement experiences since the last time we talked.
2. Tell me about any positive experiences, specific ones, you can think about since the last time we talked that stand out in your mind?
3. Tell me about what has not worked well for you and share any experiences you may have had since the last time we talked.
4. How are your family engagement experiences in middle school different from elementary school?
5. How are your family engagement experiences in middle school similar to your family engagement experiences in elementary school?
6. What has Upper Dublin Middle School done well to prepare you and your child for middle school?
7. What could Upper Dublin Middle School have done differently to prepare you and your child for middle school?

APPENDIX C

Semi-Structured Parent Interview 3 Protocol

1. Describe your family engagement experiences since the last time we talked.
2. Tell me about any positive experiences, specific ones, you can think about since the last time we talked that stand out in your mind?
3. Tell me about what has not worked well for you and share any experiences you may have had since the last time we talked.
4. Tell me about the physical artifacts that you brought with you to today's interview.

APPENDIX D

Semi-Structured Upper Dublin Faculty Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about what family engagement looks like at Upper Dublin Middle School.
2. How does Upper Dublin Middle School reach out to families about the transition to middle school?
3. What formal experiences and events are planned to engage families of incoming 6th grade students?
4. When do transition experiences and events begin for incoming 6th grade students and their families?
5. When do transition experiences and events end for 6th grade students and their families?
6. What do you believe Upper Dublin Middle School is doing well to prepare families and their children for middle school?
7. Tell me about what you believe UDMS could do differently to help prepare families and their children for middle school.
8. Tell me about any positive experiences, specific ones, you can think about from this year that stand out in your mind.
9. Tell me about any informal experiences and events you can think about from this year that stand out in your mind.
10. How do you think family engagement experiences in elementary school are different than at Upper Dublin Middle School?

APPENDIX E

Project Consent Form – Parent Interviews

Family Engagement Across the Transition from Elementary School to Middle School: Parent Perspectives of Supports and Barriers

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in a research project conducted by Melissa Baker from the Department of Educational Theory and Practice at the University of Georgia. For this project, I will be conducting interviews with parents of students transitioning from elementary school to Upper Dublin Middle School. I will be collecting data to explore parent perceptions of supports and barriers to family engagement across their child's school transition from fifth grade to sixth grade. Dr. Kathy F. Thompson, Professor in the Department of Educational Theory and Practice will supervise the research.

The purpose of this study is to conduct a case study to understand parent perspectives of family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school because it provides insight into how parents feel during this time. Ultimately, the proposed study is an effort to understand parent perspectives of the supports and barriers to family engagement.

For this project, you will participate in three audio-recorded interviews where you will be asked questions about your experiences across the school transition from elementary school to middle school, both formally and informally, and your perspectives on supports and barriers to family engagement. Each interview will last approximately 30 minutes. You will be given the opportunity to read the transcriptions of the interviews to make sure I did not misinterpret anything you said.

All information shared with the researcher by study participants will be kept strictly confidential and names will not be included in the final analysis and write up of the data.

Risk from participating in the study is less than minimal and consists of possible discomfort discussing any aspects of the school transition that are not going well. I understand that I can skip interview questions that make me feel uncomfortable and that audio-recordings of the interview will not be publicly disseminated. I understand that I may stop participating in this study at any time I wish to do so.

If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact me at XXX-XXX-XXXX. I hope you will enjoy this opportunity to share your experiences and perceptions. Thank you so much.

Sincerely,

Melissa Baker, Doctoral Candidate, Department of Educational Theory and Practice, Middle School Education Program

Dr. Kathy F. Thompson, Professor, Department of Educational Theory and Practice

Signature of Researcher

Date

Signature of Participant

Date

Please sign both copies, keep one copy and return one to the researcher. For questions or problems about your rights please call or write: Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu.

APPENDIX F

Project Consent Form – Upper Dublin Faculty Interviews

Family Engagement Across the Transition from Elementary to Middle School: Parent Perspectives of Supports and Barriers

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in a research project conducted by Melissa Baker from the Department of Educational Theory and Practice at the University of Georgia. For this project, I will be conducting interviews with Upper Dublin faculty who engage with families transitioning from elementary school to Upper Dublin Middle School. I will be collecting data to garner information regarding the events and supports the school put in place for families across the school transition from elementary school to middle school. Dr. Kathy F. Thompson, Professor in the Department of Educational Theory and Practice will supervise the research.

The purpose of this study is to conduct a case study to understand parent perspectives of family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to middle school because it provides insight into how parents feel during this time. Ultimately, the proposed study is an effort to understand parent perspectives of the supports and barriers to family engagement.

For this project, you will participate in one audio-recorded interview where you will be asked questions about events and supports Upper Dublin Middle School puts in place for families across the school transition from elementary school to middle school. The interview will last approximately 30 minutes. You will be given the opportunity to read the transcriptions of the interviews to make sure I did not misinterpret anything you said.

All information shared with the researcher by study participants will be kept strictly confidential and names will not be included in the final analysis and write up of the data.

Risk from participating in the study is less than minimal and consists of possible discomfort discussing any aspects of the school transition that are not going well. I understand that I can skip interview questions that make me feel uncomfortable and that audio-recordings of the interview will not be publicly disseminated. I understand that I may stop participating in this study at any time I wish to do so.

If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact me at XXX-XXX-XXXX. I hope you will enjoy this opportunity to share your experiences and perceptions. Thank you so much.

Sincerely,

Melissa Baker, Doctoral Candidate, Department of Educational Theory and Practice, Middle School Education Program

Dr. Kathy F. Thompson, Professor, Department of Educational Theory and Practice

Signature of Researcher

Date

Signature of Participant

Date

Please sign both copies, keep one copy and return one to the researcher. For questions or problems about your rights please call or write: Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu.

APPENDIX G

Assurance Statement

I, **Melissa Baker**, certify that within 90 days of completion of the research project, will present an oral report to interested faculty, the principal of Upper Dublin Middle School, and any central office administrators at a time that is convenient for interested group members. The report will provide parent perspectives of supports and barriers to family engagement across the school transition from elementary school to Upper Dublin Middle School. Findings could be used to look at barriers to see what family engagement experiences and activities can be adapted to better fit the needs of families and look to the supports to be aware of what parents believe is working and if experiences can be strengthened or expanded upon at the middle school or district level.

Signature