

BUILDING PARENTS' LEADERSHIP CAPACITY FOR ENGAGEMENT
IN THE NEW ORLEANS EDUCATION REFORM LANDSCAPE

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the role of a community organization's parent leadership training program in building parent leadership capacity. Many scholars have recommended that parents find ways to become authoritative and more active participants in school and community life (Hong, 2011; Oakes & Lipton, 2006; Warren, 2005; Oakes & Lipton, 2002). Federal policy also recommends that parents engage in regular, two-way, meaningful communication with school staff regarding academics and other school activities. While there is an expectation that parents will engage with school staff as equal partners in their child's education, very few training programs exist to help parents develop the skills, knowledge, and confidence needed to negotiate multiple roles (supporters, encouragers, monitors, decision makers, advocates, and collaborators).

This study seeks to understand the ways, and to what extent, the community-sponsored Parent Leadership Training Institute in New Orleans builds the leadership skills parents need to effectively engage in schools and community life. Narrative inquiry methodology was used to capture the impact of the Parent Leadership Training Institute from the participants' perspectives. This methodology allowed parents the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and describe their evolving roles both as individuals and collectively in the New Orleans school reform context.

Data for this research study was collected during the summers of 2015 and 2016. Twenty-five parents were interviewed who participated in a Parent Leadership Training Institute cohort in New Orleans from 2012 to 2014. The narratives reveal the reasons parents participated, the education-related projects they implemented after the Parent Leadership Training Institute,

and the benefits of the training for parent leaders as well as other stakeholders with whom parent leaders interacted.

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organization that made such great strides in building a collective community vision for the future of public education in New Orleans. I first learned of the parent engagement efforts of the Greater Urban League of New Orleans through Deirdre Johnson Burel's collaboration with OPEN. Parents were being referred to the Greater Urban League of New Orleans for additional training; however, there was no data to indicate the impact of the parent leadership training efforts. We both felt that the parent leadership training was worthy of examination, as the training had the potential to increase parents' voices in the school reform movement.

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I thank the parent leaders for their courage to share their personal stories of navigating the public education system in New Orleans, overcoming adversity, implementing projects to support the education of children and families, and improving communication among stakeholders. I am inspired by the parent leaders' perseverance to advocate for better services, authentic parent engagement, and relevant training and support in both the school and community contexts.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Community organizations can serve as a valuable resource to parents who are seeking to serve as change agents within schools and communities. Low-income parents, in particular, are confronted with multiple barriers to engagement, often lacking access to the social capital, time away from home and work commitments, and understanding of the school systems to take action on behalf of their children. Federal parent involvement policy calls for district personnel to engage in two-way communication with parents and build parents' capacity to engage in activities that support student learning and healthy development. However, many school communities lack the relational trust and cultural competence needed to work with parents in diverse communities. Students, parents, and low-income communities often are viewed as problems to be fixed (Warren, Thompson, & Saegert, 2001), instead of partners committed to student success.

Parent leadership training outside of the school context is worthy of examination, as community organizations have been found to make a difference in families' lives not only because they provide families access to resources or services but also because organizations maintain collaborative ties with other organizations that, in turn, can become assets for a family (Small, Jacobs, & Massengill, 2008; Lopez & Caspe, 2014). An examination of parent leadership training outcomes in the community context can be useful to education and community leaders seeking to understand the supports that parents find most relevant, as well as the knowledge and skills that can be enhanced through authentic and responsive family engagement training programs and parent engagement systems in low-income communities.

Statement of the Problem

Although a substantial amount of literature examines family involvement types and outcomes (Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001; Keith et al., 1993; Lee & Croninger, 1994; Marcon, 1999; Muller & Kerbow, 1993; Nord, Lennon, Liu, & Chandler, 2000), little is known about the role of intermediary organizations in family involvement in education. Intermediary organizations are non-profit entities that play a critical role in capacity building for family involvement. These organizations provide alternatives to school-centered approaches to family involvement at a level of intensity that schools seldom offer (Lopez, Kreider, & Coffman, 2005). In the context of today's high-stakes testing and the prevalence of low-performing schools among marginalized communities, some parents are demanding a greater voice in school policies and are turning to community organizations with whom they have trusting relationships to gain the knowledge, skills, and connections needed to have a greater impact in their community.

Henderson and Mapp (2002) found that when parents advocate for their children, their children are more confident at school, take on more, and achieve more. However, parent advocacy can be more challenging in a school reform context when families are likely to be unfamiliar with new policies, staff, and initiatives. School choice attempts to level the playing field by making it possible for disadvantaged children—who may live in neighborhoods with low-performing schools—to have the same access to high-quality schools as their more advantaged peers. However, many families still struggle to access good schools, establish relationships with school staff, and network with other parents. This is especially true in cities where schools operate under different governing and accountability systems, such as New Orleans and Detroit (Gross, DeArmon, & Denice, 2015).

Increasing the levels of family and community engagement in schools has been an important rationale for the creation of charter schools from the beginnings of the movement in the early 1990s. However, over the past decade, schools run by large-scale charter management organizations have a total absence of research on family and community engagement (Beabout & Jakiel, 2015). For example, a review of research studies from the National Charter School Research Project based at the University of Washington found that charter school research dealing with community issues tended to focus on parent selection factors and parental evaluation surveys (Anderson, 2005; Beabout & Jakiel, 2015). An examination of the training outcomes of a parent leadership training institute sponsored by a community organization in the school reform context may shed light on the knowledge, skills, and supports that should be considered when seeking to help parents overcome barriers to parent engagement and serve as advocates for children and families across contexts.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to examine whether, and to what extent, the community-sponsored Parent Leadership Training Institute contributed to parent empowerment and influenced parents' later actions. The Parent Leadership Training Institute outcomes were captured through the voices and perspectives of parent leaders who participated in a Parent Leadership Training Institute cohort in New Orleans during 2012, 2013, and 2014. Using narrative inquiry methodology, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 parent leaders to elicit narratives regarding parent leadership training experiences, relationships and connections initiated or established, and parents' views of their ability to lead across contexts (home, school, community).

This qualitative study expands the parent engagement and family involvement research by examining the efforts of an intermediary organization to increase parents' knowledge of education and school policies, provide access to resources, and support parents in building social and organizational connections. This study provides valuable information regarding the role that intermediary organizations play in providing parents with relevant information to increase their level of engagement with their children, other parents, school staff, and community members. This study's findings could be of particular interest to those seeking to partner with schools or community-based organizations to increase family involvement in public education and build the capacity of parents to serve as advocates for their children and other families.

Research Questions

To understand the role a community organization's parent leadership training program plays in building parents' leadership capacity, the following questions guided this study:

1. In what ways, and to what extent, does the Parent Leadership Training Institute build the skills, abilities, and leadership of parents to effectively engage in schools and communities?
2. How does participation in the Parent Leadership Training Institute impact parents both personally and professionally?

Significance of the Study

The literature on parent engagement training in the charter system is minimal. Although the literature on family involvement in education richly describes its outcomes and the motivation, barriers, and opportunities for such involvement, little is known about how a growing number of intermediary organizations contribute to the development of parent and family involvement, and charter school research has not explored this area in great detail (Lopez, et al., 2005). Charter school research dealing with community issues tends to focus on parent selection factors and parental evaluation surveys rather than parent engagement (Anderson,

2005; Beaubout & Jakiel, 2015). There are only a few studies that have documented the outcomes of parent leadership training programs and examined the capacity-building role of intermediary organizations (Lopez, et al.; Corbett & Wilson, 2008; Hong, 2009, 2011; Ishimaru, 2011; Frankel, Kressley, & Henderson, 2014). The research on intermediary organizations will be presented in the literature review on parent engagement programs; however, it is important to explain why this parent leadership training study was conducted in the New Orleans education reform school landscape.

The devastation caused by the failure of the levy system in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 presented a unique opportunity to implement a turnaround agenda or school reform agenda as a part of recovery efforts in the city. Kathleen Blanco, then governor of Louisiana, recommended an unconventional approach to getting the New Orleans schools running again—a state takeover of the public schools. In a November 2005 speech at the Louisiana Recovery and Rebuilding Conference, Blanco said the following:

In some ways, these storms have given us opportunities to start anew and rise above the limitations of the past. I'm determined to do just that in New Orleans, where the public school system was not providing our children with the education they so desperately need and deserve. ... Now is the time for us to turn those schools around and create a system to benefit every child in that parish. (Blanco, 2005)

The havoc wreaked by the hurricane helped usher in an era of “change” and what some called “rebirth” that reflects a re-shifting of the racial dynamics and political power structure. Three systems of schools were created comprised of three governing units: the Recovery School District (RSD), the New Orleans Public Schools (NOPS), and charter schools (Newmark & Deruby, 2006). The federal government supported the decentralized system, marked by the

September 2005 announcement (one month after Hurricane Katrina) by U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings of a \$20.9 million grant to Louisiana for charter schools (Newmark & Deruby, 2006). Only 20 of the 103 schools that operated before Hurricane Katrina were open six months after the hurricane (Newmark & Deruby, 2006). Fifty-three schools were opened a year after Hurricane Katrina (Dingerson & Levner, 2005). Of those 53 schools opened during the 2006-2007 school year, 21 different entities operated the schools, with 10 using selective admissions policies (Dingerson & Levner, 2005). Nineteen different entities operated the 80 schools that opened during the 2007-2008 school year (Cook & Dixson, 2013).

New Orleans remains the largest charter school experiment in existence, and there is a great deal to learn about how parents exercise school choice and support their children's learning and development when the governance and leadership in the public school system has changed. Over 90% of the city's K-12 schools currently are charter operated. Many are without an established Parent Teacher Organization (PTO), which exists in traditional public schools. There has been growing resistance to New Orleans school reform from youth groups, parent groups, and community organizations with a long-standing history in the New Orleans community. One community leader shared, "Input is not what we need. What we need is the power to make decisions. ... We need a plan coming from us. ... We don't need a 35-year-old New York educator to come in and tell us what we need to do. We need to tell them (entrepreneurs) what to do!" (Dixson, Buras, & Jeffers, 2015).

Many new charter principals saw veteran teachers as part of the problem, and, as local teachers were pushed out, many former students complained about losing good teachers and role models in their city schools. In reality, the rejection experienced by veteran teachers caused harm to those in the local community, including students. A student responded during a youth-led

protest that, “If they are hurting you (African American local teachers), they are hurting us” (Dixson, Buras, & Jeffers, 2015). Although education reform in the city offered choice to parents, the new governance and policies were overwhelming, and many parents expressed frustration with navigating the new educational landscape.

Currently, 59% of the population in New Orleans is African American, and 35% of African Americans in the city live in poverty (Shrinath, Mack & Plyer, 2014). While economic growth has occurred in the city post-Katrina, economic advantage for African Americans lags behind. In 2011, 52% of African American men in the city were not in the labor force or employed (Sams-Abiodun, Rattler Jr., & Boggs, 2013). The number of African American children living below the poverty level in the city grew by 7 percentage points from 2007 to 2013 to 50.5% (Mack, 2015). More broadly, across all racial demographics, those living below the poverty level in New Orleans—unable to provide food, shelter and transportation for themselves—are about 27% of the population (Shrinath, Mack, & Plyer, 2014).

These statistics are not encouraging for creating solutions that address disparities that exist for African Americans in all aspects of life in the city. Isolated by race and economic status, most African American residents are deprived of basic quality-of-life opportunities, a situation that serves to limit their life chances. Historically, African Americans have had to survive in the face of the most daunting challenges. And, even though most survive in these depressed communities without succumbing to a life of crime—with many overcoming insurmountable obstacles—some who live in conditions of poverty do engage in and become victims of crime. The multigenerational existence of families in poverty-ridden neighborhoods has deleterious consequences on the physical and emotional health of their residents (Urban League of Greater New Orleans Report, 2015). The effects of poverty, as exemplified by blighted and substandard

housing, the lack of quality schools and recreational outlets, and the lack of access to social services, can lead to the disillusionment of residents and increased involvement of residents in the drug trade and violence (Urban League of Greater New Orleans Report, 2015). New Orleans is known as one of the most violent cities in America (Urban League of Greater New Orleans Report, 2015). A lack of quality education is a strong predictor of socioeconomic and criminal justice outcomes.

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, 46% of the schools in the city were deemed “academically unacceptable” (Cowan & Parker, 2008). Although a few public schools provided excellent education, the majority of the African American population attended public schools in the city that were woefully inadequate (Sims & Rossmeier, 2015). Nearly 90% of New Orleans’ public school students are African American, yet there is an alarming disparity between those schools attended by white students and those attended by African American students (Sims & Rossmeier, 2015). Because many of the schools fail to provide adequate education and services to students with learning disabilities and other challenges, many African American males drop out of school by the 10th grade (Sims & Rossmeier, 2015). Consequently, most African Americans who are arrested do not have a high school diploma, and almost a third test below a fifth-grade level (Chang, 2012). For many African Americans in the city, resources have been extremely limited. Many African American residents in New Orleans lack basic services such as quality education; health care; community services; and access to playgrounds, social experiences, and employment opportunities; thereby drastically limiting positive life outcomes.

A report prepared for the W.K. Kellogg Foundation titled, *Public Education in New Orleans Eight Years After Katrina: The Intersection of Race, Equity, and Excellence*, by the Orleans Public Education Network (OPEN), provides insight into the nonprofit organization

landscape in New Orleans. The report identified 48 organizations and programs operating in the city's landscape in support of education. Of the 48 organizations, only 13 (27%) existed before Hurricane Katrina (Orleans Public Education Network, 2013). Among the 48 organizations are education intermediaries and entities focused on research, advocacy, human capital support, instructional support, and student support. There are two organizations in the New Orleans School Reform context that provided parent leadership training (Orleans Public Education Network and the Urban League of Greater New Orleans) during 2015 and 2016, the years during which data was collected for this study. Neither organization has ever had a formal qualitative research study conducted. Both organizations engage citizens with varying interests, cultures, and ties to the city in public engagement campaigns and training programs. The Greater Urban League of New Orleans organization was selected because it has a longstanding reputation in the local and national community for improving the lives of citizens in low-income communities by providing training and resources. Deirdre Johnson Burel, former Director of OPEN, shared that the Greater Urban League of New Orleans (UL) began providing parent leadership training two years before OPEN.

The UL has responded to the needs of the New Orleans community for over 70 years, and it is the only nonprofit organization that is both multi-program and multi-issue and focuses on education (OPEN, 2013). The UL's Center for Education and Youth Development has three primary programs: Early Head Start, College Track, and Parent Information Center (Urban League of Louisiana website, 2015). The organization's longstanding reputation for providing training and support to the underserved has helped locals develop a sense of community in the midst of change. Those residents who were fortunate to have the resources to return to the city desired, in many cases, greater voice and participation in community restructuring efforts and the

types of schools that will be placed in their communities to support their children's educational advancement. But, quite often, their opinions were not solicited.

With all the city's challenges, there are survivors. The locals have strength, perseverance, and hope for a better city for their children and grandchildren. On August 27, 2015, President Barack Obama delivered an address to the United States on the 10-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. He commended the city on its recovery efforts and shared with the nation that the work to improve conditions in the city is not done. President Obama stated:

If Katrina was initially an example of what happens when government fails, the recovery has been an example of what's possible when government works together—state and local, community—everybody working together as true partners. ... Working together, we've transformed education in this city. Before the storm, New Orleans public schools were largely broken, leaving generations of low-income kids without a decent education. Today, thanks to parents and educators, school leaders, [and] nonprofits, we're seeing real gains in achievement, with new schools, more resources to retain and develop and support great teachers and principals. We have data that shows before the storm the high school graduation rate was 54 percent. Today, it's up to 73 percent. ... So we've made a lot of progress over the past 10 years. You've made a lot of progress. That gives us hope. (Alpert, 2015)

A 2015 survey administered by the Black Alliance for School Choice options reported that two-thirds of Black voters in four states (Alabama, Louisiana, New Jersey, and Tennessee) support parent choice and school choice (Bedrick, 2015). In 2015 survey results from Education Next, another group that is known as a school choice proponent, indications are that 58% of Blacks nationwide supported universal school vouchers and 66% supported vouchers for low-

income families (Bedrick, 2015). However, the percentage of Black voters with children in a traditional public school or charter school is unknown.

Discussion of school choice is growing, especially with the appointment of a U.S. Secretary of Education (Betsy DeVos) under the Trump administration who is a school choice advocate. This research study couldn't be more timely. It is critical to learn of the lived experiences of parents with children enrolled in charter schools and understand the level of support that is available to them to establish healthy family-school-community partnerships. This research study focuses on the training outcomes of one intermediary organization in the school choice and education reform context that provides parent leadership training in New Orleans and its contribution to parent empowerment.

The examination of a community-sponsored parent leadership program adds to the literature on family involvement and parent engagement in public education because school sites are not the only places in which parent engagement and capacity building occur. This study is also significant because it has the potential to justify the need for schools to embrace the broader view of parent engagement that is advocated for by the Family, School, and Community National Working Group and the Harvard Family Research Project (Lopez, et al., 2005). The Harvard Family Research Project (now known as the Global Family Research Project) team (Lopez, et al., 2005) asserted that 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. Schools alone cannot ensure a successful path for all children; parents as partners should always be desired.

Limitations of the Study

A significant limitation of this narrative research study may be in considerations regarding researcher-participant relationships. In some ways, the researcher can be considered an insider in the New Orleans context, and in some ways the researcher is considered an outsider. Having some understanding of the local culture makes the researcher an insider. She is a native of New Orleans and a product of the K-12 traditional public school system there. Her undergraduate degree in elementary education is from a local college, Southern University at New Orleans. Although she is a product of the New Orleans public school system, while completing her teacher education program, she served as an Americorps member and worked as an educator at a middle school that became the first charter school in New Orleans in the late 1990s. While meeting with participants and engaging in data collection and analysis for this study, it was important for her not to “lean on [her] own understanding” but instead practice active listening and seek to understand the parents’ lived experiences and their perspectives of the impact of the Parent Leadership Training Institute.

Narrative inquirers move beyond the institutional narrative of “do no harm” by learning an attitude of empathic listening, not being judgmental, and suspending their disbelief (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998) as they attend to participants’ stories. There were times when the researcher had to suspend disbelief as parents described the attitudes and actions of school staff towards their children or towards themselves when they attempted to increase engagement and go beyond the traditional fundraising role of parent engagement. There were times when parents mentioned the names of school leaders or district and charter network-level leaders with whom the researcher had interacted in her professional education work or through my civic engagement efforts in the city. Throughout the research interviews, the researcher controlled

facial expressions, listened attentively to parent stories, suspended judgment, and maintained confidentiality.

Clandinin and Huber (in press) have identified issues of anonymity and confidentiality, as well as respectful representation of participants in narrative inquiry as common concerns, as participants' complexity of lives are made visible. After hearing a story of child abuse, the researcher asked a parent if she had her permission to share that particular part of the narrative. The parent's education project was linked to keeping children safe through parent education. This childhood experience played a part in deciding what area of education she wanted to impact. The researcher felt it was important to be respectful and share how the data could be used, though the Institutional Review Board letter also was shared prior to the interview. The parent agreed to allow the narrative to be shared.

The researcher's community organizing experience with OPEN from 2010-2012 and participation in a yearlong public education campaign enhanced her knowledge of ways to facilitate effective dialogue and show empathy when residents share their stories. Her knowledge and experiences in the city pre- and post-Katrina in some ways helped her to identify as an insider. Having some knowledge of the New Orleans education reform context allowed her to establish a relationship with UL staff and parents who participated in the Parent Leadership Training Institute during the recruitment and data collection process.

Another limitation is that the researcher is new to parenting. She became a parent a year prior to the development of this research study. Although she works in the education field, her daughter is in the toddler stage, therefore, the researcher's experiences with parent-teacher conferences and engaging with schools in the role of parent are fairly new and limited. Her previous experiences with parent-teacher conferences have been in the role of teacher.

The researcher-participant relationship is also complicated because the researcher is a middle-class, married, African American woman who currently lives up north in the suburbs of Chicago. She grew up in one of the poorest areas of New Orleans, which happens to be where the levees broke during Hurricane Katrina, in the Lower Ninth Ward area of the city. Her father was the only father living in the home on her block. Most children were raised by their mother or both their mother and grandmother. The majority of children attended the neighborhood elementary school that was a half-mile from her home, and many of her elementary teachers lived in her community. Her ties to the city made many of the parents' childhood stories familiar to her, given her familiarity with their high school alma maters and awareness of some of the teachers and leaders who were mentioned as well as some of the organizations that have been of support.

There are some aspects of the researcher's life that are considered "gray areas" when it comes to insider or outsider status. Although she shares the same race as the parent leaders and their families and grew up in New Orleans, her advanced studies and availability of resources based on her current middle-class status create differences in social and economic assets and opportunities. In addition, the researcher has not lived in New Orleans for a significant amount of time since the year 2000. In addition, she was not in the city when the levees broke. However, at that time, she lived a little over an hour away in Baton Rouge, LA, where she housed 26 family members in a four-bedroom home for six months after the hurricane. During that time, she assisted family members with recovery efforts and made sure younger cousins were enrolled in school. She witnessed the emotional challenges and financial changes her family experienced as they struggled to rebuild their homes and access resources in order to return to New Orleans.

Although she didn't live in the city for an extended period of time post-Katrina, the researcher was able to have some level of empathy. The devastation had ruined their homes and restricted access to their churches, their children's schools, and many other valuable community resources. Many residents struggled to hold onto their jobs. For example, one of the researcher's aunts was a special education high school teacher nearing retirement and teaching in the neighboring Jefferson Parish Public Schools system. She evacuated to Baton Rouge and drove nearly two hours each way to the New Orleans suburb to teach her students once the Jefferson Parish schools reopened post-Katrina.

Those residents still left with job options considered themselves fortunate. Thriving in the city post-Katrina required many locals to not only rebuild their homes but re-establish networks and develop new networks to access resources for their families. Many families are still struggling to provide for their families almost 12 years after Hurricane Katrina. Building parents' leadership capacity could potentially have a positive impact on parents both personally and professionally and increase their social capital in the changing city.

Many researchers believe that, by determining this status of insider or outsider at the beginning of a research project—often before a researcher enters the field—access is granted and the research field is open for exploration (Bartunek & Louis, 1996). These views, however, are too simplistic and do not capture the complex identities of communities and researchers. There are myriad dimensions of identity and representation, and the discussion of insider or outsider status must be a complex process that recognizes those dimensions.

In acknowledging where the researcher stands in relation to her participants, the issue of reflexivity is an important consideration. Reflexivity is inherently concerned with relationships, which can change across contexts, time, and encounters. It helps us identify the socially and

rhetorically constructed boundaries that limit our view of the social field, to transgress those limits, and provide a basis for creative, ethical alternatives. Researchers are encouraged to use their knowledge of relationships—with their multiple and dynamic boundaries—to move beyond traditional boundaries and develop critical research strategies.

The open-ended nature of narrative inquiry allowed the researcher to address concerns with researcher-participant relationships. Parents were allowed to speak openly about the impact of the Parent Leadership Training Institute on their lives. In many cases, the narrations included economic struggles, strained relationships with their children's father, increased communication with their children, limited family support due to families being relocated after Hurricane Katrina, increased housing costs, struggles pursuing higher education for themselves and their children, and their desires for connectedness with school staff and community members. As a result, the structure of the research and methodology used has helped to mitigate any potential limitations.

Organization of the Study

This chapter serves as the introduction, which includes the statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, significance of research, and limitations of the study. Chapter 2 provides a historical account of parent education and shares how parent involvement programs have evolved over time. The existing research on parent engagement also is presented. Chapter 3 identifies the theoretical model, Joyce Epstein's Theory of Overlapping Influence, which frames this parent leadership training research study. Epstein's Theory of the Overlapping Influences is presented to discuss the complexities of relationships between parents, teachers, and community members, even when all stakeholders may have the child's best interest in mind. How each stakeholder engages in decision-making and prioritizes students' needs depends on the

resources available, how he or she views his or her role in the child's development, and each person's ability to collaborate with others and share responsibility for the child's development. Epstein's Parent Involvement Framework is also presented to begin a discussion about parents' roles in the education of their children across contexts. Karen Mapp's Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships is the second framework that is presented to identify the parent leadership training outcomes that are advocated for in order to support parents in their development of the skills, knowledge, and confidence needed to negotiate multiple parent roles across contexts. Chapter 4 describes the qualitative methodology of this narrative research study, and it explains what narrative inquiry is and how it is used and applied to educational research. Narrative inquiry was used to capture the training outcomes from those who participated in the parent leadership training program and understand how those parents utilized their knowledge and experiences to overcome barriers and increase their leadership abilities. Recovery efforts in New Orleans following the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina required citizens to overcome enormous obstacles, and parent leaders' voices and experiences mattered. Chapter 5 presents findings from the themes that emerged regarding the outcomes of the UL Parent Leadership Training Institute. Chapter 6 discusses the findings in light of the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that shape this study. Chapter 7 summarizes the study, while noting its implication for practice and its limitations, and offers suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2

Background and Literature Review

History of Parent Involvement Programs

It is important to understand the history of programs and policies in the United States that were created to improve the lives of children through parent involvement and training. The historical context helps to better understand the shifts in attitudes, beliefs, and practices of our nation regarding the role that parents should play in the education of their children. Parents have been their child's first teacher since prehistoric times; however, the first formal parent education classes did not occur in the United States until 1815 (Berger, 1991b). An interest in child development arose from many organizations (e.g., women's associations, colleges, formal and informal parent groups, governments, and schools). Education was viewed as the vehicle to strengthening middle-class families, assimilating immigrants, and assisting low-income families. The present-day focus on parent education and collaboration grew out of the 1960s with federal programs such as Head Start, Home Start, and Follow Through (Schlossman, 1981, p. 280). The idea of parent involvement as a critical educational component has continued over the decades with concerns about violence, drug use, dropouts, teenage pregnancy, poverty, kindergarten readiness, high-stakes testing, school closings and turnaround models, and school choice.

Twenty-six major parent programs highlighted the advent of the 1920s. Most of these new parent groups met the needs of middle-class parents who formed study groups for their own enlightenment, or in some cases, developed groups in response to a need for health information regarding issues such as tuberculosis or nutrition. The Child Study Association of America (CSAA) sponsored the first parent education university course at Columbia University in 1920 (Whipple, 1929, p. 182). The CSAA grew from 56 parent groups in 1926 to 135 parent groups in

1927 (Whipple, 1929, p. 182). Parent education continued to grow and addressed varied aspects of child development (e.g., education, health).

In the 1930s, President Herbert Hoover called for the White House Conference on Child Health and Protection to study the health and wellbeing of the children of the United States, and more than 3,000 specialists attended (Michael & Goldstein, 1998). The final reports of the conference consisted of a series of 32 volumes that included the recommendation that parent education remain informal and adapt to the needs of the individual or parent group (Michael & Goldstein, 1998). Parent education was to provide opportunities for parents to learn the essentials and enable them to work through their own problems and concerns (Michael & Goldstein, 1998). The outcomes of parent education were to be measured in terms of more satisfying relationships between parent and child, parent and teacher, teacher and child, and among parents (Michael & Goldstein, 1998). Overall, parent education was expected to lead to enriched lives and more satisfying family and community life (Pennsylvania Department of Public Instruction, 1936). Social and economic conditions of the 1930s also affected families and children, and special agencies were created to help families during the Depression (Pennsylvania Department of Public Instruction, 1936).

Even though the nation was consumed by World War II during the first half of the 1940s, parent education continued to grow, and child care services were offered to allow mothers to work and support the war effort. Child-rearing beliefs and practices changed dramatically from those espoused in the 1920s and 1930s. There was a swing from the “be tough with them,” “feed on schedule,” “let them cry it out” doctrines of the twenties and thirties (Brim, 1965, pp. 130-131). The emotional and social well-being of children became recognized as important, and the forties foreshadowed the coming decade of the child.

In the 1950s, the baby boom era began. After the war, families were able to get on with their lives, and the emphasis shifted to the family unit. Benjamin Spock's 1957 book, *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*, was written to help parents raise healthy children. Erik Erikson's *Childhood and Society*, first published in 1950, analyzed eight stages of man. Erikson emphasized the first four stages of childhood as trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. shame and doubt, initiative vs. guilt, and industry vs. inferiority. He shared the idea that children's early years needed to be nurturing in order to achieve the required mental health to develop trust, autonomy, initiative, and industry (Erikson, 1950, 1963).

The 1950s were a time for change, and evidence of this desire for change was embodied in the beginnings of the civil rights movement to obtain equal rights for African Americans. The 1954 *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* court decision declared that separate schooling was not equal. Another form of change was found in the consolidation of schools, as children began to travel long distances from their homes to schools. School principals assumed stronger leadership roles, and parents' power was reduced, as they were no longer as personally involved with their children's schools (Brim, 1965, p.162).

The launching of Sputnik toward the end of the 1950s shook the United States with the realization that another nation might be more technologically advanced. Therefore, the decade of the 1960s began with a heavy emphasis on academics. Although the standard of living in the United States had risen to the highest in the world, minorities, the handicapped, and the lower class were still underemployed and poverty stricken (Berger, 1987, p. 65). The existence of racism brought about the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1965. The government, through the creation of the Great Society and enforcement of civil rights, attempted to promote equality and reduce poverty.

In 1970, Michael Harrington (as referenced in Dreier, 2012) wrote a small but important book titled, *The Other America*, documenting the amount of poverty that existed in America. Harrington's writing style—informal, accessible, and morally outraged but not self-righteous—appealed to readers. Rather than relying primarily on statistics to make his argument, he told stories, humanizing the poor as real people trapped in difficult conditions not of their own making. He described people living in slum housing, people who got sick and lived with chronic pain because they could not afford to see a doctor, people who did not have enough food for themselves or their children and lived with constant hunger. Only 1% of the federal budget was spent on antipoverty programs at this point in time, leaving Harrington to believe that drastic changes for low-income families would not occur despite government efforts (Dreier, 2012).

Three major changes in education took place during this decade. First, research released during the 1960s, such as the HighScope Perry Preschool Study, demonstrated that early childhood education could have a positive effect on the development of children, especially low-income minority children (Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart, 1993, p.18). This view opened the way for the establishment of Head Start in the summer of 1965. Parent participation was a big part of the Head Start philosophy. A second change involved educators' and the public's views of cultural diversity, with educators having more exposure to literature and lectures on cultural diversity that addressed celebrating different cultures and ways of child-rearing (Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart, 1993, p. 18). A third emphasis was on support for the whole family (Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart, 1993, p. 18). Educators were encouraged to engage in two-way communication with parents to support children and families. An example of one-way communication is a teacher seeking to inform parents about events, activities, or student progress through a variety of sources, such as an introductory letter, school newsletter, or report cards. In

the 1960s, two-way communication was viewed as interactive dialogue between the teacher and parents. Teachers were encouraged to incorporate both strategies (Berger, 1991a, p.7; Williams & Cartledge, 1997, p. 30).

Many of the programs initiated in the 1960s flourished in the 1970s. The inclusion of parents on educational governing boards took hold in other federally funded programs such as Parent and Child Centers, Home Start, Parent Child Development Centers, Title I, Follow Through, and those emanating from Public Law 94-142—legislation that included parents of handicapped children in the development of Individual Education Programs (IEP). An amendment, Public Law 98-199, provided for parent training to increase the effectiveness of parents working with the staff at their children's schools. Later, Public Law 99-457, the Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments of 1986, included an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) intended to meet the needs of each child and family. Three approaches to parent involvement and parent education were prevalent during this period: (1) the family impact model; (2) the school impact model; and (3) the community impact model (Gordon, 1979). The family impact model was designed to work with family members to enable them to cope with the social and education systems. The school impact model was defined as one based on teachers learning from parents, as well as parents learning from teachers. Gordon's community impact model advocated for the use of resources (e.g., medical and psychological) of the larger community to facilitate community-home school partnerships (Gordon, 1979).

In the 1980s, the Louisiana Department of Education and individual public schools responded to the need for parents' involvement in the education of their children. Many schools took leadership roles in developing ideal models of successful parent-school collaboration (Schorr & Schorr, 1988). Suggestions for parental involvement also were offered by many

national organizations such as the U.S. Department of Education, National Association of State Boards of Education, International Reading Association, National Association for the Education of Young Children, Association for Childhood Education International, and Council for Exceptional Children. In 1989, America's governors and President George H. W. Bush met and developed the original six goals, which later would be included in Goals 2000, the Educate America Act passed by the U.S. Congress. The national education goals were recognized by every major group of parents, educators, and businesses (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

In Goals 2000, which passed with strong bipartisan support in 1994, Congress included targets for teacher quality and parent responsibility. These two topics were met with opposition, mainly because advocates of the Act wanted to restrict goals to student performance (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). The goals stated that, by the year 2000:

1. All children in America will start school ready to learn.
2. The high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90%.
3. All students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, and geography, and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, future learning, and productive employment in our nation's modern economy.
4. The nation's teaching force will have access to programs for the continued improvement of their professional skills and the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to instruct and prepare all American students for the next century.
5. United States students will be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement.
6. Every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

7. Every school in the United States will be free of drugs, violence, and the unauthorized presence of firearms and alcohol and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning.
8. Every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children.
(National Educational Goals panel, 1994, 2001, p. 11).

In 2004, the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) released a document to guide states and school districts on the requirements for parental involvement under the No Child Left Behind program. NCLB legislation marked the first time parent involvement was defined under any re-authorization of the Elementary Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The legislation required Title I schools to develop parental involvement policies and school-family compacts that outlined how the two stakeholder groups would work together to improve student achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Parental involvement was defined as: “The participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). School staff were to ensure parents play an integral role in assisting their child’s learning; that parents are encouraged to be actively involved in their child’s education at school; that parents are full partners in their child’s education and are included, as appropriate, in decision-making and on advisory committees to assist in the education of their child; and that other activities are carried out, such as those described in Section 1118 of the ESEA (Parental Involvement) [Section 9101(32), ESEA.] (U.S. Department of Education, 2004, p. 3).

As of January 2010, 39 states and the District of Columbia had enacted laws calling for the implementation of family engagement policies. In 2012, Massachusetts was one of several states to integrate family engagement into its educator evaluation system, making “family and community engagement” one of the four pillars of its rubric for evaluating teachers and

administrators (Massachusetts Family and Community Engagement Standard III, 2012, p. 2). Teachers were expected to promote the learning and growth of all students through effective partnerships with families, caregivers, community members, and organizations.

In 2012, Karen Mapp and Paul Kuttner partnered with the U.S. Department of Education to develop the Partners in Education: Dual Capacity-Building Framework, which lays out the goals and conditions necessary to chart a path toward effective family engagement efforts that are linked to student achievement and student improvement. The four C's for enhancing the capacity of staff and families were listed as Capabilities (skills and knowledge), Connections (networks), Cognition (beliefs, values), and Confidence (self-efficacy) (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013, p. 10).

Existing Research on Parent Leadership

This extensive history overview provides the background for understanding the existing research on parent leadership. Increasingly, parents are seeking to work with schools and communities to identify problems and partner with them to create solutions. This emerging approach to parent involvement that goes beyond fundraising and attendance at school events is called *parent leadership* (Henderson, et al., 2004). Parent leaders generally think of themselves as typical moms, dads, and grandparents. Most are without high-level political connections, advanced degrees, or surplus leisure time. In fact, many of these dedicated leaders work hard to raise their families in low-income communities. Many would say that they had no intention of becoming leaders at all—they simply saw a need and responded to it. Often, parent leaders are motivated by conditions in low-performing schools in districts where school bureaucracies tend to keep parents at arm's length. Yet, the research on parent leadership indicates that parents can, and do, bring their skills to bear in a range of settings. Parents address issues that head the

agenda of school reformers, politicians and policymakers, educators, and parents (Henderson, Jacob, Kernan-Schloss, & Raimondo, 2004).

It is important to note that there are three different approaches within the parent leadership research: parents as partners, parents as advocates, and parents as community organizers (Catone, et al., 2014). One approach is parents as partners. Programs such as Kentucky's Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership and the Parent Leadership Exchange in New England are based on the concept of parents as partners with educators. The goals are to equip parents with skills and contacts to engage other parents; connect schools with community groups; identify and engage resources for schools; and collaborate with administrators, teachers, and other school staff (Catone, et al., 2014). In 2001, Kroll, Sexton, Raimondo, Corbett, Dickson, and Wilson conducted an evaluation of the Prichard Committee for Excellence's Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership in Kentucky. The researchers examined whether the parent leadership training institute increased parents' understanding of school reform and willingness to work for district and school improvement. Data from a demographic examination of Institute graduates, and surveys of 1998 and 1999 graduates, identified five ways in which parents can promote educational change (Kroll, et al., 2001). First, it was noted that parents can accept and communicate the message that schools must serve all students well. Second, parents can gather data about school needs and present them publicly. Third, parents can talk knowledgeably about educational issues. Fourth, parents can initiate activities that make schools more welcoming for parents and promote parent-teacher communication. Finally, parents can leverage contacts made during training and continue resource exchanges.

Corbett and Wilson (2008) conducted an evaluation to gauge the long-term effects of the Commonwealth Institute Parent Leadership (CIPL) training on its decade of graduates and

fellows from 1997-2006. The evaluation, conducted with support by the Spencer Foundation, examined whether parents' participation in the program spurred a continued interest in educational advocacy and involvement well beyond that evidenced during and just after the training, as documented in the previous evaluation (Corbett & Wilson, 2008). Of the nearly 1,400 CIPL participants who graduated, the study authors contacted 100 for telephone interviews and mailed surveys to the 1,200 graduates for whom the program had current addresses. Of these 1,200, nearly 40 percent (389) responded.

Using qualitative and quantitative methods, the followup evaluation discovered that parents' mindsets had changed from being concerned only about their child's needs to identifying the needs of all children and promoting practices that were in the best interest of all children. Fellows also continued their involvement in the education community and even broadened their engagement in education beyond just their child's school. Fellows reported feeling empowered based on their new levels of knowledge of education systems and supports. Finally, many fellows not only became involved but also became more influential (Catone, Friedman, McAlister, Protchnik, & Thompson, 2014). Fellows reportedly became meaningfully engaged in local and state educational activities in ways they had never considered before. Corbett and Wilson (2008) also reported that parents found ways to maneuver around wary educators and evidenced a profound sense of obligation to use their training constructively (Catone, et al., 2014).

The researchers were able to document trends such as parents expanding engagement from school and community organizing to education system-based efforts. Those who previously served on the PTA or PTO branched out to join advocacy and policy groups with larger constituencies. Two-thirds of the fellows who engaged in policy and systems efforts held a

college degree. Fellows who participated at the district level were appointed to curriculum task forces, strategic planning committees, and superintendent search committees. Two-thirds of fellows' education projects were implemented well beyond a year, with some districts adopting fellows' projects as part of continuous improvement efforts (Catone, et al., 2014). In regard to parents continuing their education, 21% returned to school for undergraduate and graduate degree programs (Catone, et al., 2014).

A second approach to parent leadership is parent advocacy. Organizations such as Parents United for Responsible Education (PURE) in Chicago, Advocates for Children in New York City, New Jersey Education Law Center, and the Southern Poverty Law Center, provide training and technical support to parent organizations and parents on school councils to ensure that parents understand their rights and have the knowledge and skills needed to help children reach their full potential (Catone, et al., 2014). These groups also are known to take legal action, such as working to remedy unfair funding formulas, intervening when special education services are not adequately provided, addressing unfair school discipline systems, and ensuring fair treatment of LGBT students (Catone, et al., 2014). The parent advocacy approach recognizes partnership as a goal but has evolved in districts and schools where there is resistance to parent collaboration or parents as decision-makers in public education. This approach seeks to address unequal power dynamics that hinder parents serving as equal partners in their children's education.

Allegra Alessandri Pfeifer's dissertation examined the parent advocacy efforts of a parent organizing group and documented the leadership competencies based on the groups' actions and outcomes (Pfeifer, 2010). The parents in the organizing group wanted to realize their dream of a rigorous charter school option—comparable to an expensive curriculum mostly found in private schools—in the midst of Sacramento City Unified School District's radical reform of high school

education in the fall of 2000. Eight small high schools were planned. Four small high schools were opened in 2003, and by 2007 two more opened, each with Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and Health professional themes. The parent organizing group advocated for a public Waldorf high school program. This was a lofty goal because, for nearly 100 years, Waldorf programs in the United States have been privately funded (Pfeifer, 2010).

As a result of the parents' advocacy efforts, in the fall of 2008, the first Waldorf public high school was opened in the Sacramento district, thanks to the parents' community organizing efforts. The years to develop and open the school were guided by a group of parents building their community of support, developing social capital, and emerging as engaged leaders in the height of civic school reform. (Pfeifer, 2010). Parents were interviewed about their roles and contributions as leaders to understand their work and their perceptions about their leadership. Questions were designed to focus on understanding how these parents used their expertise, leadership, civic engagement, and networking to move their agenda through the board of education and the district leadership to successfully realize their goal. The results of the study showed that distributive leadership practices were key to achieving their goal, as well as ongoing learning and effective verbal and written communication requesting that community leaders respond to their needs. The persistence of the parent groups paid off, and the parents were able to create an attractive school option in their community for families of all economic backgrounds.

A third approach to parent leadership is parent and community organizing. In this approach, parents organize to hold schools accountable through the democratic political process. Groups such as the Boston Parent Organizing Network, Mothers on the Move in the Bronx, and the Logan Square Neighborhood Association in Chicago use direct action, such as demonstrations, media events, and public meetings with office holders and candidates to make

their point. Parent organizers also build constituencies among other parents or join forces with existing community groups and religious organizations (Henderson, et al., 2004).

One of the three community organizing entities mentioned above, the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA) in Chicago, is known for its Parent Leadership Training Institute and community organizing efforts (Villanueva, 2016). The LSNA serves as a catalyst for parents' entry into schools to tutor students, support student safety improvement action plans, and advocate for best practices in their schools and community. Parents became allies with the Logan Square school community when the Chicago Public School Board threatened to close schools in the area in 2013 (Villanueva, 2016). Parents from the Logan Square community were very vocal at community meetings in their opposition to school closings in their area. The LSNA parent institute and mentoring program that supports parents working and volunteering in schools has expanded throughout Illinois. The program operates in at least 65 schools in Illinois, with some financial support coming from the Illinois State Board of Education. The LSNA reported that, since the creation of the program in 1995, 1,300 parents, most of whom are mothers, have graduated from the Parent Mentor Program, and 130 parents work in eight schools in Logan Square (Villanueva, 2016). Other positive outcomes that indicate the impact on children's and parents' educational advancement include improved test scores (an increase of 35% of students who meet or exceed ISAT benchmarks in 10 years), as well as increased long-term graduation rates (Villanueva, 2016). Between 1990 and 2009, the dropout rate for youth aged 16-19 decreased 61% in classes with a parent mentor involved in their early grades (Villanueva, 2016). Also noted as a positive outcome was strengthened social capital (parent mentors more than doubled the network of teachers and parents with whom they communicate regularly) (Villanueva, 2016).

Soo Hong published a book in 2011 based upon her dissertation research of the community organizing Parent Leadership Training Institute and Parent Mentor Program. *A Cord of Three Strands: Organizing parents, schools, and communities for collective empowerment* is a layered ethnography that explores the ways in which community resources can be engaged to build more effective relationships between schools and families (Hong, 2011). Data reveals that the LSNA's parent mentor program, presenting a three-part model to parent engagement training, can be broadly applied to schools. The ecology of parent engagement presented describes parent engagement as a process of *induction, integration, and investment* (Hong, 2011). Through parents' participation in school activities, projects, and improvement teams, parents can be *inducted* into previously unfamiliar environments to support their children as well as their own understanding of schools (Hong, 2011). Through a program that focuses on connecting parents to teachers and other parents in the school, parents become *integrated* into schools as key actors and role models. Finally, by developing parents as leaders, rather than as passive participants in school-determined initiatives, parent engagement was seen as an *investment* in schools and the broader community (Hong, 2011). The LSNA training and community organizing efforts were found to be relational in nature, rooted in leadership and community change, and built upon the mutual interests of schools, families, and community members (Hong, 2011).

Ann Ishimaru (2011), who graduated from Harvard University (and collaborated with Soo Hong during their time as graduate students at the university), decided to examine a partnership between district leadership and a low-income Latino parent organizing group in Oregon. Ishimaru used mixed methods and an embedded case study design to understand how the district leadership and community organizing group built a collaboration to improve schooling for Latino English language learner students and how that partnership has impacted

the district and its schools. Through educator professional development, parent capacity building, and a civic engagement initiative, the stakeholders worked to balance the power among them and shift the district culture from denial to shared responsibility (Ishimaru, 2011). Results from the study revealed that schools with high levels of organizing activities had more inclusive parent-teacher relations. However, parent-teacher trust did not show an increase. Ishimaru suggested that new collaborations focus on capacity building for systemic transformation, engage low-income parents of color as educational leaders, alter relationships to build civic capacity, and address the broader political context of schools (Ishimaru, 2011).

Lopez, Kreider, and Coffman (2005), from the Harvard Family Research Project, examined the functions of intermediary organizations, which provide capacity-building training to parents by using a framework of capacity building at the individual, organizational, and relational levels. Intermediary organizations in this study were found to have designed capacity-building strategies primarily for parents and worked either directly with parents or local chapters of their organization that reached out to parents. The four intermediary organizations involved in this study were the Alliance for Children and Families, National Coalition of Advocates for Students, the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, and the Right Question Project (Lopez, et al., 2005). Researchers interviewed six national administrators in person and by telephone; in addition, site visits to parent leadership training sessions were conducted in 1999 and 2000 (Lopez, et al., 2005). Focus groups with local practitioners and school personnel from three community-based organizations were conducted; documents of training manuals and proposals were provided to the research team; and the focus group sessions were taped and transcribed (Lopez, et al., 2005). Data analysis consisted of reviewing the multiple sources of data and writing case studies of these organizations (Lopez, et al., 2005). One parent engagement

administrator shared that empowerment is a slow process and acknowledged that parents grapple with issues that are addressed in the trainings and issues that are present in their lives (Lopez, et al., 2005). However, despite the difficulties they may struggle with, parents demonstrated the commitment to want to learn more and continue supporting improvements in schools and their communities (Lopez, et al., 2005).

A program administrator who was interviewed as part of the study shared that parents had begun to recognize their rights were being violated in some cases (Lopez, et al., 2005). Parents also gained a much better understanding of what happens in the school system and to their children. The program administrator also shared that the next steps would be finding appropriate venues in which parents could get involved and finding ways for them to receive some sort of compensation for their willingness to serve in the school setting and support other parents (Lopez, et al., 2005). Another recommendation was to provide much-needed training to teachers and school personnel (Lopez, et al., 2005). Three intermediary organizations were shown to have imparted usable content knowledge as a way of bridging the differences in the professional knowledge of educators and families (Lopez, et al., 2005). The Pritchard Committee for Academic Excellence, for example, focused on helping parent leaders—many of whom were active in their schools—to understand Kentucky’s school reforms and standards so they could effectively monitor school performance and promote the goals of reform through specific projects (Lopez, et al., 2005). The committee’s parent leadership program began with skills training, such as understanding school data, and culminated in an action project that parents carried out in their respective schools. All four organizations increased parents’ capacity at the relational level by providing opportunities for parents to become engaged in projects to improve student achievement and engage in parent and community organizing (Lopez, et al., 2005, p. 82).

Intermediary organizations also were found to have developed tools that strengthened parents' sense of efficacy in relating with schools (Lopez, et al., 2005). For example, the Right Question Project team believed that parents must be able to ask the right questions to be active partners in their children's education. Rather than give parents a list of questions, the organization produced an educational strategy to help parents identify educational issues that were important to them to help them develop their own questions (Lopez, et al., 2005). By practicing to formulate their own questions, parents developed the skills to prioritize their concerns. They also learned a simple framework on the three roles they could play in their children's education—supporter, monitor, and advocate. This framework became the foundation for their action plans and specific tasks (Lopez, et al., 2005).

Summary

This chapter provided background information and literature regarding parent involvement policy and programs and approaches to parent leadership. Parent education for the sake of the child is not a new concept; however, the focus has changed over time. Parent involvement has shifted from learning and engagement at home to parents supporting children with learning at home and becoming involved in schools and, further, to parents taking on multiple roles such as supporters of their child's learning, monitors of learning and development at schools, and advocates for quality services and resources, not just for their child, but for all children in the community. There is an expectation in federal policy that parents in Title I schools will become involved and engage in two-way communication with school staff despite the lack of a clear federal investment in capacity-building programs.

Research results from Ishimaru's 2011 study examining the collaborative relationship between a school district and a community organizing group indicated that, although parent

organizing activities increased, parent-teacher trust remained the same. The researcher recommended that new collaborations focus on capacity building for systemic transformation, engage low-income parents of color as educational leaders, alter relationships to build civic capacity, and address the broader political context of schools (Ishimaru, 2011). Parent capacity building by intermediary organizations is an emerging practice that provides a safe space for parents to convene, learn best practices, and expand their networks and leadership skills.

There is a need for parent engagement research in the school reform context. Seeking to learn from the experiences of parents exercising school choice and examining the quality of programs designed to build parents' capacity building contributes to the scholarship on effective parent, school, and community engagement partnerships. Without attention to training and capacity building, well-intentioned partnerships can fall short of effectiveness (Southeast Educational Development Laboratory, 2013).

Chapter 3

Theoretical Framework

This chapter presents one theory and two frameworks of family-school-community involvement that guide this study. First, Joyce Epstein's 2001 Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence in family and schools informs this parent leadership study's analysis. Next, Epstein's framework regarding parents' roles is examined to better understand the various ways in which parent engagement is represented across contexts. Finally, the Dual Capacity-Building Framework developed by Karen Mapp in 2013 in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Education, is presented as guidance for developing training programs that build the capacity of parents and school staff to engage in effective home, school, and community partnerships. Partnerships between home and school can only develop and thrive if both families and school staff have the requisite collective capacity to engage in partnership (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Mapp's Dual Capacity-Building Framework is not a blueprint but should be viewed as a compass that lays out the goals and conditions for effective family engagement. Authentic parent engagement programs must be tailored to the particular contexts for which they are developed and be aligned to school and district achievement goals and families' learning goals for their children (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Epstein's theory and the two parent engagement frameworks were essential to examining the impact of the Parent Leadership Training Institute on building parents' leadership capacity.

Epstein's Theory of the Overlapping Spheres of Influence

Epstein's Theory of the Overlapping Spheres of Influence is useful in understanding the complex nature of family, school staff, and community members. The degree of overlap among the spheres is influenced by the history, developmental patterns, and changing experiences of the

individuals and institutions within each sphere. The model underscores the continuing relationships, constant evolution, and cumulating knowledge that occur among the spheres. By highlighting the connections between them, Epstein argues for the development of “school-like families and family-like schools” (Epstein, 2011, p. 36). Epstein’s practical application of the theoretical model is presented in a six-part framework of parent involvement that includes parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaboration with the community (Epstein, 2011).

Parental involvement from Epstein’s perspective can be defined as the various instructional and non-instructional activities through which parents show commitment to and exercise influence over the education of their children (Epstein, 2001). It involves the exercise of influence in spheres that include social, cognitive, psychological, moral, physical, and spiritual development and education of children.

Epstein describes the Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence by distinguishing between the external and internal structures of the model. External structure implies the forces that influence the interactions of the social institutions that come from outside agents such as school, family, and community. Internal structure is a term that describes the dynamics of interpersonal relationships within both the family and school (intra-institutional interaction) and between the family and school (inter-institutional interactions). An example of internal structure would be various types of communication between the family and school and within each of these social institutions (Epstein, 2001).

The model consists of three overlapping and non-overlapping circles representing the family, school, and community in the education of children (Epstein, 2001, p. 27). The degree of overlap is under the control of four forces, namely time, experiences in families, experiences in

schools, and experiences in community (Epstein, 2001). Force A for a child, for example, would include his or her chronological age, grade level at school, and the sociopolitical conditions of the period in which the child is at school (Epstein, 2001). Force B represents experiences, philosophies, and practices of families; Force C represents experiences, philosophies, and practices of schools; and Force D represents the experiences, philosophies, and practices of the community (Epstein, 2001). Epstein illustrates how the model works by comparing the education of a handicapped third-grade child with that of a “normal” (without physical, mental, or emotional challenges) third-grade child. The spheres of influence in the case of the handicapped child’s education will differ based on forces A, B, C, and even D (time, experiences with families, experiences in schools, and experiences in community). Epstein argues that a handicapped child is likely to experience more overlap because “parents (home) and special education teachers (school) may begin a highly organized cooperative program to benefit the child” (Epstein, 2001, p. 29). There are a lot more issues that are likely to bring the two social institutions together for the benefit of the handicapped child than for a child without special needs. In addition, home and school may be more compelled to tailor their interactions according to the needs of the handicapped child’s education (Epstein, 2001, p. 29).

As mentioned earlier, the internal structure describes the dynamics of interpersonal relationships within both the family and school (intra-institutional interaction) and between the family and school (inter-institutional interactions). These interactions, which revolve around the child, include various types of communication between the family and school and within each of these social institutions. Epstein’s 2001 model has a central place in the interaction and influence that is always part of intra-institutional and inter-institutional interactions.

External and internal structures do not work in isolation from one another; they are intimately related. A hypothetical example of the dynamics of overlapping spheres of influence would be a parent who has to work a double shift four days a week for two months until her employer recruits and hires someone to cover the evening shift. The external factor would be the new assignment of a double shift, while the internal factor is the limited interaction the parent will have in his or her child's education. Nevertheless, Epstein does not hesitate to point out that there is never complete overlap, because both families and schools maintain some functions and practices that are independent of each other. For example, the choice of a family to have more children is independent of the school. In summary, the theory of overlapping spheres of influence explains that family, school, and community not only work together to accomplish a common educational mission for the benefit of children and society, but the influence of their work overlaps. This theory is important to this parent engagement study because it demonstrates the complexity of parent-school-community interactions and shows how parent training in a setting outside of the school community could inform parent engagement across contexts (e.g., home, school, and community) (Epstein, 2001).

Epstein's Parent Involvement Framework

Epstein's (1992) parent involvement framework is by far the most referenced, tested, and widely accepted conceptual model of parental involvement (e.g., Barnard, 2004; Fishel & Ramirez, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; McBride, Bae, & Wright, 2002). The six subconstructs (hereafter simply referred to as constructs) are (1) parenting, (2) communicating, (3) volunteering, (4) learning at home, (5) decision-making, and (6) collaborating with the community (Epstein, 1992). *Parenting* refers to parents' actions that foster the children's learning and cognitive development, not necessarily tied to school. *Communicating* covers all

home-to-school communication regarding children's academic development and other academically relevant information. *Volunteering* includes parental attendance in a variety of school events ranging in scope from classroom activities to schoolwide events. *Learning at home* is more schoolwork-specific than *parenting* (Construct One). It involves assisting with homework, encouraging hard work in school, and emotionally supporting the child in her or his academic challenges. *Decision-making* reflects how much parents advocate for their children's interests and influence the school environment. *Collaborating with the community* refers to the degree to which parents know about and use community resources that support children's learning (Epstein, 1992).

Although the utility of Epstein's conceptual model has been widely recognized (Barnard, 2004; McBride et al., 2002), it is not a theoretical model, in that it does not explicitly propose the nature of specific relationships among the six constructs nor between those constructs and other variables (Ringenberg et al., 2009). Epstein's Parent Involvement Framework was developed in 1992; however, Epstein's Theory of Parent Involvement known as the Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence wasn't developed until 2001. The first four constructs of the Parent Involvement Framework are parenting, two-way communication, volunteering, and learning at home. These four constructs represent traditional parent involvement programs. However, the idea of parent representatives as a part of a school's decision-making team or parents collaborating with school staff or community members on issues related to school reform are viewed as emerging practices that require parents to have some sort of power and influence in the school and community context. The Parent Leadership Training Institute examined in this study seeks to provide parents with the confidence, knowledge, and leadership skills needed to

negotiate multiple roles across contexts as advocated for by both parent engagement experts, Epstein and Mapp.

Dual Capacity-Building Framework

The second framework that informs the theoretical background for this research study is the Dual Capacity-Building Framework developed by Karen Mapp in 2012 in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Education. The framework seeks to support effective communication between schools and families, and it advocates for both teacher and parent capacity-building training. Capacity building is broken down into four components: capabilities, connections, confidence, and cognition (beliefs and values) (Mapp, 2012). It is recommended that capacity-building training for school and program staff should seek to develop professionals who can honor and recognize families' funds of knowledge, connect family engagement to student learning, and establish school cultures that are welcoming and inviting for parents. In addition, it is recommended that capacity-building training for parents and families seek to develop family members who can negotiate multiple roles such as supporters, encouragers, monitors, and advocates for improved learning opportunities and safe environments for children. Capacity building for families includes developing the skills, knowledge, and confidence needed to negotiate multiple roles (supporters, encouragers, monitors, models, decision makers, advocates, collaborators) and participate in effective family engagement. Parents are expected to be able to take on multiple roles, and seven have been identified in this framework: (1) supporters of their children's learning and development; (2) encouragers of children so that children develop an achievement identity or positive self-image; (3) monitors of their children's time, behavior, boundaries, and resources; (4) models of lifelong learning; (5) advocates for improved learning opportunities for all children, not just their own; (6) decision-makers and choosers of educational

options for their children; and (7) collaborators with school staff and community members on issues of school reform and community empowerment (Mapp, 2012).

These seven roles allow parents to take on multiple aspects of education and support their children across contexts. In the school and community settings, parents will have the confidence and skills needed to serve as equal partners in their children's education, serve as advocates for their families and other families, and collaborate on school and community improvement efforts. The Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships builds on the work of Higgins' (2012) capacity-building framework from the business sector. Mapp breaks capacity building for families into four components, the "4 C's." The first component is *capabilities*, which speaks to the need of families to access knowledge regarding student learning and the inner workings of the education system in their communities. Parents are to develop advocacy skills so they can provide education support at the district and state level. The second component is connections. Families need access to social capital through cross-cultural networks built on trust and respect for differences. Networks may include various stakeholders such as parent-teacher relationships, parent-parent relationships, and connections with community organizations and advocacy groups. The third component is confidence. Families need a sense of comfort and self-efficacy related to engaging in parent engagement activities and working across lines of cultural difference. The fourth component of capacity building is cognition. Parents must view themselves as partners in their children's education and construct roles that support their children's learning and development as well as quality services for all children in their community (Mapp, 2012).

The goals and conditions to establish effective capacity building programs that support parent empowerment and effective partnerships are outlined in the dual capacity-building

framework. School and parent engagement program staff are expected to honor and recognize families' funds of knowledge, connect family engagement to student learning, and create welcoming, inviting cultures (Mapp, 2012). Relational trust also is addressed in the framework, with the goal being to establish it at the outset and allow opportunities to build relational trust throughout the parent engagement programs by incorporating activities that include facilitated engagement with school staff and/or community leaders (Mapp, 2012).

Summary

The theory and frameworks are important to determining whether, and to what extent, the community-sponsored parent leadership training contributed to parent empowerment and influenced parents' later actions and how the training experiences served as a benefit to parents personally and professionally. Parents in the New Orleans context are grappling with change in many aspects of their lives, and the theory of overlapping spheres of influence speaks to the complex nature of home, school, and community and all of the institutions' contributions to a child's learning and development. As parents seek to increase their involvement in ensuring their children's success, Epstein (1992, 2001) and Mapp (2012) provide the lens for examining the effectiveness of programs designed to help them.

CHAPTER 4

Methodology

This chapter describes the qualitative methodology of narrative research that was used to examine the contributions of the Parent Leadership Training Institute to parent empowerment and leadership. Narrative inquiry is discussed, as well as the process of gathering and analyzing data from parent narratives. This study was constructed with the understanding that people shape their daily lives by stories of who they are and who others are. People interpret their past in terms of these stories, with story being the portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Narrative inquiry—the study of experience as story—is first and foremost, a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 477).

Narrative Inquiry Research

Narrative inquiry aims to understand how people structure the flow of experience to make sense of events and actions in their lives; that is, it looks at how people contextualize experience and knowledge (Schram, 2006, p. 104). This methodology is appropriate for this qualitative study because it is difficult to separate experience and narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000); consequently, narrative inquiry provides a great platform to understand the role that a community organization's parent leadership training programs play in building parents' leadership capacity.

By listening to training participant stories, the goal is to write narratives of what it means to seek greater involvement in New Orleans schools and community as a parent in a school

reform landscape. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) assert that narrative inquirers are not scribes but storytellers. The narrative inquirer is not just listening, recording, and fostering participant stories. The stories of the participants merge with the researchers' experiences and analysis. Narrative and story in educational inquiry generate a somewhat new agenda of theory-practice relations (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). One part of the agenda is to let experience and time work their way into inquiry. The authors state that story, being inherently temporal, requires this. For example, by listening to parents' stories of how the training increased their confidence and comfort level with school staff and community leaders after participating in the Parent Leadership Training Institute, the reader is able to understand how parent empowerment and leadership identity is developed. The unlimited possibilities of community transformation through community training start to unfold. Narrative inquiry as a qualitative method allows the researcher to better understand human phenomena more fully—how and why people develop, act or display certain attitudes and behaviors. It is imperative that the researcher be able to observe the participants' actions within the contexts of how those actions are manifested in their everyday lives. Qualitative research allows the researcher to engage more intimately with participants through face-to-face, open-ended interviewing and dialoguing (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Parents' stories, which are referred to as narratives in this study, were key to understanding the potential benefits of participation in the Parent Leadership Training Institute for parents both personally and professionally. Parents' relationships and connections with their families and other stakeholders in a city struggling to recover post-Katrina were interwoven in the parent narratives.

The questions in the Interview Guide (Appendix B) served as the compass for interviewing the parents. The questions revolved around the following themes: background information of the participant; parents' perception of involvement in children's education; child's home environment and parent's experiences of involvement in the education of children. Other themes include the

nature of interaction between parent and the school of his or her children, the nature and channels of communication and challenges. The researcher used follow-up questions to clarify the participants' positions on issues raised and made it known to the participants that there is no wrong answer to the questions.

Program of Study: Greater Urban League of New Orleans PRIDE Leadership Academy

The intermediary organization being examined is the Urban League of Greater New Orleans. The organization offers a Parent Leadership Training Institute in the city of New Orleans. The parent training operates through the Greater Urban League of New Orleans Parent Information Center, which is centrally located in the city and easily accessible by public transportation. The parent group is called PRIDE, **P**arents **R**eady to be **I**nvolved to **D**eliver **E**xcellence. The majority of parents are recruited by parent leaders who have participated in the training, family members who heard about the program, or by parents participating in the annual education fair, which showcases schools and other organizations that provide services to children and families.

PLTI Curriculum

The PRIDE Leadership Academy hosts a series of workshops for parents. During the eight-week training sessions, academy leaders strive to increase parents' awareness of the educational landscape, civic engagement, and leadership roles and opportunities (Urban League of Louisiana website). The parents meet twice a week for the eight weeks, and upon completion of the training, parents develop and execute an education-related project of their choice with the assistance of community partners and the Parent Information Center support staff. After the eight weeks, the project development phase begins and typically lasts another eight weeks. Parents receive more intense support to ensure their projects are fully developed and ready for implementation, and some parents receive mini-grants to jumpstart their projects, as applicable.

The training sessions begin with topics such as “How a community cares for its children” and “Parents as Change Agents.” Guiding questions are posed to the group such as, “How do our own experiences in family life influence our notion of the right to be a parent leader?” The goal is to help parents perceive of themselves as change agents and understand obstacles to leadership. Other sessions discuss how to identify a problem and work towards a solution using intentional language to frame and express a point of view or take a stance on an issue. Parents also receive training on maximizing community resources and understanding school reform. Parents develop a better understanding of how the local education system works with attention on budgets, policy, education services/supports, communication, and, parents’ rights. In regards to communication, there is a session titled, “The Power of the Media and How to Use It.” The session covers different forms of media, how they work, and how to access them. Parents have an opportunity to expand their knowledge of social media and traditional forms of media as they prepare to serve as messengers for children. The training also covers family structure and child development. Parents meet twice a week (2.5 hours a session for a total of five hours a week) for eight weeks, which is a total of 40 hours, then parents take a two-week break and meet for eight additional weeks to develop education projects and implementation plans, which is an additional 40 hours of training and collaboration. To remove barriers and ensure training participation, the Urban League provides round-trip transportation for parents who need it, childcare for children (3-16 years old), refreshments, and a small stipend for completing the program. Once the parent leaders have completed the Parent Leadership Institute and developed their projects, they may continue to stay involved through the monthly parent networking meetings. The monthly networking meetings do not offer structured childcare as experienced during the Parent

Leadership Institute meeting sessions, but children are allowed to attend the meetings with their parents.

The PRIDE Leadership Academy has been in existence since 2011. Women, men, parents, and grandparents have applied and participated in the Parent Leadership Training Institute and expanded their knowledge of charter school operations and best practices in child development and school improvement. Fifty parents have completed the Parent Leadership Training Institute to date; therefore, the parents in this study represent one-half of the parents who have participated in the Urban League of Greater New Orleans Parent Leadership Training Institute.

Schedule and Venue of the Interview

In scheduling interviews with parent leaders, the Community Outreach Coordinator of the Urban League of Greater New Orleans was enlisted to help with recruitment efforts. Recruitment materials were emailed to parent leaders who are a part of the organization's Listserv. Parent leaders who were eligible and interested sent a response email directly to the researcher. In order to be eligible, parents needed to have participated and completed the Parent Leadership Training Institute through the Greater Urban League of New Orleans as part of the 2012, 2013, or 2014 cohort. Interviews took place during the summers of 2015 and 2016. Parent leaders were emailed the consent form ahead of time to review, and the consent forms were signed on site at the time of the interview. Parents received a verbal explanation of the nature of the study and participants' rights. Twenty-five parent leaders consented to participate in this research study. Interviews were conducted at one of three public locations that were convenient for parents: a coffee house, a library conference room, and the Urban League of Greater New Orleans Parent Information Center. Parents had participated in meetings at the Parent Information Center and the library

during participation in the PLTI. The coffee house was selected to provide parents with an alternate setting that had not been used previously to convene parents for training sessions. The coffee shop also had extended hours, making it possible to interview parents in the early morning, midday, or late in the evening, whenever it was most convenient for them.

Participants

All 25 of the parent leaders who participated in this study were African American. Twenty-three were female, and two were male. All of the parent leaders were natives of New Orleans. Two of the 25 parent leaders did not have school-aged children but were grandparents serving as the primary guardian of their grandchildren. Four of the 25 parents shared that they received special education services as a child and currently have at least one child that is also receiving or being referred for special education services. Two of the parent leaders had served as classroom teachers in New Orleans. One parent leader served in a support role at a charter school before becoming a parent leader. Seven parents shared during their interview that they were single parents who struggled to make ends meet in New Orleans, especially post-Katrina. Rising housing costs (rent payments) post-Katrina were mentioned a number of times during the interviews with parent leaders, as they shared their lived experiences raising children in the city. A decrease in family support to assist with parenting responsibilities post-Katrina also was mentioned in several parent narratives. This information isn't directly related to the research questions but provides important background information regarding potential barriers to parent engagement in education post-Katrina. Parents' work responsibilities or lack of childcare could potentially limit parents' involvement in schools and communities. The chart below was created to provide context regarding the charter networks in which parents enrolled their children. The

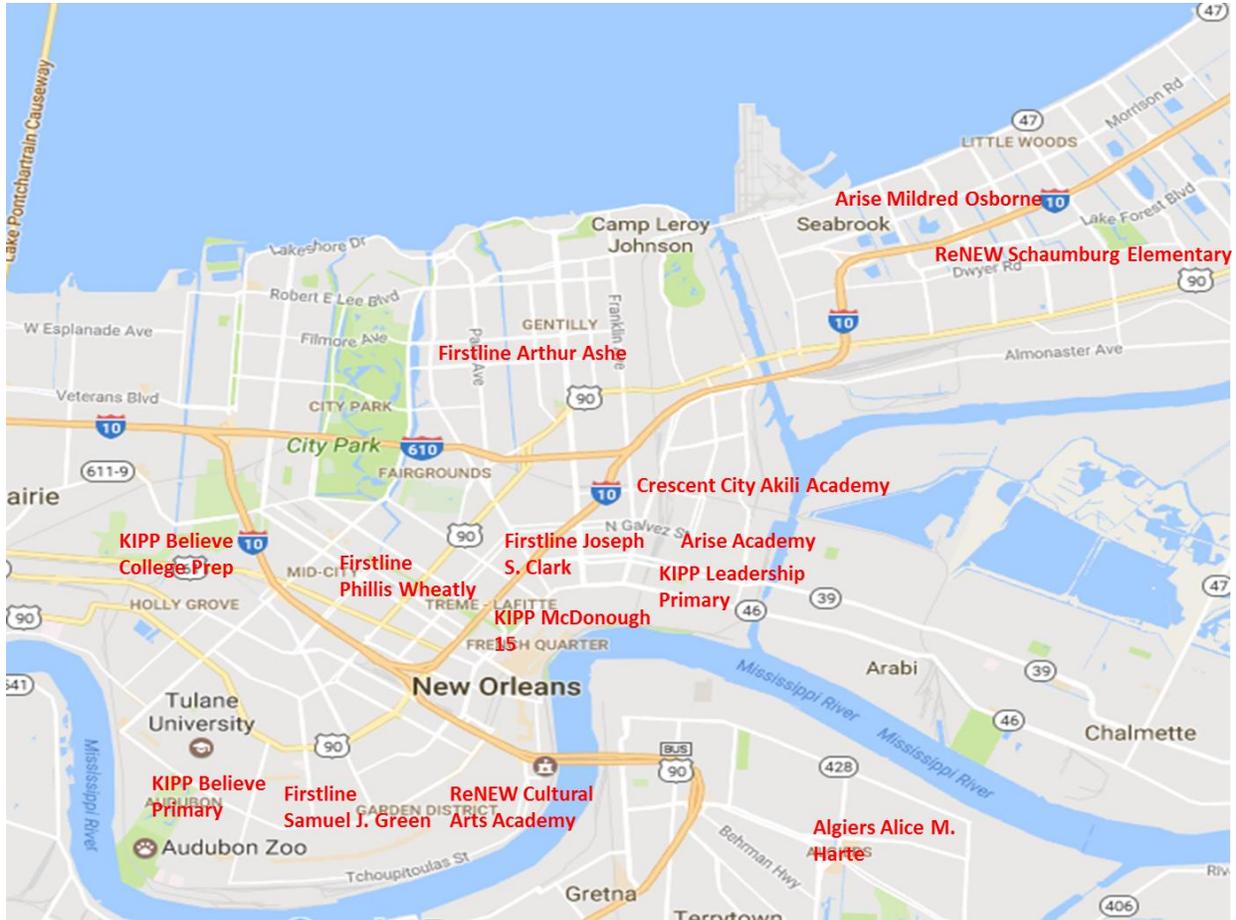
particular schools within the charter network are not identified to protect the identity of research participants. In addition, pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the parent leaders.

Figure 1: Participants' Demographic Information

Greater Urban League of New Orleans Parent Leaders Study Participants	Ethnicity/ Birthplace	Gender	Employment Status	# of Children	Charter Network Children Attended
Brittany	AA/New Orleans	Female	Unemployed	2	KIPP Believe Primary
Nia	AA/New Orleans	Female	Employed	2	Algiers Charter Alice Harte
Malika	AA/New Orleans	Female	Employed	1	KIPP McDonough 15 Primary
Portia	AA/New Orleans	Female	n/a	2	Firstline Charter Network Samuel Green
Andrea	AA/New Orleans	Female	Employed	2	ARISE Academy K-8
Helena	AA/New Orleans	Female	Employed	3	Renew Cultural Arts Academy, K-7
Sheena	AA/New Orleans	Female	n/a	n/a	KIPP Leadership Primary
Marva	AA/New Orleans	Female	Unemployed	1	Crescent City Akili Academy
Jennifer	AA/New Orleans	Female	Employed	4	ReNew Shaumburg Elementary
Catina	AA/New Orleans	Female	Employed	1	Crescent City Akili Academy
Rachel	AA/New Orleans	Female	n/a	3	Choice Foundation, School not available
Tanzania	AA/New Orleans	Female	Employed	4	Firstline Phyllis Wheatley, Firstline Joseph S. Clark HS
Terrance	AA/New Orleans	Male	Employed	n/a	Firstline, Authur Ashe
Cameilla	AA/New Orleans	Female	Unemployed	n/a	KIPP Leadership Primary, Leadership Academy,
Dawn	AA/ New Orleans	Female	Employed	4	KIPP Believe Primary K-4, KIPP Believe College Prep 5-8
Marianne	AA/New Orleans	Female	Employed	1	Crescent City, Akili Academy
Laurel	AA/New Orleans	Female	Employed	3	Choice Foundation, school not available
Wanda	AA/New Orleans	Female	Employed	2	Crescent City, school not available
Tiffany	AA/New Orleans	Female	Employed	3	ReNEW Charter School Network, school not available
Olivia	AA/New Orleans	Female	Unemployed	n/a	Firstline Charter Network
Katy	AA/New Orleans	Female	Employed	1	Crescent City, Akili Academy
Shauna	AA/New Orleans	Female	Employed	2	Choice Foundation, school not available
Angela	AA/New Orleans	Female	Unemployed	2	Algiers Charter, Alice Harte PreK-8
Elise	AA/New Orleans	Female	n/a	3	KIPP Believe Primary K-4, KIPP Believe College Prep 5-8
Joseph	AA/New Orleans	Male	Retired	3	Algiers Charter Network, Alice Harte, PreK-8

Seven charter school networks are represented in this study. The chart below indicates the location of the 15 schools that the parents' children attended. The charter schools in which parents' children attended are located across the city of New Orleans.

Figure 2: Location of Charter Schools in which children attended and parents' sought involvement.



Data Collection

Parents are the primary source of data for this study, although parents also have provided some archival data regarding their education projects. Interviews operate for qualitative researchers like night-vision goggles. They not only permit the interviewer to see what ordinarily is not in view but also to examine what is often looked at but seldom seen (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 1). In addition, interviews enable the researcher to enter into the participants' perspectives and gather their stories (Patton, 2002, p. 341).

IRB approval was obtained for the research and consistent with the approval, consent forms were obtained from parents prior to their participation in the interviews. (See Appendix A for consent form.) In-depth interviews were conducted with 25 parent leaders, and each interview lasted between 55 to 65 minutes. A semi-structured interview format was used instead of closed or leading questions. The questions were broad and designed to encourage participants to share their own personal experiences and views (Creswell, 2003; DeCuir-Gunby, 2007). (See Appendix B for interview questions.) Participants took control over these discussions and shared their successes and challenges with the education system in the New Orleans school reform context. Followup (probing) questions were used to maintain focus on the topic and explore more deeply pertinent themes as they arose. The interviews were recorded using a digital tape recorder with an audio tape recorder available as a backup in case of technical difficulties. The interview questions are consistent with the training participant interview questions used in the National Parent Leadership Training Evaluation.

Data Analysis

Data analysis moves from raw data (interviews) to evidence-based interpretation. It entails classifying, comparing, weighing, and combining materials to extract the meaning and

implications and reveal patterns or to stitch together descriptions of events into a coherent narrative (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Through this process, the researcher constructs informed, vivid, and nuanced reports that reflect what the interviewees said, opinions and policies expressed in the archival data that respond to the questions the researcher seeks to answer (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). After each interview was conducted for the dissertation study, a thematic summary of the interview was created, the participant was described, and themes and questions that emerged during the interview were identified. Themes that emerged from the interviews were parents' relationships with others and the ways in which the PLTI contributed to parents' capacity building. This strategy helped develop a better understanding of each participant in light of the research questions and the participants' training reflections. Interviews were transcribed verbatim. The following steps were used to analyze the data: a) listening to and transcribing recorded audio, b) coding and sorting the data, and c) creating a visual analytical scheme. Data was analyzed related to the following:

- Parents' support for children
- Parents' and teachers' communication and relationships
- Parents' support and collaboration with other parents
- Parents' engagement with community members and community leaders
- Parents' actions after the training and parents' leadership capacities.
- Parents' feelings surrounding limited parent engagement
- Ways in which the PLTI benefited parents personally and professionally.

When transcribing the data, the tape recordings were replayed several times as the researcher listened and typed the parent narratives on paper word for word. This approach was beneficial in that it allowed for repeated exposure to the parent stories of their experiences in the school

reform landscape and greater interpretation of the data. The transcribed data was read several times, and the next step was to manually code the data. Themes became apparent relative to the research questions and other issues that emerged during the interview. After coding and sorting concepts and themes, the researcher visually represented the data. The goal was to establish links between the themes and concepts that emerged during sorting and coding. This process helped to deepen the analysis. The theoretical framework also was considered, and Epstein's Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence was useful in understanding the complex nature of social institutions (e.g., family, schools, and community) as the data was being analyzed. The data was stored in a secure location—in a locked cabinet at home accessible only to the researcher and in her password-protected personal computer.

Parents' experiences were at the center of this analysis. A grounded theory approach was used, and theoretical explanations were developed only after all of the data was analyzed. Strauss and Corbin (1990) define grounded theory as a theory that is derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. The theory is discovered, developed, and verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to the phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analysis, and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In addition, Strauss and Corbin share that the researcher does not begin with theory, then prove it. Rather, the researcher begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area—which in this case is parent leadership—is allowed to emerge. Eight key findings emerged from the analysis of parent narratives and consideration of Epstein's Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence in regard to the impact of the PLTI. These findings are presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

Research Findings

This chapter presents the research findings from this study's two main research questions. The first question is, "In what ways, and to what extent, does the Parent Leadership Training Institute build the skills, abilities, and leadership of parents to effectively engage in schools and communities?" Secondly, this study seeks to understand, "How does participation in the Parent Leadership Training Institute impact parents both personally and professionally?"

The community-sponsored Parent Leadership Training Institute provided a safe space for parents to learn and grow as leaders. The parent narratives reveal a great deal about the challenges to parent engagement in the school context, as well as how the leadership training empowered parents to utilize their skills, abilities, and interests to expand their engagement and support of their children and that of other children and families.

Finding 1: The Parent Leadership Training Institute Increased Parents' Confidence to Initiate Involvement in Schools and the Community

The first set of excerpts from parent narratives supports this study's first finding and provides valuable information regarding the impact of the Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI). The Parent Leadership Training Institute was found to have contributed to parents' increased confidence to initiate involvement with school staff to support school improvement efforts. Parents expressed an interest in serving on school improvement teams, mentoring and tutoring students, and helping to connect parents and teachers on behalf of students. Parents' requests for increased involvement were made either face to face or through email communication. Although in many cases, school and charter network staff were not responsive to parents' requests to contribute to school improvement efforts and the establishment of a

parent-teacher organization, parents were able to communicate their concerns. The following excerpts support this finding:

The school staff say they want parents to be involved but everything is on their terms. Teachers send tips for reading a book and send invites to afternoon celebrations. That's when parents can come into an open space for student rewards and chants, but you don't get a chance to see what your child is learning in the charter school classroom. Friday celebrations are fine but I joined the Parent Leadership Training Institute to learn about the education system and connect with others who might know more about charter schools and curriculum and parent's rights to visit schools. If my child is welcome I should be welcome. As the training program was coming to an end I reached out to the school leader and shared that I wanted to get involved and be a part of the school improving and help the staff and parents get to know one another. I was told that a parent-teacher initiative was being planned and I was placed on a list to be a part of that work, however the initiative was not launched. It has been over a year now.

–Marva, Parent Leader

Marva's narrative reveals that the school failed to follow up and show mutual interest in connecting parents and teachers and working together on school improvement efforts. But more importantly, it shows the parent's desire to be involved and the role of the PLTI.

Andrea also felt the PLTI was beneficial and allowed her to connect with other parents and express her concerns with the education system. The narrative below also speaks to her disappointment with the charter schools staff's lack of interest in working with the parents of the children they serve. Andrea shared:

We don't have a PTO at the charter school my kids attend. I don't know a lot of the parents and teachers. But the Parent Leadership Training Institute gave us a safe space to open up and talk about the things that matter to us. Growing up even if we had a problem with the teacher our parents knew the teachers because they lived in our community. Everything was eventually worked out either in school or in the aisle of the grocery store, you know like when we ran into the teacher at the store on the weekend. Things were easily addressed back then. Back then, parents just showed love and did the best they could providing the basics but it still hurts because we all agreed that we could have transformed New Orleans ourselves and made sure locals were included if we had a state of the art education growing up and parents were in a better position to help us to access the resources we needed. We can't change the past but as parent leaders we can speak up to make sure parents are not overlooked and that parents know where to go to learn more about the resources that are available to them and their children. We can't rely on the school to reach out to us. Sometimes I feel as though the schools don't really want to connect. I just don't think everybody has bought into the whole idea of parents and teacher working together. Parents are doing their best and so are teachers, but I feel our kids would greatly benefit from parents, teachers, and community members working together. Our kids need to know that we are watching and supporting them PreK-12.

I used to ask teachers to reach out to me if they needed my help at the school but it wasn't happening. Now, I send a note or email asking if there are opportunities for parents to serve on committees, volunteer or provide input. I have been asked to volunteer twice and I have been asked to complete a survey once. I believe the email communication has helped the school staff to see that I am a parent that is professional

and truly want to increase my involvement. I wish there were more opportunities to get involved but it will take time to build relationships and trust with the school staff. I feel like the Parent Leadership Training has prepared me to work as a change agent in the school setting, participate in community forums and trainings, and collaborate with parent groups like PRIDE to continue our learning and envision an education system that support all learners and welcome all families.

–Andrea, NOLA Parent Leader

Andrea acknowledges that establishing trusting relationships with charter school staff may take some time; however, she expressed that the PLTI prepared her to work as a change agent in schools and the community.

Helena’s narrative, below, indicates her desire to be involved despite the resistance of school staff that has been a barrier to furthering her engagement in schools. She wasn’t told directly that parent involvement in school improvement efforts was not necessary; however, she was told by a school staff member to share with other parents that the school is already improving. Helena shared:

Someday, the charter teachers and leaders will see that limiting parent participation in schools was not what was best for our kids. We knew the things that was working but no one bothered to ask when the new system was set up. What is the harm in working with parents? What are they afraid of? I don’t understand it. At least we have the Urban League working to educate parents and help us handle conflict in a way that will really bring about change. I am more confident since I became a parent leader and I am more concerned about the school ratings overall and not just my child’s grades. I have shared with the school that I want to get more involved and help more students experience

success whether it's motivating students or reading to them but I was told that the school is improving it will just take some time to see the improvements reflected in the ratings. I was told by another teacher that the staff is working hard and that the best way I can help is by making sure more parents knew that the teachers are making a difference.

Every charter school should have to have a parent teacher organization. They can be against teacher unions but they can't be against parents and teachers working together. Being a part of the parent leadership training and PRIDE has helped me cope with the resistance, because other parents have similar stories of school staff limiting parent participation while claiming to have moved to New Orleans to improve the education system. Parents aren't seen as a part of the improvements so what does that make us?

–Helena, NOLA Parent Leader

A common concern among school staff is low parental involvement. However, the narratives of Marva, Andrea, and Helena run counter to that concern. Marva was eager to get involved to improve student achievement and school climate; however, the school leader failed to follow up with her and establish a parent engagement system. Andrea had previously delivered handwritten notes and sent emails offering to help in any way she could, but teachers did not take her up on her offer of service. She has concluded that school staff are not interested in connecting with parents or don't see the value in doing so. When Helena provided school staff with specific ways she could support student achievement (e.g., reading to or with students, mentoring students) she was told to communicate to other parents that student achievement is already on the rise. Although school staff ignored parents' volunteerism offers and requests to get involved, as evidenced in the cases above, it still can be concluded that the Urban League

Parent Leadership Training was beneficial in building parents' confidence to offer support and effectively communicate with school staff.

Finding 2: The Parent Leadership Training Institute Contributed to Improved Communication with School Staff

The second finding is that the Parent Leadership Training Institute effectively prepared parents to express concerns in a non-threatening manner regarding grades and progress tracking, student engagement, and discipline concerns. The problem-solving skits, best practices in education training sessions, and assistance of support staff affiliated with the Urban League of Greater New Orleans contributed to parent's concerns being addressed. The three excerpts below demonstrate that parents were satisfied with the outcome when they attempted to address a concern (e.g., grading, student engagement, discipline). All three parents expressed that their parent leadership training experiences influenced their decision and approach to communicating concerns and problem solving with school staff.

Nia was able to address a concern with a school's grading and progress monitoring practices in a meeting with a school leader. She felt her problem-solving meeting led to improved practices not just for her children but for all of the children in the school community. Nia explained her concern and how it was addressed in the narrative excerpt below:

I am able to be more to my children since going through the Parent Leadership Training Institute. The skits were funny when we role played how to handle issues effectively but I was really learning how to talk to people in the schools and community. I'm still a mom but I'm also a coach and community worker and activist. The one change I am most proud of has to do with grading. My son had a B at progress report time but when he got his report card he had a failing grade. I was like, 'What in the world happened?' But I

knew not to say it like that! I asked to speak with an administrator and I was told to come back a few hours when someone would be free to speak to me. I shared that my child's grade had dropped significantly since the progress report although I had been tracking his progress pretty regularly on the online tracking system. As it turns out, the teacher put in a lot of grades at the end of the quarter that held a lot of weight.

I listened thoroughly to understand the school's response to grading and the information the teacher had provided to the school leader regarding my son's decline in participation at the end of the quarter. I thought about the best way to respond so that the school leader would see that this is a real problem not just for my child but for all of the students. I simply asked, 'Where is the opportunity for improvement?' If several grades are put in right before the deadline then children don't have time to show improvement. From the look on the school leader's face I can tell my comment made sense to him. He promised to speak with the staff about regularly putting in grades and possibly make-up work or extra credit assignments. This situation never happened again and I saw an increase in grades being inputted for both of my kids. I believe the school leader kept his promise and students throughout the school benefited. I feel really good about that. I wouldn't have done this before.

–Nia, NOLA Parent Leader

Nia shared that the PLTI gave her the confidence to address concerns with school staff and that she was effective in her ability to do so.

Whereas Nia initiated the meeting with the school leader, another parent, Brittany, responded to a teacher's concern with her son's lack of engagement in literacy lessons.

Brittany's narrative, below, also indicates that the PLTI equipped her to effectively communicate

and address concerns with school staff. Brittany's shares how her relationship with her child's teacher was enhanced after a classroom observation:

The Parent Leadership Training Institute prepared me to make request on behalf of my children. For example, my youngest son wasn't adjusting very well and fitting in with the school culture. Well that's how the teacher described it. I asked if I could observe and I was allowed to observe for one hour after sending the teacher an email request. At the start of the lesson the teacher shared that the students were to listen as she read a story aloud and then the kids were to write about their favorite character using details from the story. My son sat on the carpet with the other kids for story time and he complied just like the other children. However, my son along with the other kids started getting the wiggles and moving around after about 30 minutes or so. The same kids were being called on to answer the questions to the story and the other kids were checking out. I was in the back of the room so I couldn't give my son eye contact to get him to straighten up. Most of the kids responded to redirection but the others began to play with things or each other or look away from the teacher. The teacher continued the reading even though she was losing a lot of kids. She was determined to make it to the end of the book. Many of the kids struggled to sit for an hour long read aloud. Still, I was thinking if we chose to leave the school for good I wanted it to be on our own terms, not because we were coached out which is what normally happens to families in charter schools.

The observation helped me realize what was different about reading at school and reading at home. I read with my son all the time but never for that long because I know he wouldn't keep still. The school expects him to sit for longer periods of time and I decided that I needed to start preparing him for that or get prepared for more calls like

this one. When we got home I spoke to him about listening to the teacher and I also extended the amount of time I read with him. He was only six at the time but I had to do it.

When the teacher asked me what I thought about the observation, I was able to share my thoughts with confidence. We had discussed best practices in classrooms and child development at Parent Leadership Institute sessions so I focused on how my child was responding to the instruction rather than saying something that would offend the teacher. She was only in her second year of teaching. The teacher and I agreed that during the observation my child was not the only child that was having difficulty staying engaged in the story. I shared my experiences reading with my son and how I sort of gauge when to stop or speed up the reading and start an art or writing activity to go along with the story. The teacher and I touched base with one another regarding my son at least once a month. The teacher's feedback that school year was mostly positive. She seemed more willing to help my child adjust to her expectations after the observation and discussion we had. I knew more about the challenges he was having after the observation and how I should help him.

I shared with the PRIDE group what happened with my son and how I responded and the other parents were proud of how I handled it and I was proud of myself. I wouldn't have asked to observe my child before. I feel I am in a better position to support my child and help other parents too.

–Brittany, NOLA Parent Leader

Brittany expressed that the PLTI increased her confidence, allowing her to request to observe and learn more about the instruction that occurs in her child's classroom. The PLTI gave her the

knowledge of schooling and the confidence needed to engage in collaborative problem solving with the teacher to support her son's learning and social development in collaboration with her child's teacher.

Another parent shared that participation in the Parent Leadership Training Institute compelled her to speak out against the mistreatment of her first-grade son on a field trip in which she served as a chaperon. Malika shared:

My son kept asking me to sign up so I agreed to chaperon a field trip. More than one first-grade class was going on the field trip so there was several members of the school staff and a few parents chaperoning the students. I wasn't just watching out for my son; I was keeping an eye on the kids in my area. When the bus pulled up to the site all the kids on the bus got excited and they were jumping up and screaming real loud on the bus. We had trouble lining up the kids once we got them off the bus. Some kids were shoving one another and jumping out of the line we were forming.

When I looked up from trying to get kids in a straight line, a teacher that was not my child's teacher had grabbed my son. She was pulling his arm so hard that he squealed to the ground. That made the teacher tug at my son more so. I just left the other kids and ran to my son's side. I couldn't speak but when I kneeled down she let go of him. My son's teacher spoke to her but the teacher that grabbed him never apologized or tried to explain what happened leading up to the incident. I tried not to let my disappointment show but I definitely wasn't my normal happy self for the rest of the field trip and my son was near me the entire trip instead of playing and learning with the other kids. It took three contacts with the school leader before the teacher was forced to apologize and admit that her actions were not justified.

A member of the Urban League staff came to the last meeting with me to make sure the situation was addressed and that my child wouldn't be treated differently because I spoke up. I worried about that; I didn't want anyone to make him uncomfortable at school. I knew then I made the right decision joining the Parent Leadership Training. It gave me the confidence to speak out against wrong-doing and control my anger. Once you get all loud and outrageous you lose and they win because they don't have to deal with the situation. I have recruited two other parents to PRIDE to get training since I completed the Parent Leadership Training Program.

–Malika, NOLA Parent Leader

Finding 3: The Parent Leadership Training Institute Contributed to Parents Serving as Knowledge Experts as they Utilized Knowledge from the PLTI

The third finding from the parent narratives is that parents who participated in the Parent Leadership Training Institute were found to have the ability to serve as knowledge experts in specialized areas such as navigating the special education process, preparing for the college entrance process, and understanding school funding or how resources are distributed. All of these areas are very complex and require specialized knowledge. Parents from a variety of backgrounds would probably have questions and benefit from advice provided by trained knowledgeable parents. As parents complete the training and transfer knowledge into their daily lives, they have the potential to emerge as specialists or advocates, serving as a knowledge source for other parents. The following three excerpts support this finding.

The first narrative shares Dawn's struggles with advocating for quality staff and services for her son with special needs. The school seems to have limited staff and low expectations for special needs students. Dawn shared how the PLTI increased her knowledge and ability to serve

as a supporter and advocate for her son, support three other children she is raising, and support other parents. Dawn openly shared her experience:

I learned how the Individualized Education Process (IEP) is supposed to go through the Parent Leadership Training program. I wasn't sure how to read the IEP and I didn't feel comfortable in the IEP meetings. After participating in the training I was actually excited about the IEP meeting for the upcoming school year because I felt better prepared. I emailed the special education coordinator to find out when it would be scheduled and told her to make sure I received the documents in enough time to read them thoroughly. I even asked if I could have someone to join me.

A community member joined me that I met through the Urban League programs. The interventions for my son wasn't being consistently implemented due to a shortage of support staff and the school was saying I should be proud that my son was actually at the same reading level as the other kids at his grade level. That is fine but I still wanted my child to receive the interventions and services because as he progress in the grades he could fall behind as the work get harder. The community member helped the school understand my point of view and asked questions to get the school to at least create a plan of action for providing my child with the services he is entitled to before the quarter ended. I reminded them that when we were applying to the school they promised he would get the very best services. The meeting was a success but I think the staff felt like I was overstepping my bounds. I was just advocating for my child, they would do the same for their special needs child.

When I would ask the teachers questions I wouldn't get an answer right away. They had to check with the school leaders and get back to me. The staff acted more

business-like and less personable. It's like I was hassling them to actually provide special education services. I had to encourage my child and encourage myself that year. I kept my child enrolled the next year in hopes that things would improve and special education staffing would get better. But the truth is this particular charter school network just didn't want to invest resources to provide quality services to special education students like my son so I became a problem to them.

I changed to a school that existed before the hurricane with highly trained staff and he (son with special needs) is getting what he needs. I have sacrificed so much to support my son and the parent training gave me more confidence and endurance because I will have to advocate for him throughout his life. People are always asking me if I'm okay and how my son is doing. I bring him with me to community meetings, he is use to it. When I am speaking at community meetings I am advocating for all special education students in New Orleans not just my own. I get questions all the time about the IEP process, some parents are worried about attending meetings at the school and they want to know what will probably happen and what rights they have and what they can ask for to help their children learn better.

–Dawn, NOLA Parent Leader

Dawn's passion for her son with special needs and compassion for other families navigating special education in the school reform landscape was evident. Although she found a school that welcomed her input and passion for supporting her son, she still seemed hurt from the alienation she experienced at her child's former school. Dawn has sustained her involvement with the Urban League parent engagement programs, and she also participates in other parent groups for

children with special needs. She has the potential to emerge as a knowledge expert in navigating the special education process.

Joseph is a retired teacher raising his grandchild. He says that the Parent Leadership Training Institute enhanced his knowledge of school funding and operations. He has been compelled to attend charter network board meetings and keep other parents abreast of how funds are being spent. He feels that parent involvement has been limited to fundraising activities, and he would like to raise parents' awareness of how school funds are being used and topics that are being discussed and voted on at the board meetings. Having worked in public education for decades, Joseph joined the PLTI with a considerable amount of knowledge of schools. Joseph's narrative reveals how the PLTI increased his knowledge of schooling and engagement in education. Joseph shared:

I served as a teacher in New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina. I'm retired now and raising my grandson. What was most beneficial to me was the session discussions about school funding and resources. I knew all there was to know about teaching but I started attending the board meetings and I was able to follow the money better and understand where the money was going under the new system. The charter network near my home has a parent group so I started attending and sharing what was being discussed and voted on in the board meetings. Some parents were interested and others were just interested in fundraising activities. A school leader that attends the meetings suggested that I stop sharing the information from the board meetings at the parents meeting because it changes the mood of the meetings. Parents can do, and should be doing more than just fundraising. What the group decided was that I would share out on the board meetings and parent action for 15 minutes at the end of the meeting. The meetings have

gone really well and parents stay for my part of the share out. The Urban League Parent Leadership Training Program got me up to speed on the charter system and prepared me to serve as a liaison between parents and the charter network leaders that are making the decisions. I have a broader perspective and understand school operations enough to inform others when something big is recommended that parents need to take action on.

–Joseph, NOLA Parent Leader

Like Joseph, Tanzania also gained invaluable knowledge. She has children in the K-8 setting, as well as in high school. She has expressed that she has made some adjustments in her parenting style since participating in the training. Tanzania provided tremendous support to her son who was entering his senior year of high school and beginning the college entrance process. Her experience with this process and knowledge of resources in this area makes her an asset to other parents who may be approaching this process. Tanzania shares her experience supporting her son in the narrative below:

My kids tell me what is going on in school because I believe they feel I am going to find out anyway. I communicate with their teachers and yes they do call me when there is a problem or concern with one of them. My oldest son wants to be an engineer so we have been exploring the different types of engineering. I didn't realize there are different types of engineers so he is learning about what they do and figuring out which engineer program he wants to select based on his interest. He sees that his ACT and SAT scores has to be really good just to get in to any one of them so I believe he will take his studies and test prep more seriously. Learning about the cost of colleges was shocking, too; most of these colleges cost more than a new car per year and I remind him of that every time he ask for one. This summer we have searched colleges and scholarship requirements

and application deadlines and it doesn't seem as far out of reach. He just has to buckle down on his studies senior year if he is serious about going off to college and becoming an engineer.

I helped him find an organization close to home that he can do community service at because all the scholarships wanted to know if he had done some type of community service and helped others. I have taken many of the suggestions from the parent training to help him through this process, for example, making sure my child knows the guidance counselor, making sure he researched options for colleges and looked for opportunities to visit campuses at a low cost, and not waiting until the last minute to apply. I want him to be more responsible but he is still a kid so he had his mind on getting a job afterschool to pay for a phone, clothes, and taking trips with his friends. Now he sees he has to spend time getting college ready or he may not be going to college. Being an engineer and experiencing campus life means more to him than the phone and new clothes. He is beginning to see the bigger picture and set goals for himself. I'm helping him plan out his senior year, kind of serving as an accountability partner while supporting my other kids with homework and projects. I'm not perfect but I've made adjustments in how they spend their time, how we spend time as a family, and I'm always encouraging them to do things and watch shows that really make them think.

–Tanzania, NOLA Parent Leader

The above three excerpts from parent narratives demonstrate that parent leaders were able to utilize knowledge from training sessions to advocate for improved learning opportunities, provide specialized knowledge to other parents, and support their children's decision making and educational options. Parents were receptive to advice and educational updates from one of their

own, as demonstrated in the narratives provided by Dawn and Joseph. As Tanzania guides her son through the college entrance process, she has the potential to serve as a valuable resource to other parents and impact the lives of other adolescents in need of assistance and support in this area.

Finding 4: The PLTI Improved and Increased Parent-Child Communication

The fourth finding is related to parent-child communication. Analysis of parent leader narratives suggests that the Parent Leadership Training Institute was instrumental in enhancing parent-child communication concerning education-related issues (e.g., homework, support service, teacher-student relationships, curriculum, conflict resolution). The majority of the parent leaders (18 out of 25, or 72%) felt there was a change in their communication with their children after participating in the Parent Leadership Training Institute sponsored by the Urban League.

The following nine excerpts show how parent-child communication improved:

I used to talk to my son about school or should I say, TRY to talk to my son about school. This is how the conversation went in the car, 'How was school?' and he would say, 'It was fine.' I would say, 'Just fine?' and he would say, 'Yes.' I wouldn't get much further with him. But now I know what's going on so he can't pull that on me no more. I ask questions to find out what he was learning and I know his teacher and speech teacher so I ask him if he was pulled for services that day and if he worked on the computer or in small groups. I ask if he was a classroom helper and what color he was on at the end of the day on the behavior chart. We have a lot to talk about now because I know more about what should be happening as far as his education goes.

–Marianne, NOLA Parent Leader

Marianne's narrative reveals that the PLTI equipped her with knowledge regarding the nature of schooling that she utilized to engage in more effective education-related discussions with her son to monitor his progress in school.

Likewise, Laurel's increased knowledge of curriculum standards and schools' expectations for students prepared her to serve as a more effective supporter of learning. She has helped her children organize school assignments and projects. Below, Laurel shared the shifts in the contributions she has provided to her children to support their learning. These shifts have the potential to lead to practices that can benefit children throughout their lives. Laurel reports:

My relationship has changed with me and my children. They know I know about Louisiana State Standards and how challenging school is these days. They talk to me a lot more about problems they are having and I think it's because they know I'm in PRIDE and that I know how to fight to get what they need in order to be successful. We talk about what they are learning and put on the calendar when test and projects are coming up so we can get the supplies and work on things ahead of time. We talk about who they are friends with and my youngest one don't like to write so we talk about what the writing activity was about and I normally have to help him finish pulling his ideas together but he is smart, he's working hard and he knows I am there for him and he feels comfortable coming to me and sharing with me what he likes and dislikes about school.

– Laurel, NOLA Parent Leader

Another parent, Portia, shares a similar experience:

I used to have to hunt through my kids' backpack to figure out what was going on; they wouldn't talk to me about school too much even when I tried. But since I joined PRIDE

we talk about how they are feeling about the curriculum and we talk about what help they need to get good grades. They hand me things that was passed out at school because they know I get upset when I don't know what's going on. I work with my family to pick them up after school if they want to stay instead of saying 'no' because I have to work. We talk about problems with other kids and I know who gives the teacher problems because we talk about school a lot more now. I offer suggestions for staying out of trouble and I take them to the community meetings with me sometimes because I want them to see their 'mommy' fighting for them and other kids in the community. My kids are proud of how active I am and I think they feel more protected and supported.

–Portia, NOLA Parent Leader

The excerpts above indicate that parent leaders are providing their students with more accountable talk since participating in the Parent Leadership Training Institute. The accountable talk is not only geared towards the curriculum (level of rigor and how students are progressing), but parent leaders also are engaging in discussions with students regarding the student's social development and the school's culture and climate. Parents' increased knowledge about the nature of schooling—gathered through participation in the Parent Leadership Training Institute—has allowed the parents to probe students and serve as supporters, encouragers, and monitors of their students' educational experience.

The excerpts below also indicate an increase in parent-child communication regarding school concerns. Parent leaders have more knowledge of the curriculum and school expectations and have, in turn, decided to engage in greater communication with students to better understand how their children experience school. Following are some examples of parents serving as

supporters, encouragers, and monitors through increased parent-children communication with their children.

Me and my kids talk about school, pretty much the entire way home. Before PRIDE the radio was turned up on the ride home but now we talk about what they learned and how they feel about what they are learning. We talk about the teachers and the students and all the different subjects. I ask about the chapters they are reading and what topics they are on in math and whether they had music and what was for lunch. Through PRIDE I learned about the importance of writing. I want to make sure my children are building their vocabulary and I ask questions to check their understanding of different things. I never really made a big deal about their drawing and I skipped the illustrations but now we talk about what they are drawing and how that relates to the reading or how they are feeling about their progress. We slow down and talk about the illustrations and how it connects to what they are learning. They also tell me about problems they have with other kids or the teachers or with completing a task and I ask them how they tried to handle it before I jump in and offer suggestions. I just listen more now and know how to follow up to get my own progress report from my children. I'm still their mom but I'm an advocate too and I feel great about how we spend our time as a family and I am empowered by my work with my kids and other parent leaders.

–Wanda, NOLA Parent Leader

Wanda has a heightened consciousness regarding how children's leisure time is spent and is proud of the support she is providing to her children.

Jennifer also felt there has been a shift in her communication with her daughter, and she provided additional supports to her daughter after participating in the PLTI. Jennifer shared:

I feel more connected with my daughter that was really struggling to make good grades and stay out of trouble in school. All kinds of speakers came to the parent trainings to teach us things. I was so into the speaker that was talking about brain research and how kids learn and what adolescents might be struggling with. It made me have more patience with her and ask questions about how she is feeling and adjusting. She has papers everywhere in her room so we talked about getting organized and I brought this large calendar and we both put things on the calendar. If she want to go somewhere with her cousins we talk about it and talk about what things need to be completed before she can go hang out with them.

I am a lot more conscious of my reactions to things because I know she is watching and it's important for me to model how to solve problems effectively and deal with stress. I email her teachers at least once a month so we talk about what is going on in school more often. I feel that she takes more responsibility for her actions in school. Before it was never her fault now she is a lot more forthcoming about her part in things. I can't pick her friends and I make that perfectly clear but I tell her how important it is to surround herself with people who want to excel in school and go to college. I feel like I am getting through to her these days. She told me she needed a math tutor and I was able to find her one and her grades have gotten a lot better. She use to say that I favored my youngest son but she doesn't make comments like that anymore. I love all of my children and what to be able to support them. Parenting is hard work but I feel I have gotten better with talking to my kids and reaching them since I joined the PRIDE parent group.

–Jennifer, NOLA Parent Leader

Tiffany has seen an increase in communication with her children and has increased her knowledge of college and career standards and educational assessment targets in order to monitor her children's progress and support their learning and development. Below, Tiffany talks about how she holds her kids accountable for learning:

I talk with my kids more about what is going on in school because I know about what is going on in school. I know about individual growth targets and I reward my kids when they meet their reading and math goals. It is not about whether you got the right answer, we talk about how they got the right answer to a problem. I have them to explain themselves more because that is what Louisiana State Standards calls for. We go through the rubrics together to make sure they covered everything for their projects. I am more involved in their education and open to my children going away to college. My job is to make sure they are enjoying learning and getting the supports they need to be successful. They can go to whatever college they want when that time comes, I will be able to guide them in that process. I didn't have anybody to help me.

–Tiffany, NOLA Parent Leader

Catina also reported an increase in parent-child communication. She even supports her daughter with communicating with her teacher to request clarity on an assignment. Catina explains the parent leadership trainings influence on her relationship with her daughter:

I feel like I know what questions to ask my daughter. 'What did you read about today?' 'Did you read it alone or with a partner?' 'Did you learn any new words today?' 'Did annotating the reading help you understand it better?' 'Did you volunteer to do a math talk?' You know, questions like that. I'm not a teacher but I am an informed parent thanks to the Parent Leadership Training. I talk to my daughter about school and if she

has a question about an assignment we craft the question together. She has shown more interest in science so we are both looking for science camps for her to attend before school starts. We have always talked but we have a lot more conversations about what she is learning in school since I started participating in the parent leadership program. I am in a better position to support her with accelerating her learning.

–Catina, NOLA Parent Leader

Next, Rachel explains how the PLTI helped her make the shift from being a manager of her children’s learning to a facilitator of her children’s learning. Rachel explains:

My children have always been involved in activities at school and church but there is a lot more talk these days about the learning that occurs. We talk about how they plan to get everything done and who they can ask for help. I do less telling and more listening and asking questions. Sometimes when I ask a question my kids think I am asking because they did something wrong. I have to explain that I am asking because I really don’t know and want to understand things better. The Parent Leadership Training Institute has influenced how I support my kids with education and activities.

–Rachel, NOLA Parent Leader

Parent leaders expressed greater interest in communicating with their children regarding their students’ educational experience and the school’s culture and climate. Parents asked questions to gather information about their student’s educational experiences in terms of academics and their social and emotional development. Parents also supported students with homework and helped students engage in goal-setting and managing their time and tasks more effectively. Many of the skills that parent leaders were seeking to transfer to their children (e.g., asking for instructional support when they need it, how to address concerns with a peer,

organizing events and tasks on a calendar, volunteering to help the teacher or model for other students, learning about problems that impact their community at community meetings) are very important skills and experiences that have the potential to benefit students as they mature into adulthood.

Finding 5: Parent Leaders Made a Difference in the School Community

As a culminating activity, the Urban League parent leadership training facilitators provided parent leaders with time to brainstorm and begin the initial planning of projects that would address a concern in the education community or New Orleans community. Parent leaders were allowed to work individually with input from another parent or form a group if they had similar concerns. As parent leaders reflected on their training experience, six parent leaders expressed that the information and connections established through participation in the Parent Leadership Training Institute contributed to them being able to have a positive impact on students and families in the school setting. Therefore, the fifth finding is that some parent leaders were successful in gaining entry into the school community to supplement the curriculum and work directly with students or parents. Parent leader narratives revealed that parents' education initiatives were inspired in three ways: 1) by their talents and interests with working with particular groups of students (e.g., early learners, special education students), 2) by their passion for a particular subject area or making sure students have basic skills, or 3) by ensuring the health and wellness of students. Examples of parent leaders making a difference in the lives of children, and in one case in the lives of children and parents, include the following:

The Parent Leadership Training Institute really caused me to reflect on my own childhood. My sister and I made good grades but we had a lot of hurt and pain inside growing up and we didn't talk about it with anyone. We were sexual abused and my mom

says she didn't know it was happening all those years. My sister and I are both parent leaders. We decided to collaborate on the education project because it took a lot of courage to share our secret with others. The Protect My Childhood Project was created to help moms keep their children safe. It educates moms about the signs of sexual abuse and connecting them with community agencies to learn more. We have been allowed to speak to parents at school and community meetings. So many parents have come up to us to say they were sexually abused as a child and they never told anyone. You never know what someone has gone through but it impacts your relationships throughout your whole life when something traumatic happens to you so young and over and over again.

We created a brochure that we pass out to parents about the signs and how to get help. Many parents are worried about their children being taken away if they waited to tell someone that something may have happened to their child from a family member or boyfriend. It is a very sensitive matter; that's why we connect parents to community agencies that really work to support parents and children. We have even gone to counseling with a few of the parents that experienced abuse as a child and parents who felt their child may have been abused after hearing about the signs. Being a single mother is hard and housing is so expensive after Katrina but you have to work to live here. I look moms right in their eyes and say 'you can't just leave your kids with anybody, and even keep an eye on those you do know.'

Keeping kids safe has to be our number one priority. My sister and I are no longer victims; we are victorious and now it's about helping parents protect their children from sexual predators. What we are doing doesn't feel like work. We are child advocates that are having conversations with parents about a topic that rarely gets

discussed. School staff and community leaders have embraced our project because child abuse or sexual abuse impacts a child's ability to learn and concentrate and connect with others.

–Olivia, NOLA Parent Leader

The project initiated by Olivia and her sisters was well received by stakeholders in the school and community. The Protect My Childhood Project addresses a critical need that is seldomly discussed in homes, schools, or the community. Olivia and her sister already have begun to provide parent education, serve as knowledge experts, and take on the role of collaborators with the community.

Helena decided to share her passion for art with her son and others in the school community. New Orleans is known for its rich musical and art culture. The school community was receptive to Helena providing enrichment to students after school to supplement the school curriculum.

I loved art growing up and I used to get a crayon and marker set or paint set every Christmas because my whole family knew that was my thing. I loved working on projects in school because that was my opportunity to incorporate art and show off my creativity. I get that the focus is on the Learning Standards and we have to prepare our children for college and careers but we can't lose the arts. This is New Orleans. The arts are a part of our culture that everyone loves. The school that my son attend has a Creative Arts teacher but I started an afterschool local arts program at his school. My son is a young artist so he helps me with it and we talk about him taking over the project when he is a teenager.

Last year, kids participated from second grade on through fifth grade. The kids would come in so excited to learn and participate. One of my favorite moments was during the testing period because some of the kids were telling me the test was coming up and it was gonna be hard and they didn't want to fail. Getting the kids engaged in the creation of Mardi Gras floats and making beads and masks took their little minds off the stresses of the world. The kids demonstrated so much creativity and they were getting better at standing up and presenting their talent and providing positive feedback to one another. The Urban League and the school provided me with materials to work with the children and I don't believe the school would have agreed to this without the Urban League backing me. It feels great to share my love for the arts with my son and other young children.

–Helena, NOLA Parent Leader

Another example of parent engagement is Katy's project. Her accepted proposal accepted allows her to collaborate with other parents to lead a 10-day skills camp to provide students with an academic jumpstart before school begins.

My project is a ten-day basic skills mini-camp right before school begins. I am partnering with two other parent leaders on this one. We decided on this because during the parent leadership institute, we discussed summer learning loss and we knew it was an issue that needed to be addressed. So many kids just hang out in the summer without much to do. Also, a lot of summer programs don't have an academic component although I know kids need time to play outside and play sports. Obesity is a real issue too.

We spent three weeks recruiting and we have 16 kids that have signed up for the grades 1-3 basic skills mini-camp refresher. The Urban League and the charter school are working on logistics to address health and safety concerns. We as parent leaders are doing our part to make sure students are prepared for college and career standards at their grade level and we just want to motivate the kids to do their best every day. We feel the additional skill practice will help the kids make a smoother transition when school starts.

–Katy, NOLA Parent Leader

Shauna was able to gain entry into the school community to implement a math intervention program. The Urban League Outreach Coordinator and a school leader are working together to launch Shauna’s math program. Shauna proudly shared the nature of her education improvement program below.

My project is a math camp that is scheduled to begin in October once the students get their individual growth targets for the year. I have collaborated with a volunteer at my child’s school to provide small group math help and lead math projects afterschool. I wanted to start this summer but the school leader said we need a security officer available and a nurse on staff and no one is really available in the summer. The Parent Leadership Training Institute Coordinator helped me connect with the school staff and partner up with other parent volunteers that wanted to make a difference. The volunteer is not a part of PRIDE but she loves math and loves working with children and we just want to motivate the third-grade kids and help them get better at problem solving and making real world connections.

–Shauna, NOLA Parent Leader

The parent projects above were formed from parents reflecting on their own childhood talents and challenges or subjects they enjoyed and a desire to help students master those topics. The next two narratives, however, were inspired by parent leaders with different types of specialized interests—those of working with early learners and special needs students. The narratives were able to capture the school staff’s support for parent projects, as well as children’s feelings about parent participation in educational programs during and after school.

I love working with the Pre-K. I can be sort of quiet around most people. But, I just come to life around little kids. I love reading stories to the Pre-K so that is what I decided to do for my parent leadership training project. I use to read to the Pre-K children twice a month and I started sharing what I was doing with other parent leaders. Other parents asked me if the school would let them participate too. The school said ‘sure but just for the Pre-K classrooms.’ I am thankful the Pre-K teachers partnered with us because the children are delighted to see a new face and they are so smart and say the cutest things. I love when they make connections with the story and make predictions. I find so much joy in just sharing my favorite stories. I go to book stores and look for new ones. I don’t want to hear anyone else say that kids don’t want to learn because I just don’t believe it. You have to make learning fun and make them fall in love with reading and math that’s all there is to it. The kids I have met are curious and enjoy stories being read to them.

–Angela, NOLA Parent Leader

Parents developed and implemented projects that were of interest to them and implemented their projects with groups of children in age groups or special groups they were passionate about serving. For Angela, this meant working with early education students, and for Elise, this meant

working with special needs students to support their learning and development. Elise's project occurred outside of her children's school:

I wanted to advocate for a quality education for special needs students for my project. I was able to connect with a home school organization that provides services to both regular education and special education students in a smaller education environment. I help the students with their projects and ask open-ended questions to get them to explain what they are doing and what they would like to create. I help the students with writing summaries from the reading of the day. The children are so excited to read to me and work on assignments. The classroom environment and whole feel of the school is so supportive and inspirational. The school staff have high expectations for special needs kids and enjoy working with all kids. I feel fortunate to have this opportunity to work with the students and school staff. The Urban League staff put me in contact with the founder after learning of my interest in supporting special needs students and learning about education in alternative environments.

–Elise, NOLA Parent Leader

Parent leaders' projects reflect the parents' creativity and inventiveness. The parent leaders who are sisters addressed an issue that is rarely talked about in education—sexual abuse—and they were able to positively impact both parents and children. In addition, many students can use additional time and support with mastering basic skills, either in the summer or after school, and parent leaders were able to collaborate with other parent volunteers in some cases and tutor students. Lastly, in the age of accountability, as many schools have placed a greater focus on subjects that are tested, developing art skills and learning about the local culture through art is rarely recognized.

Finding 6: Parent Leaders Helped Other Parents Navigate School Choice and Access Training and Resources

The sixth finding is that the Parent Leadership Training Institute contributed to parent leaders' ability to help other parents navigate the charter system and recruit other parents for the training program outside of the school context. Many parents expressed that the schools their children attended did not have an operating Parent-Teacher Organization, which limited parent communication and engagement. Parents were inventive in creating new ways to support other parents (e.g., use of social media, education expo, and community meetings, and connecting with community partners who support parents).

The school choice landscape can be overwhelming for many parents, and the education expo organized by the Urban League provides a central place for parents to learn about schools and community groups that offer services to families. Community partners and others at community events also connected parent leaders to other parents in need of support (e.g., training, resources, feedback on schools). The excerpts below indicate how parent leaders shared their experiences and expertise with other parents to navigate the school reform landscape and access resources.

At first I wasn't communicating with anyone and my cousin who had been a part of PRIDE got me out the house and we started going to the education forums. Then I decided to join the parent leadership training classes. It wasn't time away from my son because I was talking about him and learning about the best ways to help him. I didn't have kids before Katrina so when I returned back to the city years later with my son I didn't know anything about how to enroll in Pre-K and K. It's easier when you know someone. New Orleans is still who you know but it is also what you know, especially after

Katrina and with all the changes. I am out of my shell now though. At the Education Expo, I spoke to so many parents about what to expect when your kid is in kindergarten and first grade. You have to work with them a lot more because the school expect them to know a lot. I was talking about all the documents you need and how it is important it is for children to already know their letters and sounds before kindergarten. I was telling the parents about PRIDE and how important it is to get involved and let your voice be heard. You gotta be able to talk with the teachers and leaders and the training classes really help you figure out what should be happening and what's important. If you find it's not happening you have to know how to talk to the teachers and do what's best for your child without getting frustrated. I tell them, you can't assume that everything will be fine because you send your child to a charter school.

–Malika, NOLA Parent Leader

Malika has been able expand parents' knowledge of the formal schooling enrollment process and school expectations for K-1.

Similarly, Terrance has been able to help parents access much needed resources, and he has encouraged other parents to increase their engagement in schools and the community.

Terrance talks about the abundance of resources he has been able to access and share with other parents since participating with the Urban League and staying abreast of community events:

I have been in PRIDE for two years. I have met so many parents and parents connect me to other parents. When I meet a parent, I put their information in my phone and send out a mass text when it's around the time for the Annual Education Expo that is organized by the Urban League. Many parents are in need of resources and information to determine the charter schools that are right for them. The EXPO is important because it is kind of

like the ONE APP (common charter application) come to life. Parents can read what's on the website but we like to feel a connection to things and know our kids will be alright down here. The EXPO has tons of information and people to help parents exercise school choice. Parents can gather what you need, like do their own research, then sort through the information at home then contact the schools and set up tours. It's like a one-stop shop.

Parent leaders guide other parents. I think it also helps for people to see men and women advocating for better schools and community programs At the PRIDE table we share our experiences and let other parents know how we are making a difference in our community. If we get 15 applications after talking with parents about PRIDE, over half will probably join the next parent leadership training institute. I invite parents to the expo because many people are struggling to make ends meet. Parents receive free uniform vouchers, school supplies, and tickets to museums and shows. This kind of support goes a long way.

–Terrance, NOLA Parent Leader

Likewise, Marva shares that the PLTI has expanded her networks and ability to support other parents. The PLTI gives her greater purpose. Marva shared:

Community members come up to me at the forums and ask me if I would be willing to reach out to a parent that they know that really needs help and talk to them. It's not that they haven't talked to them. It just helps to have one parent helping another parent navigate the system and answer questions. Some community members are passionate and making a difference in their own way but they don't have any kids going through the charter system. I'm able to connect with the parents in ways others cannot and it's all

positive and all in love. No parent is perfect and the parents share things that they are struggling with and relationships that have caused a great deal of disappointment for them and their kids. I'm able to relate because I'm doing the juggling act too, trying to live right, take care of my kids, connect with other positive leaders, and make the most of money and resources I have. Being a part of the parent leadership training and going to the community forums has help me stay updated about changes in policies and new programs and groups that have been created to make things better for New Orleans families and I share that knowledge with others.

– Marva, NOLA Parent Leader

Parents have been able to connect to other parents, recruit parents for the parent training, and access resources for their children through other community partners and the annual education expo. The Urban League of Greater New Orleans hosts the annual education expo—referenced in the parent narratives—for parents in New Orleans. The expo was established with assistance from the Urban League, feedback from a charter network leader who served as a leader before Hurricane Katrina, and feedback from parents regarding how frustrating exercising school choice can be with so many options and staff they don't know. The education expo has been successful in bringing together more than 100 schools and 80 community groups each year. According to parent leaders, the education expo is truly a value-add for connecting parents and resources. In addition, it is an opportunity for other community partners to learn about the PRIDE parent group that asks parent leaders to mentor and give advice to other parents.

Finding 7: Parents Grew Personally and Professionally Through the Parent Training Experience

The second question in this research study asks, “How does participation in the Parent Leadership Training Institute impact parents both personally and professionally?” As the previous findings have shown, parent leaders have developed a greater sense of connectedness with their children, other parents, school staff, and the community as a result of the training experience. The seventh finding is that the Parent Leadership Training Institute contributed to parents developing a “leadership identity” and sense of empowerment to address concerns and manage change and conflict across settings (home, school, community). Parents have positively impacted their children, as well as other children and families in school and community settings, through advocacy, volunteerism, and knowledge and resource sharing. The following narratives reflect parents who view themselves as leaders and have used their leadership and empowerment to impact change in their city.

One of the things that stuck with me from the parent training is the idea that education is what you know, not what's in a book. I didn't see consider myself a leader, but once I started learning about what makes a good education system and how to teach your child with things around the house, and programs and resources that are available to support children being successful in school, I got motivated to be a part of the change and I starting helping other parents get connected and get resources for their families and I just transformed into a leader. I have helped several parents get their kids into good schools with teachers that understand the benefits of working with parents.

–Catina, NOLA Parent Leader

Catina’s narrative reveals how she began to help other parents access resources and make real-life connections with content area learning after participating in the PLTI.

Dawn also shares that she has been instrumental in supporting parents in expanding their knowledge of the IEP process and parents' rights. Dawn shared her training outcomes:

Through my involvement with a support group for students with special needs I was able to meet other parents that understand the uniqueness of my situation and we get together several times a month and I talk about how my son is progressing and how the parent training started off my work as a parent leader. I share the supports I received through my involvement and how I feel much better now that my son is in a charter school that appreciates my involvement and concern for him. The other parents in the support group have more experience navigating the IEP process and advocating for improvements in policies that impact special needs students. I am learning a great deal from participation in the parent group for special needs students and I share important information that I learned with my PRIDE group and other parents at his school.

–Dawn, NOLA Parent Leader

Jennifer also has been able to provide valuable feedback and recommendations to parents. She believes she has grown professionally and feels confident helping other parents. She was able to support her cousin's co-worker with requesting supports for her child who struggled academically. Jennifer reported:

My cousin asked me to talk to one of her co-workers who has a daughter on a 504 plan (plan that help students with learning and attention issues learn and participate in the general education curriculum) and when I spoke to her she was saying she wished her daughter could keep the same teacher for several years because she felt her daughter would do better if she stayed connected to the same teacher and developed a strong relationship like she has with her daughter. I suggested that she write her daughter's

teacher a letter at the start of each new year and explain her daughters strengths, interests, things she find challenging and how she help her daughter work through them. I got this idea from one of the speakers at the Parent Leadership Training Institute. The parent thought it was a wonderful idea and asked me to share more about the training and she filled out an application to join because she really wants to do everything she can for her daughter and I know that feeling.

–Jennifer, NOLA Parent Leader

Tiffany has been instrumental in keeping parents abreast of community forums and resources that are available to assist children and families. Tiffany shared:

Mahalia Jackson School connected me to PRIDE and I went through the trainings and started sharing on social media how the training helped me. I've just been letting people know when the community forums are happening and how they can get involved. Parents really get excited about all of the resources at the expo. I feel all parents really want to learn how to help their children do better in school but many don't feel like they have the time. But when they do, it really makes a difference in how parents run their household and think about the charter system and the community. You just can't watch and wait anymore, you know too much.

–Tiffany, NOLA Parent Leader

Tiffany feels her increased knowledge has raised her awareness for the need for parents to increase their engagement and be a part of the solution in New Orleans. Her new knowledge of the school system led to a raised consciousness about inequities.

Sheena was disenchanted with the school choice landscape and has concerns with the quality of education. Her participation in the PLTI has compelled her to speak out against the school choice rhetoric. Sheena shares:

Charters gave us school choice but took away our voice and our teachers that knew our kids and cared. The teachers are different, the teaching is different, the materials are even different. They don't spend money on textbooks, kids get the floppy workbooks that don't last and they expect you to spend hundreds of dollars on school supplies. They didn't have to change everything after Katrina, at least find out what was working. I found out after Katrina that New Orleans is very different from the way people live in other places. Family and good hearted trusting people is everything to us. I thought the schools would want volunteers around but they just want to tell us what to do at home. They don't know anything about us; it's so disrespectful. Meeting the other parents and going through the training calmed me down and helped me plan out how to address some of the issues I had with the charter system. Together we can accomplish more and the Urban League gave me a safe place to talk about my concerns and get advice. I haven't been in school in years. I had my kids and never finished college. I felt like I was in school again and I learned so much at the parent training and I am a part of the parent group. I have been thinking about going back to school to study computer technology. I met a non-profit leader at one of the community meetings that teach decoding and other computer classes and he help the students that complete the courses find jobs. I have been struggling to take care of my kids and make ends meet for so long and I didn't have a plan for things to get better. But, things are so much better for me and my kids and I'm helping other families too. My mom keep saying she see a huge difference in me, and I'm

not as stressed and I know from the trainings that how I feel makes a difference in my kids' lives.

–Sheena, NOLA Parent Leader

Andrea also felt that knowledge served as power. She believes the PLTI contributed to her ability to manage change. Andrea explained:

Being a parent leader is powerful because you get to help other parents work through concerns not just with education but with life altogether. It's hard out here. You feel like you are raising your kids by yourself and then you meet someone that is willing to help and not judge you and train you for free to rise above the challenges and make a better life for yourself and your kids. Once you know how schools should be and services that can really help your kids do better in school you just want to rally everyone and fight to make sure all kids are healthy, engaged, and supported.

–Andrea, NOLA Parent Leader

The narratives above reveal that parents viewed themselves as leaders and realized that there is “power in numbers.” Parents felt more motivated, supported, and equipped to make good decisions in their lives and the lives of others. Parents recognized that they still face economic challenges, but their outlook on overcoming on their ability to overcome challenges had changed. It was empowering for many of the parent leaders to become aware of what happens in the school community and the supports that are available for their children and families in their schools and communities.

Finding 8: Parents Negotiate Multiple Roles

The eighth finding is that parents were able to negotiate multiple roles (supporter, encourager, monitor, advocate, chooser of education options, collaborator) to set their children

on a path to success. There are examples of parents serving in these six roles throughout the parent narratives. Rachel shared how the PLTI contributed to her shift to tapping into her child's gifts and talents. She felt the PLTI impacted her personally and allowed her to be of greater support to her child's continued learning and development. Rachel shared:

My oldest daughter has gotten really good at reading and answering questions with supporting evidence. She also knows how to convince others to support her point when she is writing. I have her to read her writing to me to make sure it's clear and convincing. I have always encouraged her to do her best but she knows about my community work to improve education and she includes me more. She says she want to advocate for children like me and go to law school. The parent training sessions talked a lot about nurturing your child's gifts and talents and I was seeing that my child was persuasive and knew how to make good arguments and I began to not just compliment her but find ways to nurture her talents.

We applied to a high school that had a speech and debate team and a great academic program. She has started community service and she has a list of what classes she needs to take. We learned about the POSSE organization where she can connect with other teens that plan to go to college and possibly get a scholarship. The parent training went through some of the statistics on black youth going to college and finishing college and I feel it should have been way more kids being prepared for college and going to college. I decided that I was going to play a greater role in making sure my kids don't become one of those kids that don't make it. I'm feeling much better about stirring my three children in the right direction.

–Rachel, NOLA Parent Leader

Olivia developed a leadership identity and identified the need for parents to serve in multiple roles to support their children and themselves. Olivia shared:

I am able to be more to my children now. I'm still mom but I'm a coach and community worker and activist for all kids. I'm a better role model and guide for them, I feel like a different person but really I've tapped into my inner strength and gained knowledge and friendships with others that can help me get a better paying job, help my kids do better in school, and help these schools do a better job with keeping kids engaged and parents engaged too. The schools need to really get to know us to know what we need.

–Olivia, NOLA Parent Leader

Tanzania was able to negotiate multiple roles and serve as a supporter, encourager, monitor, and collaborator in school improvement. She shared how the PLTI contributed to her developing conflict resolution skills and ways of managing resistance. Tanzania shared:

When my child was not progressing, I was able to ask around and find free tutoring help for her on Saturdays. My oldest is on the right track now with going to college. Being a part of PRIDE makes it easier to handle roadblocks because you can easily find out the best way to handle things and get what you need for your kids and yourself. I know my voice matters in the community. Organizations have been coming to us to find out what we think about the education our children are receiving and how we envision the schools getting better results. Nobody asked me what I thought before. It's true, there is power in numbers.

–Tanzania, NOLA Parent Leader

Below, Terrance reflects on how the PLTI impacted him personally and professionally. He shares details about his increased engagement across contexts:

I'm more engaged with my kids, their teachers, and community leaders. I dropped out of college to work and provide for my kids but I'm motivated to go back to school now. It doesn't have to be one or the other. They need to see me going to college and getting my degree and I'm going to continue learning throughout my life. It's a part of me being a good dad and role model. I want to send the message that learning continues throughout life and I want my children to always try to better themselves and help others like I'm doing.

–Terrance, NOLA Parent Leader

Portia briefly shares how the PLTI contributed to her finding a work-life balance.

I am more connected to the community and I balance my mommy duties with my work as a parent leader. I joined the Parent Leadership Institute to figure out how to help my child more but I've been working to improve the charter schools for all of the kids in the city now. All kids should have a wonderful education taught by teachers that are competent and caring individuals.

–Portia, NOLA Parent Leader

Nia feels the PLTI helped her stay abreast of education issues. She believed the training made her more persistent in order to get results. Nia shared her experiences after participating in the PLTI:

I don't feel like I'm the last to know things anymore; that's not a good feeling. I'm around people that have been through just as much as I have but they refuse to give up; they refuse to take 'no' for an answer. They keep searching until they find someone that can help. I have that kind of spirit these days. I don't settle. I ask around and ask around

until I find out how things work. Sometimes it is too late but I don't get down on myself. I just ask if there are other organizations that I can be referred to for assistance. One 'no,' or 'it's too late,' don't discourage me, I know I have to continue on and have a positive outlook.

–Nia, NOLA Parent Leader

Camellia feels the PLTI supported her career advancement and development of leadership skills. She is excited that she was able to expand her parent and community networks:

I have gotten some great leads on jobs just by starting up a conversation with people at music and food festivals. That's actually how I learned about the position I have now working at City Hall. Before taking the parent training I wasn't as comfortable striking up conversation with people I didn't know and talking about my interests and roles I have held. Just applying for jobs online wasn't working for me. I needed to connect with young professionals in authentic ways just as I connected with the parent leaders to impact the community. Being a part of PRIDE made it easier to connect with others and I enjoyed sharing the work that our parent group was doing to impact change in public education.

–Camellia, NOLA Parent Leader

Joseph is a retired teacher who participated in the PLTI and is proud of his engagement post-Katrina. He is focused on helping parents understand the financial aspects of the school system and the implications for the decisions that are being made at the district or charter-network level. He believes many of the organizations that emerged post-Katrina have little or no ties to the city, and their good intentions are not enough to make a difference because parents are not even aware that the resources and services exist. Joseph's narrative reflects these concerns:

People think parents are getting so much help but there are organizations set up to help families that don't even know how to contact parents and really reach parents. Parent leaders are essential to the change process we are the bridge between community and schools and New Orleans parents. If we don't know, the other parents don't know about supports that are out there either. I know so many leaders in the city that I didn't know before. I share my experience before Katrina and how I got involved with PRIDE and they just want to help me help parents and I get a lot of encouragement. We can't leave parents in the dark. They need to know what's going on with their children as well as the education system as a whole. I don't know everything but I listen and ask questions and stay involved. I am a retired teacher but I want to keep learning because I want to keep helping my grandchild, help parents have a greater voice in decision making, and help leaders understand what the needs of parents and students are so that they can allocate resources based on the needs of all students.

–Joseph, NOLA Parent Leader

All eight findings reflect the extent to which a community-sponsored parent leadership training institute contributed to parents' capacity-building and had an impact on the parents personally and professionally. The PLTI was found to have impacted parents' relationships with children, school staff, other parents, and community members. Data findings indicate that parents' knowledge of schooling was increased, parents had greater access to resources, and parents expanded their connection to other parents and community members. Although parent engagement was limited in many cases by school staff or the lack of a parent-teacher organization in charter schools, many parents utilized community forums to express concerns

and offer suggestions for improvement, and many parents sustained their involvement long after the PLTI.

CHAPTER 6

Analysis of Research and Findings

This chapter examines the narrative research findings of Chapter 5 in relation to Epstein's (2001) Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence. Beginning with an overview of Epstein's Theory of Overlapping Influence, the study research questions are revisited through the theoretical frameworks. Data analysis reveals that the community-sponsored PLTI greatly enhanced parents' knowledge about the nature of schooling, and that knowledge, in turn, contributed to parents' increased confidence; development of a leadership identity; and increased engagement in the home, school, and community. Although parents experienced resistance to their engagement by charter school staff, in many cases, the PLTI was found to be instrumental in helping parents cope with change and manage conflict, initiate involvement in schools and the community, and adequately voice concerns.

The Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence illustrates that there is commonality in how the family, school, and community work together to accomplish a unified educational mission for the benefit of children and society. Epstein asserts that the degree of overlap between stakeholders in the education of children is determined by four forces: 1) the time, age and grade level of the child; 2) experience, philosophy, and practices of the parent and family; 3) experience, philosophy, and practices of the school; and 4) experience, philosophy, and practices of the community (Epstein, 2001). Epstein describes the Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence by distinguishing between the external and internal structures of the model. External structure implies the forces that influence the interactions of the social institutions that come from outside agents, such as family, school, and community. Internal structure is the term used in Epstein's theory to describe the dynamics of interpersonal relationships within both the family

and school and between the family and school. An example of internal structure would be various types of communication between the family and the school and within each of these social institutions. Epstein's theory was suitable for theorizing parent engagement across contexts and the contributions of the capacity-building training (Epstein, 2001).

To understand the role of a community organization's parent leadership training programs in building parents' leadership capacity, the following questions were explored:

1. In what ways, and to what extent, does the Parent Leadership Training Institute build the skills, abilities, and leadership of parents to effectively engage in schools and communities?
2. How does participation in the Parent Leadership Training Institute impact parents personally and professionally?

Data analysis of research findings reveals that the community-sponsored Parent Leadership Training Institute greatly contributed to parents' increased knowledge about the nature of schooling. Parents' knowledge about the nature of schooling correlated with seven of the eight findings from this capacity-building study. Knowledge about the nature of schooling is an example of an internal structure within Epstein's Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence that impacted the dynamics of interpersonal relationships within social institutions and parent engagement across contexts (Epstein, 2001).

Overlapping spheres of influence contributed to parents' increased knowledge regarding the nature of schooling through participation in the PLTI

Finding 1 states that the PLTI gave parents the confidence to initiate involvement with school staff to support school improvement efforts. Parent narratives that support this finding reveal that parents were able to identify specific ways in which they could contribute to school

improvement efforts, e.g., helping parents and teachers connect, establishing a parent-teacher organization in the school, volunteering to read with or to students, serving on school improvement committees, mentoring troubled youth. Andrea mentioned that the PLTI and participation prepared her to work as a change agent in schools and the community. She felt the training sessions increased her knowledge of the supports and resources that should be available to support students' learning and development. She felt confident that the PLTI had prepared her to collaborate with other parents to envision an education system in New Orleans that provided all learners with adequate supports and welcomed all families. The increase in knowledge regarding the nature of schooling gave parents the confidence and clarity needed to initiate involvement and two-way communication with school staff.

Finding 2 states that the PLTI effectively prepared parents to express concerns in a non-threatening manner regarding grades and progress monitoring, student engagement, and inappropriate discipline concerns. The internal structure of knowledge about the nature of schooling was found to have contributed to parents' ability to effectively express school concerns in a non-threatening manner. Brittany's narrative revealed that the PLTI has presented best practices in the classroom and child development. As a way to apply the new learning to an actual problem-solving situation, the Greater Urban League of New Orleans Parent Leadership Training Institute often used skits in closing activities. Many parents identified role-playing activities as a beneficial strategy for applying the learning from parent leadership training sessions. Role-playing served as a dress rehearsal for interacting with school staff and addressing school concerns in a professional manner.

Brittany felt prepared to provide her child's teacher with feedback on a lesson she observed without offending the teacher. She kept the focus of her comments on her child's

engagement in the lesson and shared her own experiences reading with her child and how she responded when he seemed to disengage. Brittany left the classroom with a better understanding of the teacher's expectations for school learning and the ways in which Brittany can support her child's ability to experience success in the classroom setting. She felt her comments were well received by the teacher, and Brittany and the teacher engaged in two-way communication throughout the year to support her child's academic and social-emotional learning development. Nia also commented on the benefits of role playing when she said, "The skits were funny when we role played how to handle issues effectively, but I was really learning how to talk to people in the schools and community."

Finding 3 reflects that some parents who participated in the PLTI developed the knowledge and ability to serve as knowledge experts in specialized areas such as navigating the special education process, preparing students and parents for the college entrance process, and understanding school funding and resource distribution in districts and charter networks. The internal structure of knowledge about the nature of schooling was found to have contributed to parents' ability to serve as knowledge experts and provide valuable information to other stakeholders (e.g., parents, community members, community leaders).

Malika's narrative reveals that, after participating in the PLTI, she was actually excited about the IEP meeting for the upcoming school year because she felt better prepared and knew which documents to request ahead of time in order to ensure a more effective meeting. She had a better understanding of her rights as a parent of a child with special needs and expressed that the PLTI gave her increased confidence and endurance to advocate for her child throughout his life. She has increased her knowledge of the IEP process and reported getting questions and calls from worried parents all the time who are seeking the information and assistance she can

provide. She feels the PLTI equipped her with the knowledge needed to support her child, as well as other families navigating the special education process and services.

Finding 4 states that the PLTI was instrumental in enhancing parent-child communication concerning education-related issues (e.g., homework, support services, teacher-student relationships, curriculum, classroom participation, conflict resolution). The majority (18 out of 25) of parent narratives indicated there was a change or increase in their communication and discussions with their children after participating in the PLTI. The parents' knowledge about the internal structure of the nature of schooling was found to have contributed to communication changes and shifts.

Marianne's narrative regarding how the PLTI impacted her relationship with her child revealed, "We have a lot to talk about now because I know more about what should be happening as far as his education goes." Marianne didn't accept the response from her son that his day at school was "just fine." She probed more and asked more specific questions. She inquired about whether he was pulled for intervention services or had a chance to work on the computer at school. Her knowledge about the nature of schooling allowed her to engage in more in-depth school-related discussions with her son and learn more about his school experiences.

Laurel shared that her relationship with her children had changed, and she attributed the change to her increased knowledge of curriculum standards and resources, as well as her involvement with the Urban League parent engagement programs. She shared that her children talk to her more about the problems they are having in school, and she believes it's because she has gotten involved and increased her knowledge of schools.

Portia also shared that, since participating in the PLTI, she has seen an increase in her academic discussions with her kids. Portia explained that her kids talk to her about how they are

feeling about the curriculum, and they give her notes and handouts from the school without her having to dig through their backpacks. She feels her kids are proud of her involvement, and she believes they feel more protected and supported.

Wanda shared that instead of putting on the radio when she picks her kids up from school, they talk about school the entire way home. She believes her increased knowledge of schools and curriculum has allowed her to provide greater support, especially with their homework and vocabulary development.

Knowledge about the nature of school was not found to have influenced Finding 5 related to parents being able to gain entry into the school community to implement education projects. However, the internal structure of knowledge about the nature of schooling did contribute to Findings 6, 7, and 8. Finding 6 states that the PLTI contributed to parents' leadership capacity to help other parents navigate the charter system and recruit other parents to participate in the PLTI. The community context was mentioned as the context in which parents supported other parents.

Many parents expressed disappointment that their child's school did not have an established Parent Teacher Organization (PTO). Andrea mentioned in her narrative that the charter school her children attended did not have a PTO. She expressed that she did not know a lot of the teachers or parents. The PLTI gave her a safe space to open up and talk about issues that were of concern to her. She reflected on her childhood growing up in New Orleans, when the majority of teachers lived and worked in the community. She shared that parents and teachers knew each other back then. The PLTI allowed her to learn about charter schools and the new education landscape in New Orleans and connect with other parents in her community.

Marva also expressed that the charter schools her children attended did not have a PTO. She felt parents were limited in their opportunities to connect with and visit classrooms to learn

more about how charter schools operated. The PLTI provided parents with a vehicle to expand their knowledge of schools and their networks of parents and resources. Parent recruitment occurred at the annual citywide school expo, where parents spoke to other parents about their experiences exercising school choice, accessing resources, and the benefits of participating in the PLTI.

Terrance's narrative is one that reveals the importance of parent leaders connecting with other parents at the Urban League-sponsored annual expo. He said:

The EXPO is important because it is kind of like the ONE APP (common charter school application) come to life. Parents can read what's on the website, but we like to feel a connection to things and want to know our kids will be alright. The EXPO has tons of information and people to help parents exercise school choice. Parents can gather what they need and do their own research.

Finding 7 states that the PLTI contributed to parents developing a leadership identity. The internal structure of knowledge about the nature of schooling was found to have contributed to parents' construction of a leadership identity. Learning about the charter system and best practices for school improvement and community development was found to have contributed to parents' confidence and leadership development. Parents felt equipped with the knowledge and tools they needed to advocate for not only their children but for all of the children in their community. Parents spoke boldly about their experiences at community meetings and advocated for increased input and decision-making power for parents in school and community development efforts.

The Urban League training sessions included Urban League staff, as well as politicians, researchers, parent leaders, clergy, and community leaders leading partnering organizations. The

PLTI allowed parents the opportunity to expand their networks with members of the community who had influence and power in the city. Having access to community leaders gave parents a sense of empowerment. Speaking out against unwelcoming culture and climate, limited afterschool enrichment activities, and inadequate supports for special needs students or inadequate instructional materials at community meetings, and participating in the PLTI and PRIDE parent group were found to have contributed to parents' development of a leadership identity, as well. The idea of knowledge being a source of power emerged from the study's findings.

Finding 8 states that the PLTI increased parents' capacity to negotiate multiple roles to set their children on a path to success. The internal structure of knowledge about the nature of schooling was found to have contributed to parents' being equipped with the knowledge and skills to negotiate multiple roles. Parents spoke of how the PLTI had a positive impact on their lives both personally and professionally. Olivia wrote,

I am still a mom, but I'm a coach and community worker and activist for all kids. I'm a better role model and guide for them, I feel like a different person, but really I've tapped into my inner strength and gained knowledge and friendships with others that can help me get a better paying job and help my kids do better in school.

Sheena got very emotional when sharing her narrative, as she expressed her disappointment with the school's reaction to parents wanting to become more involved. However, even with the resistance she experienced with offering to become involved, she still found the PLTI to be beneficial. Sheena shared, "Meeting the other parents and going through the training (PLTI) calmed me down and helped me plan out how to address some of the issues I had with the charter system."

Experiences, Philosophies, and Practices of the Community

According to Epstein's (2001) Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence, one of the forces that determines the extent of overlap among family, schools, and community efforts to support learners is the community experiences, philosophies, and practices. Analysis of data findings reveals that, during the time frame of this study, there were many community meetings occurring in the city regarding the future of public education. These meetings were open forums for various stakeholders and breeding grounds for parents seeking opportunities to have their voices heard by those in positions of power. The community meetings served as an opportunity for parent input to be included in policy recommendations and considerations for supports for children and families.

The majority of parents interviewed attended and participated in community forums regarding education or community development at least once a month. Having an opportunity to voice concerns contributed to parents' development of a leadership identity (Finding 7) and increased advocacy efforts on behalf of the children in their community. The majority of parents experienced resistance from school staff when seeking to increase their engagement in schools; therefore, having an opportunity to convene and have their concerns and suggestions heard in the community validated parents' knowledge and experience and the relevance of their PLTI experience.

The Parent Leadership Training Institute influenced parent-community relationships. Research findings indicate that the PLTI served as a catalyst for parents' engagement with community representatives and other community leaders in their community. Some of the training sessions were led by community leaders and professors in the New Orleans community who had a great deal of influence in education and community development.

Parents did not sit in training sessions as passive recipients of knowledge, instead they reported engaging in dialogue with training presenters and other parents. Parents helped set the agenda for educational change and parent engagement program development. Many presenters provided their contact information, and one parent shared that she contacted a community leader who offered to provide followup support for a project the parent was interested in implementing. Parents reported feeling empowered because they knew community members and leaders who could help them address concerns.

Many parents expanded their parent and community networks and experienced great success with impacting the community. For example, the Protect My Childhood Project was led by two parent leaders who connected parents to a community organization for counseling and support after educating parents on the warning signs of child abuse. Many parents reported participating in community recovery and education improvement meetings months after completing the PLTI. The majority of parents who participated in this study are a part of the UL PRIDE Parent Group and meet monthly to continue their learning and development and support parent outreach efforts in the community.

Experiences, Philosophies, and Practices of Parents

According to Epstein's (2001) Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence, the experiences, philosophies, and practices of the parents is an important factor in learners' outcomes. The PLTI was found to have influenced parents' interactions with their children, teachers, other parents, and community leaders. Parent narratives reveal that the Parent Leadership Training Institute contributed to shifts in the focus of parent-child communication, parents' effectiveness in addressing concerns with school staff, parents' ability to support other parents with gaining entry into schools to implement school improvement projects in some cases,

and parents' ability to share their experiences and suggestions for improving education at community meetings. The PLTI increased parents' knowledge about the nature of schooling, and that increased knowledge, coupled with parents' lived experiences, helped in supporting their children and other families. Some parents demonstrated the ability to emerge as knowledge experts in specialized areas.

Parents' experiences and practices were examined closely through the parent narratives. Parents were able to take on multiple roles (e.g., supporters, monitors, collaborators) and support children's development across contexts (family, school, community). Parents increased their confidence to initiate involvement with schools that seemed unwelcoming in some cases. In addition, parents developed a leadership identity as people who can impact change in the community and support the development of their children and other children across the city's educational landscape. Parents reported an increase in students' willingness to share their school experiences after the parents had participated in the leadership training. Although some parents shared that they joined the parent leadership training program to become more aware of resources to support their child's development, none of the 25 parents shared that they were motivated to join the program to improve their communication or relationship with their children, even though that was one of the positive outcomes of the training. The PLTI's contributions to enhanced parent-child communication and relationship-building seem to be an unintentional positive consequence of participation.

The Parent Leadership Training Institute also influenced parent relationships with one another. Many parents reported that there were no parent-teacher organizations in the charter schools in which their child or children attended. A common concern in parent narratives was limited parent engagement opportunities in schools. Parents expressed that their knowledge of

charter schools were limited, and there weren't many opportunities for parents to convene and engage with one another to learn of school practices and problem solve with one another or those in the school community. The PLTI provided parents with a safe space to reflect on their own educational experiences, learn about best practices in education, express frustration with issues related to school choice, and problem solve with other parents and Urban League Parent Outreach Coordinators. They were able to expand their involvement in schools, access resources for their families, deal with resistance and concerns about unwelcoming school staff, and envision a better school system in New Orleans that ensures a successful path for all learners.

Parents began to realize their collective power as a parent group. At least two parent leaders made a statement about feeling empowered and confident that their involvement made a difference because "there is power in numbers." Parents also expressed that, before participating in the training, they felt their concerns were isolated incidents. However, after participating in the training and having an opportunity to hear about other parents' experiences with charter schools, they realized that they were not alone in their concerns. Other parents also had encountered unwelcoming staff or felt that their involvement at the school was not welcomed.

When designing education projects to address a concern in the field of education, some parents collaborated and designed projects based on their common interests regarding an education issue (e.g., child abuse, early childhood literacy, skill development). Parents' projects were influenced by their interests and talents, as well as their comfort level working with children in specific grade bands or content areas. The projects that parents developed seek to supplement the education of students (tutoring, mentoring, art programs, addressing bullying).

Finding 3 revealed that parents gained the ability to serve as knowledge experts in specialized areas such as navigating the special education process and exercising their rights as

parents of children with special needs. Two parents experienced success with supporting their children with the college entrance process. One parent leader who is also a retired teacher developed key knowledge of school funding, which was shared with other parents at parent meetings. When parents emerge as knowledge experts, they are able to support other parents with key aspects of schooling and demonstrate leadership in supporting other families.

Parents leaders helping other parents is also supported in Finding 6. Parents were instrumental in helping other parents exercise school choice in the school reform landscape. Parents reported sharing with other parents what children were expected to know in kindergarten, on state assessments, and in high school, in order to have a successful transition.

Experiences, Philosophies, and Practices of School Staff

According to Epstein's (2001) Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence, the experiences, philosophies, and practices of the school staff is another important factor in learners' outcomes. Data analysis reveals that the PLTI has the least amount of impact on parents' relationships with those in the charter school community. Many of the parents reported that there was not an operating PTO at their child's school, and the majority of requests to get involved in school improvement efforts did not result in followup by the school staff. However, six out of the 25 parents interviewed gained entry into the school community to implement supplemental education projects. Some parents specifically requested to get involved in school improvement efforts but were directed to fundraising groups instead.

The responses of charter school teachers and leaders to parents interested in increasing their involvement were found to have varied. There were more cases of parents expressing an interest in getting involved and school staff not following up than there were cases of parents being allowed to get involved in the school community. Charters' lack of response to

engagement requests of parents may have influenced the extent to which parents could transfer the knowledge and skills developed during the parent leadership training. Only 28% of charter schools in this predominately charter school context seemed open to the idea of parents serving as equal partners in their child's education, and parent input in improvement efforts were rarely sought.

Epstein (2001) asserts that the goal is for schools to influence homes and homes to influence schools, making homes more academic in nature and schools more welcoming. However, schools will have to seek input from families and demonstrate that their knowledge is valued before a positive shift in culture and climate occurs. This study's findings suggest that the majority of parents who participated in the capacity-building training had children who attended charter schools that were alienating and disempowering. Local participation in school reform was greatly limited.

Epstein's Parent Involvement Framework

Analysis of research findings also confirms that the types of parent engagement that were encouraged by school staff align with the first four constructs of Epstein's Parent Involvement Framework (e.g., parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home). Many schools regularly sent out information regarding tips for establishing routines that support children's success in schools. Schools also communicated students' academic progress and behavior either by parent-teacher conference or written communication sent home. Parents were enlisted to engage in fundraising activities and volunteer to participate in field trips. Distributing parent tips for reading with students and helping students make real-life connections to mathematics also was a common practice. However, parents serving as equal partners, school improvement

planning members, and parent organizers were not encouraged. Schools did not express interest in establishing family, school, and community partnerships.

The fifth construct of Epstein's Parent Involvement Framework is decision-making. Decision-making reflects how much parents advocate for their children's interests and influence the school environment. Three parent leaders—Nia, Brittany, and Dawn—advocated for their children, and their actions may have influenced the school environment. Nia challenged the school's grade reporting policies when her child had a grade of a "B" at progress report time and a failing grade by the time reports cards were sent home. She questioned the school's monitoring of student progress and its commitment to ensuring the success of all learners when teachers are allowed to "grade dump"—or put in lots of grades at the end of the grading period—which limits students' opportunities to alter their study habits, demonstrate growth, and experience success. Nia's attempt may have influenced the school's grade reporting practices, because she reported that this situation never happened again, and she reported that she saw a steady input of grades through the year for both of her children after the incident.

Brittany served as an advocate for her child by conducting a classroom observation and debriefing with the teacher after the lesson. Brittany was able to share her experiences reading with her child and the adjustments she made when she noticed that he was no longer engaging in the story reading. Brittany's willingness to share her experiences and observe her son's level of engagement during the teacher's lesson may have influenced the teacher's approach to student engagement. Brittany and the teacher conducted regular two-way communication as advocated for in federal policy, Epstein's Theory of Overlapping Influence, and Mapp's Dual Capacity-Building Framework.

Dawn's advocacy efforts to support quality services for her special needs child do not have the same happy ending. Dawn asked a community member whom she met through involvement with the Parent Leadership Training Institute to accompany her to her child's IEP meeting. The school stated that it was okay for Dawn to bring a representative to the meeting; however, Dawn saw a shift in her relationship with school staff after the IEP despite leaving feeling like her concerns were addressed. The school staff did not seem comfortable with Dawn exercising her rights as a parent, and the school's willingness to work collaboratively with her on behalf of her son changed once Dawn and the advocate encouraged the school to create a plan to provide her son with intervention services despite a shortage of specialized staff.

Data analysis reveals that schools were inconsistent in their response to parents serving as child advocates and decision-makers in the children's educational experiences. Schools seemed more comfortable with traditional parent engagement constructs (e.g., volunteering, communicating with teachers) rather than engaging parents in school improvement efforts.

Collaborating with the community is the sixth construct under Epstein's Parent Involvement Framework. Participation in the Parent Leadership Training Institute enhanced parents' knowledge of community resources and engagement in the local community to support best practices and additional resources for children in schools and the community. Parents reported feeling more informed about education issues and resources that are available to support learning in school, as well as learning outside of school to supplement the curriculum. For example, Catina reported that she learned about programs and resources that are available to support children experiencing success in school. She started helping other parents get connected and access resources for their families. Parents who participated in the PLTI also partnered with other community groups to advocate for best practices and quality resources. Dawn joined a

support group for parents with special needs and remains involved with the Urban League through the PRIDE parent group.

Epstein's framework and theory shed light on the strengths of the PLTI to improve parent-child communication and strengthen parents' ability to serve as supporters and monitors of their children's learning and development across contexts. The theory also illuminates parents' shift in knowledge of the education system and the need to support children in the community, not just their own. Parents' new knowledge about schools and the need to support all learners in their community was apparent in the issues of concern they chose to address in their community and present at community meetings.

Mapp's Dual-Capacity Building Framework

The narrative inquiry methodology used in this study revealed how parents' roles may have evolved from parents providing the basic needs for their families to parents viewing themselves as partners in their children's education. The parents are constructing roles in their children's learning (e.g., helping with projects, supporting children with problem solving, monitoring student progress) and taking on multiple roles as described in the Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnership (Mapp, 2012).

The parent narratives include examples of each of the seven roles (supporters, encouragers, monitors, models, decision makers, advocates, collaborators) referenced in Mapp's 2012 framework. For example, parent engagement programs are expected to prepare parents to express concerns and serve as *monitors* of their children's education. The Dual Capacity-Building Framework states that parents serve as monitors of their children's time, behavior, boundaries, and resources (Mapp, 2012). Parents' tracking of student progress, as in Nia's case, led to improved grading practices for students in the school community. Brittany conducting a

classroom observation is another example of parents serving as monitors of their child's education. Malika serving as a chaperon on a field trip for her child is an example of parents serving as *supporters* in their children's education; however, when her child's arm was aggressively pulled by a teacher and she monitored whether the school would address the issue with the teacher to avoid this behavior being repeated, Malika also served as a monitor of her child's safety and the safety of other children. When parents participated in the annual education expo to learn of quality school options and offered to share their experiences with schools, parents took on the role of *decision-maker* of education options. Parents took on the role of *collaborator* as they designed and provided feedback to other parents on school and community projects to address issues in their community. Some parents served as collaborators when they implemented projects together based on a shared interest in an education issue they were seeking to address.

The theory and framework (Epstein, 2001; Mapp, 2012) provide an important lens for analyzing the experiences of parent leaders in the PLTI. The findings in many ways confirm the validity of the theory and framework. Implications of this study and suggestions for future research are discussed in Chapter 7.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion

It has been determined that the community-sponsored PLTI contributed to parent empowerment and influenced parents' later actions. The research questions that were answered were 1) In what ways, and to what extent, does the Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI) build the skills, abilities, and leadership of parents to effectively engage in schools and communities? and 2) How does participation in the Parent Leadership Training Institute impact parents both personally and professionally? These questions were informed by Epstein's (2001) Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence, which explains the complex nature of relationships among families, school staff, and community members in supporting children's learning and development. The degree of overlap of efforts is influenced by the history, developmental patterns, and changing experiences of individuals and institutions within each sphere (family, school, community). The eight research findings were consistent with the theory and frameworks presented in Chapter 2.

Narrative inquiry methodology was used to capture the PLTI outcomes through the voices and perspectives of parents who participated in the PLTI in New Orleans during 2012, 2013, and 2014. Using narrative inquiry methodology, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 parents to elicit narratives regarding their parent leadership training experiences; relationships with their children, school staff, and community members; connections initiated or established; and parents' views of their ability to lead across contexts (home, school, community). Eight key findings emerged from this study regarding the benefits of the PLTI and its influence on parents' later actions. Data analysis reveals that the community-sponsored Parent Leadership Training Institute greatly enhanced parents' knowledge of the

nature of schooling, and that knowledge contributed to parents' increased confidence and willingness to initiate involvement, parents' development of a leadership identity, parents' ability to support other parents with navigating the school reform context, and parent engagement after becoming equipped with the skills to support children in the home, school, and community contexts.

Parent narratives reveal perturbing examples of charter school staff exhibiting resistance to parents' requests for participation in schools. Many staff members in the school reform context failed to follow up on parents' requests to become involved in school improvement efforts. However, despite these low levels of interest in local participation in school improvement efforts, the PLTI was found to be instrumental in helping parents cope with change and utilize conflict resolution skills, and parents reported an increased comfort level with initiating involvement in schools and the community. Analysis of parent actions determined that the PLTI contributed to parents' ability to adequately voice concerns related to unwelcoming staff; limited parent engagement school grading practices; student engagement and classroom management; school culture and climate; and the quality of staff, intervention services, and resources to support students' learning and development in the school and community contexts. Parents envision an education for their students that is consistent with place-based education, which immerses students in local heritage, culture, landscapes, and experiences, using these as a foundation for the study of language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and other subjects across the curriculum. Parents also desired a greater investment in afterschool programs to support students' academic development, technology proficiency, and social-emotional development.

The community organization that sponsored the PLTI sought to empower parents and increase their involvement. The leadership program promoted greater parent-initiated dialogue and partnerships with schools and the community. There were success cases found in the parent narratives that legitimized the effectiveness of the Greater Urban League of New Orleans Parent Leadership Training Programs despite concerns with local participation being limited. Some of the benefits of participation in the PLTI were parents' expanded knowledge and access to resources to support their children. Six out of 25 parents interviewed were able to gain entry into the school community and implement projects to impact change. In addition, five out of the 25 parents were found to have the ability to serve as knowledge experts in specialized areas such as special education services, college entrance process, school funding, child protection services, and counseling after participating in the community-sponsored PLTI.

The eight research findings were consistent with Epstein's Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence. Parents' leadership capacity increased after participation in the PLTI sessions, and parents were equipped with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to effectively address concerns and support children across contexts (home, school, community). Mapp's Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships also asserts that parents should be equipped with the knowledge and skills to support students across contexts. The study findings were consistent with this framework in that parents were equipped with the knowledge and skills to develop a leadership identity and support learners across contexts.

Research findings suggest that charter school staff may have preferred traditional modes of parent involvement that align with Epstein's parent Constructs 1 through 4 (parenting, communicating, volunteering, and learning at home) versus parent constructs that support parent input and influence in the school setting (e.g., Constructs 5 and 6 - parents in decision-making,

and collaborating with the community). The PTLI served as a catalyst for parent empowerment and leadership in social institutions (family, school, community) to support students throughout their lifespan. The PLTI had the most influence on parent engagement in the home and community contexts. School staff responses (or lack of responses) to parent engagement requests may have limited parents' contributions to school improvement efforts in the school setting.

Research Implications, Suggestions for Future Research

Parents' knowledge of the nature of schooling was found to be of great importance to parents' increased engagement in the home, school, and community. Knowledge of schooling also contributed to parents' development of a leadership identity. The community forums in the city provided parents with an opportunity to express concerns and offer suggestions for educational improvements. Many parents experienced resistance to engagement in the school context. Future research may include a case study to examine the experiences of the six parents that gained entry into the school setting to implement improvement projects. What were the parent experiences when implementing education improvement projects in charter school settings? Were projects sustained year to year? What were parents' interactions like with school staff, students, and other parents involved in the improvement projects?

Another suggestion for future research would be to examine parents' engagement experiences from one isolated charter network to learn more about differences in parents' experiences across charter networks. Some charter networks may be more willing to work with parents than others. Another study could examine the experiences of male parent leaders in the school reform contexts, as there are so few male parent leaders. Another study could explore the experiences of parents who have children with special needs in charter schools.

Additional research is needed to better understand the practices of charter school staff, especially in relation to family and community involvement. What are school staff perceptions of family and community partnerships? What would capacity-building training for charter staff look like? Every school can benefit from knowledgeable engaged parents. It is hard to argue that schools should give up on working with engaged parents and seek improvement in schools without parent input. Finally, this study only examined the experiences with the Greater Urban League. Examining the experiences of parents who participated in other parent leadership programs such as OPEN could help determine the effectiveness and best practices associated with such programs.

Ultimately, more research in this area can encourage community organizations such as the Urban League to provide ongoing leadership training and support to parents that lead to improvements in their lives, the lives of their children, and their communities. This research study demonstrated the important contributions that these parent leadership programs can have across multiple forums—from the community, the family, to schools.

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Appendix A

Consent Form

Dear Parent Leader,

My name is Rebecca Parrott, and I am a doctoral student in the Department of Education Policy Organization and Leadership at the University of Illinois. I, with the assistance of my advisor, Dr. Menah Pratt-Clarke, am conducting a qualitative research study. Dr. Menah Pratt-Clarke is a Faculty member in the College of Education at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign who has addressed many equity and diversity issues. This research study explores whether participation in a parent leadership training program enhance parent's leadership capacity. We are seeking to document parents' voices and experiences in the New Orleans community.

If you agree to participate in the study, I would like to interview you for about 1 hour to learn about your reasons for participating in the parent leadership training and its benefits to you. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded for transcription only and your responses will be analyzed for the purpose of the study. Your actual name will never be used to protect your privacy. Interviews will be held in a public space (library, coffee shop, or parent information center) therefore I cannot ensure that what we share will be confidential. However, your responses will only be shared with the research team appointed to lead this study. If you do not wish to be audio-recorded I can take handwritten notes.

Your decision to participate or decline participation in this study is completely voluntary and you have the right to terminate your participation at any time without penalty. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. You will receive a gift card in the amount of \$20 after completion of the 60-minute interview. If you decide to meet but do not consent to be a part of the study or if you decide to end the interview before the duration you will receive a gift card in the amount of \$10 for partial participation and/or for expressing further interest in the study. We anticipate no risks to this project greater than what is experienced in normal life and hope that the results will build on our understanding of the benefits of parent leadership trainings for parents personally and professionally. The results of this study will be used for my early research, a scholarly report, a journal article and/or conference presentation. In any publication or public presentation pseudonyms will be substituted for any identifying information.

If you have any questions please call me at 217-766-4265, email me at chairs@illinois.edu or contact my advisor Dr. Menah Pratt-Clarke at menahpc@illinois.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 or irb@illinois.edu.

Thank you so much for your consideration, and I look forward to interviewing you regarding your experiences as a parent and Parent Leadership Training graduate in the city of New Orleans.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Parrott

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. When did you take the parent training? Why did you get involved?
2. What did you learn or experience in the training sessions that was particularly helpful (e.g. civic skills, knowledge about making public policy, understanding how to work across racial, cultural & economic diversity, networking w/ fellow participants & others, using power as a parent leader)?
3. Can you share what actions you took to further your engagement in schools and/or the community? Continuation: What happened? What response did you get? How did people react and what did they do? What difference do you think your engagement made to improve the lives of children, or schools, other families, or the community?
4. Can you share what project you developed at the end of the Parent Leadership Training Institute? Was there a particular issue you were addressing? Why did you choose to address this issue? What was happening about (this issue) in the community before you got involved? What skills and knowledge did you use to develop and implement your project plan? Continuation: What happened? What response did you get? How did people react and what did they do? What difference do you think your project made?
5. Looking back on your experience, what did you accomplish? Who benefited? Which people, groups, organizations, or neighborhoods did you impact?
6. How might you use what you have learned and gained in bringing up your own children? Do you think your participation in the parent training has had an impact on your children? How so? Have you seen any changes in your parenting of relationship with them? How have your child/children reacted to your participation and involvement?
7. How do you plan to use what you've learned or gained? What issue, action or role is next for you?
8. How has the parent training impact you personally and/or professionally?
9. In what ways did your training experience shape your understanding of what a leader is? Do you see yourself differently now, in what ways? Do you think the PLTI has had an impact on those you interact with within the community? How?
10. How comfortable do you feel now when you talk to and work with people from different education backgrounds and experiences different from your own after participating in the parent training?
11. What was your biggest take away from the parent training? What challenges do you continue to face even after participating in the parent training? What suggestions do you have for improving the parent training? What suggestions do you have for charter school staff? Would you encourage other parents to participate in the PLTI? Why or why not?