PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHER SUPPORT AT A CYBER CHARTER HIGH SCHOOL

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Despite high growth rates, cyber charter schools experience higher attrition rates than their brick-and-mortar counterparts. Students' reasons for failing an online course are complex and students may require a high level of teacher support to be successful online. Research examining effective teacher engagement has relied heavily on teacher perceptions, and perceptions of parents may prove especially insightful. In this research we conducted 19 interviews among nine parents of students who were enrolled at a cyber charter school. Interview analysis was guided by, but not limited to, the elements of teacher engagement described in the adolescent community of engagement (ACE) framework. Parents tended to be highly satisfied with the course quality and the support that teachers provided to their students. However, parents also expressed a degree of dissatisfaction with their students' experience in the school and provided recommendations for improvement.

The majority of adolescent students who take online courses do so to supplement their course load in brick-and-mortar schools (Gemin, Pape, Vashaw, & Watson, 2015). However, students are increasingly enrolling in full-time online programs, also called cyber schools (Woodworth et al., 2015). Cyber schools can provide a unique educational opportunity for students and parents who are seeking an alternative to the traditional learning environment. Erb (2004) categorized factors that impact students' and parents' decisions to enroll in cyber schools as either push or pull factors.

Push factors are those that stem from students' academic and personal needs not being met in the traditional environment. Pull factors are those that stem from a desire to obtain certain benefits from learning online.

Although parents and students may choose to enroll in cyber schools for a variety of reasons, their needs may not be fully met in that environment. Research has found that just as parents can choose to enroll their students in online courses, they can also be highly influential in a student's decision to drop online courses (de la Varre, Irvin, Jordan, Hannum, & Farmer, 2014). Parents' perceptions of online learning effectiveness is especially helpful in cyber school settings because they share the same physical space with students and have a unique understanding of their children's needs (Liu, Black, Algina, Cavanagh, & Dawson, 2010). However, additional research is needed that examines in more depth parent perceptions of online teaching and the support that teachers provide to students. As a result, in this research we conducted and analyzed 19 hour-long interviews with nine parents at a cyber charter high school to better understand their perceptions of online teachers' efforts to meet the needs of their students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Framework

Using K-12 online learning research to build on the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework's primary concepts, Borup, West, Graham, and Davies (2014) developed the Adolescent Community of Engagement (ACE) framework. The ACE framework identified four types of engagement: student, teacher, parent, and peer. Student engagement included students' cognitive, behavioral, and affective engagement when participating in learning activities. The ACE framework hypothesized that student engagement would increase when a student's teacher, parent, and peers were actively engaged in their learning. Parent and peer engagement are beyond the scope of this research, but the remainder of this section will describe the elements of teacher engagement.

The ACE framework identified three primary elements of teacher engagement: (1) designing and organizing, (2) instructing, and (3) facilitating. Before discussing each of these elements it is important to note that depending on the instructional model, one or several individuals can fulfill these primary responsibilities. For instance, Borup et al. (2014) examined a full-time program where teachers commonly designed, organized, taught, and facilitated their courses. However, online programs, especially supplemental programs, commonly offer courses that are designed and organized by an instructional designer, and taught by a content and pedagogical expert who also shares facilitating responsibilities with an on-site facilitator who works with students in their brick-and-mortar school (Harms, Niederhauser, Davis,

Roblyer, & Gilbert, 2006). For the purposes of this paper, we will use the term "teacher" to refer to all people who work to fulfill these responsibilities.

The ACE framework first explained that teachers could impact student engagement by designing effective activities that are aligned with learning standards. Cavanaugh, Gillan, Kromrey, Hess, and Blomeyer (2004) explained that when designing learning activities teachers should consider the developmental stages of their students. These researchers suggested that adolescent students in general require require simple directions and that content be divided into shorter segments than what would typically be necessary for adult learners. The International Association for K-12 Online Learning's (iNACOL, 2011a) *National Standards for Quality Online Courses* similarly stated that teachers should ensure that "readability levels, written language assignments and mathematical requirements are appropriate for the course content and grade-level expectations" (p. 11). Furthermore, iNACOL argued that courses materials and activities should be organized logically, contain active learning strategies, provide multiple learning paths that can be adapted to student needs, and require higher-order thinking.

Borup et al. (2014) also explained that learning activities and assessments should be organized using timelines that help to ensure students complete the course by the target date. However, in many programs students are not penalized for submitting work after the pacing guide's target dates. Smith (2009) explained that strict deadlines are often not enforced because online students' personal situations demand a high degree of flexibility. However, that flexibility proves to be one of the largest obstacles for adolescent students whose self-regulation skills are still emerging (Weiner, 2003). Cyber schools can more easily set common deadlines because, unlike supplemental programs, their students share a common school calendar. Garrison (2009) added that "interaction and collaboration are limited by organizational parameters such as self-pacing and the perceived value of self-direction" (p. 99). As online programs move toward a more personalized learning experience in the place, pace, and path of instruction (Patrick, Kennedy, & Powell, 2013) students' opportunities to interact and collaborate with their peers in meaningful ways will be limited.

The second element of teacher engagement is instructing. The majority of online courses are delivered asynchronously (Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2011). Teachers in asynchronous courses are not required to present the material to students multiple times. Instead, teachers spend their time responding to student inquiries and proactively identifying struggling students and offering instructional support and corrective feedback (Borup, Graham, & Drysdale, 2014). The iNACOL (2011b) *National Standards for Quality of Online Teaching* added that teachers are required to have a level of technological expertise to fulfill their responsibilities and can also be asked to help students who encounter technological problems.

The last element of teacher engagement is facilitating interactions. For some students, having a well-designed course and an available instructor is enough to succeed online. However, the majority of adolescent students lack the motivation, self-regulation, and metacognition to succeed even in the best of courses and require that their teachers actively provide them facilitating support (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). The ACE framework highlights three indicators of effective facilitation: (1) nurturing a safe and caring environment, (2) monitoring and motivating student engagement, and (3) encouraging communication and collaboration with and between students and parents (Borup et al., 2014).

Parent Perceptions

Enrolling in a charter school requires parental consent and involvement. Research has also found that charter school parents' are more highly involved than their public school counterparts (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006). The nature of online charter schools demands an especially high level of parental involvement because students are learning from home (Borup, Stevens, & Hasler Waters, 2015). In fact, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2016) argued, "Perhaps more than any other type of educational environment, full-time virtual charter schools require self-motivated students and highly involved parents" (p. 8). Because courses are delivered online, cyber school teachers' actions are more transparent to parents, allowing them to better evaluate their student's learning experience. However, research involving parents focuses largely on parental involvement, not on parents' perceptions of teachers. Although limited, the existing research provides helpful insights.

Litke (1998) provided one of the first insights into parents' perceptions of teacher engagement by interviewing parents whose middle school students were enrolled in a small online program where students learned primarily from home with some "callback" days where students received instructional support at the brick-and-mortar school. Although parents were generally satisfied with the program, their satisfaction did not stem from teacher practices and was largely the result of students being removed from the brick-and-mortar school that they viewed as unfriendly and distracting. In fact, the quality of instruction and lack of teacher contact were cited as weaknesses in the program. This is supported by Erb's (2004) dissertation research that found parents' decision to enroll in a cyber charter school was based more on their dissatisfaction with the brick-and-mortar learning environment than on their desire for students to receive the benefits of online learning. Beck, Egalite, and Maranto (2014) more recently analyzed 208 survey responses and found that parents of special education students were

more likely than parents of general education students to enroll their students in a cyber charter school as a result of their students experiencing behavior problems with other students and a sense that their needs were not being met in their previous brick-and-mortar school. Beck et al. (2014) also found that general education and special education parents were more satisfied with their students' cyber school teachers than their previous public school teachers on several teaching criteria including the level of communication, encouragement, and expectations that teachers provided. Parents of special education students were also more satisfied than parents of general education students. Beck, Maranto, and Lo (2013) also found no significant differences in parent satisfaction between demographic groups.

Butz (2004) conducted a multiple regression analysis to determine how the factors of technology support, instructional support, curriculum programs, and social interactions impacted parents' overall satisfaction with online learning. These four factors accounted for 63.3% of variance in parents' overall satisfaction and the most important variable was instructional support followed by social interactions. Similarly, Sorensen's (2012) survey of 92 parents found that they were generally satisfied with the online courses their students had taken despite concerns regarding their students' social interactions in the course. Parents also expressed appreciation for teachers' level of availability and found that keeping their student on pace was the most challenging aspect of learning online. Shoaf (2007) conducted two focus groups with parents who also expressed concerns over the lack of social engagement in the online learning environment as well as the quality of some elective courses such as art, music, and physical education.

In summary, research examining online teacher practices tends to ignore parents' perspectives despite parents having a unique understanding of their students' needs and learning. For instance, when developing their *National Standards for Quality Online Teaching* (iNACOL, 2011b), "iNACOL organized a team of experts consisting of online teachers, professional developers, instructional designers, researchers, course developers, and administrators" (p. 3) but did not consult the primary stakeholders—online students and their parents. The limited research examining parent perceptions of online instruction has also tended to gather data using surveys. As a result, in this case study research we conducted multiple interviews with parents at a cyber charter high school to better understand their perceptions of the teacher support that their students received. More specifically this research addressed the following questions:

1. Why did sampled parents enroll their student in a cyber high school?
2. How did sampled parents perceive and value teachers' engagement activities at a cyber high school?

METHODS

Setting

Mountain Heights Academy (MHA), a cyber charter school, was selected as the setting for this case study. At the time of this research, MHA employed 21 teachers and enrolled 338 students in grades 9-12 for all or most of their courses. Teachers provided students with daily office hours in four-hour blocks that varied in time of day to accommodate a variety of learning schedules. In addition to teaching specific courses, MHA instituted an online facilitator program where teachers were asked to serve as an online facilitator to 20 of their students. As a facilitator, they worked to understand students' interests and needs and then communicated that information to other MHA teachers. They also acted as an anchor adult whom students would contact when issues arose.

Most MHA courses were created in-house using open educational resources (OER). As a result teachers had a high level of flexibility to modify course content and learning activities to meet students' needs (Tonks, Weston, Wiley, & Barbour, 2013). The courses were offered asynchronously with weekly assignment deadlines, followed by a one-week period when students could submit their work without penalty.

MHA's belief statement stated, "students, parents, and teachers are all part of the educational team." Parents and their students were required to attend a face-to-face orientation meeting where they met teachers, learned about MHA's instructional model, and became familiar with their responsibilities in their student's learning. MHA also worked to actively involve parents throughout the year using a parent organization to which all parents belong.

Participant Sampling and Data Collection

Sampling was based on recommendations from the MHA's facilitators who worked with students most closely. More specifically we asked five facilitators who taught across grade levels and content areas to provide us with two student names. We asked that facilitators provide us with a name of one student who engaged in learning activities but was more dependent on teacher support and interaction than an average student as well as the name of one student who was more independently engaged in learning activities. We then emailed the students' parents/guardians and asked to conduct two interviews with the parent/guardian who was most involved in their students' online learning. When a parent declined we asked the facilitator to provide us with an additional student name. In all cases the parent who agreed to be interviewed was the student's mother. Two teachers

separately recommended two students who were siblings so we interviewed the mother three times instead of two. In total we conducted 19 interviews with nine mothers.

The first interview protocol focused largely on parents' and students' background and on parents' personal engagement activities, and the second interview protocol focused on parents' perceptions of teachers' engagement activities across all of their students' online courses. However, it was common for parents to discuss their perceptions of teachers' engagement in both interviews. As a result, we analyzed portions of all 19 parent interviews for this research. A previous article contains a full analysis of parents' engagement activities (Borup, Stevens, & Hasler Waters, 2015).

Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions were sent to parent participants who reviewed them for accuracy. A member of the research team then analyzed the interview transcripts using elements of constant comparative coding methods (Glaser, 1965). More specifically the researcher followed the "defining rule for the constant comparative method" (Glaser, 1965, p. 439) by coding parents' comments into as many different categories as possible while comparing each statement to all previously coded categories. Similar categories were then grouped. This grouping was guided by, but not limited to, the elements of teacher engagement as defined by the ACE framework. Researchers also met regularly to review the individual codes and how those codes were being grouped. Any disagreements in the analysis were then discussed and resolved. When describing our findings, we used pseudonyms to protect participants' identity.

Findings

In this section of the article we will first share parents' provided reasons for enrolling their students in MHA (research question 1). Following we will share parents' perceptions of the teachers' engagement activities (research question 2).

Reasons for Enrolling

Parents' reasons for enrolling their students in MHA varied depending on students' educational background and goals. Two parents had never homeschooled their students, four had exclusively homeschooled their students, one had home schooled except for two years, one had homeschooled except for four years, and one alternated between homeschooling and public school. Although parents enjoyed homeschooling their children, they found it to be too challenging to teach certain high school curricula. Online learning allowed these parents to maintain a high level of support while offloading the

instructional responsibilities to MHA teachers. Additionally, some parents who homeschooled their children chose MHA because it allowed students to earn a traditional high school diploma. For instance, Ashley realized that when it came time for her son to apply for colleges, he would "need a diploma, something credible, something to say he really did it." Other parents' changing life circumstances required them to take on added responsibilities and they could no longer dedicate the time necessary to homeschool their students.

Parents of students who had experienced learning in brick-and-mortar environments or who had seriously considered brick-and-mortar environments tended to base their decision to enroll their student in MHA on three factors: the quality of education, a need for flexibility, and to avoid conflict. First, Edith explained that in a brick-and-mortar school her son was not receiving the level of attention he needed to reach his educational goals and found that he was able to receive more personalized attention at MHA. Second, parents enrolled their students in MHA due to a need for more flexibility than what was provided in brick-and-mortar environment. For instance, Alice enrolled her daughter in MHA because they were planning on moving and she did not want her daughter to transfer schools. Ashley added that her son enrolled in MHA in part so that he would have the flexibility to participate in swim and water polo teams.

Lastly, conflict avoidance was a motivating factor. For instance, Janice enrolled her daughter into MHA because her feelings conflicted with brick-and-mortar teachers and administrators over how her daughter should be educated. Other parents added that they enrolled their students into MHA when the brick-and-mortar school failed to protect their students from verbal and physical aggression from other students. Parents also wanted to reduce the level of peer pressure their students felt to misbehave and/or underperform in a brick-and-mortar setting. For instance, Laura believed that negative peer pressure in the traditional environment contributed to her son's poor grades and his disrespectful behavior at school and home. These conditions appeared to negatively impact student motivation to learn. Ashley remembered "dragging [her son] out of bed all the time to get him to go to [brick-and-mortar] school," and Anne found that attending a brick-and-mortar school was "sickening" to her daughter.

Perceptions of Teacher Engagement

Once enrolled at MHA, parents were largely satisfied with the courses and the level of teacher support that their students received. One parent stated that MHA teachers "are some the finest [teachers] around and it is nice that there are so many in one [school]" and another parent found that teachers were willing to "go the extra mile" for their student. In fact, parents commonly attributed their students' success to their teachers: "I have to give

the teachers the credit for how successful they've been." Another parent called MHA teachers innovative, confident, and professional and believed that "they really are interested in what they're doing and they're motivated to do well." However, parents also commonly provided recommendations for improvement or expressed some degree of dissatisfaction with their students' courses or the instructional support that they received. In this section we will discuss parents' positive and negative perceptions.

Designing and organizing.

Parents commonly commented on how well the courses were designed overall. However, the quality of course content appeared to vary somewhat across courses. Ashley especially appreciated teachers who "found really creative ways to present the material." For example, she explained how the history and current events teachers used videos that "caught [students'] attention" and were "engaging." Pam added that video lectures were preferable to in-class lectures because they allowed her daughter to "go back and re-watch a lecture" when needed. However, videos alone were not enough and she commented that teachers should "give [content] in different formats."

Parents found that not all learning activities and content were engaging to students. Ashley stated, "if [course content] is not engaging, I have more [behavioral] issues" because her son would "get distracted and go chat or go check out some video he's heard of or download some music." Similarly Anne added, "I see that [teachers] put a great deal of effort into making the lessons interesting for the kids. Without that, it would be very difficult for a kid to stick with it, and I really appreciate that about the teachers." Leslie explained that rather than trying to change students' interests it was best when teachers tailored the course content to "what [students] think is important." In part this was accomplished by providing students with some level of choice in their learning activities. For instance, at times teachers would provide students the "option of reading texts or watching videos" or provided students with a list of projects or topics to choose from.

At times course content proved unclear or confusing for students. For instance, Janice found that in two courses teachers asked "vague questions," and Ruth similarly explained that some assignment rubrics were unclear. Some teachers seemed responsive when they became aware of these issues. Pam recalled when her daughter was confused reading a chemistry text and asked her teacher to create a video that better explained the material. The teacher made the video and Pam's daughter told her, "Oh Mom, that helped so much. She got us a video and it helped so much!"

Parents also expressed concerns regarding their students' workload. Janice believed that "sometimes [her daughter] was working herself to the bone" and stated, "there just seemed to be a little too much work in some

of those core classes. It just really was a little overboard." Ruth added that at times the amount of course content and assignments "just seemed a little overwhelming" and that some teachers were requiring "nonsense busy-work" that was "not a meaningful or good use of [students'] time." Ashley summarized that with online learning "there is temptation…to give the kids a ton of information" but believed that the best online teachers "found a way to pare down the information."

In general, parents believed that teachers effectively organized the course assessments and content within the learning management system (LMS). Alice stated that MHA teachers "are really trained and seem to be really well organized." Leslie added that she appreciated how weekly units were listed and "broken down and they had little check boxes off to the side." Similarly, Ashley found that, "for the most part, it's very clear what [students] need to do. You go into your class, you watch this, you read this, you watch this…they are really well organized; you know exactly what's coming."

Although the courses had regular deadlines, Alice appreciated that most teachers would "open the assignments up a week or two in advance so if the child knows they are going to be on vacation or something they can work ahead and kind of know what is expected of them." Parents also found that weekly deadlines helped their students stay on pace to complete the course. However, there was one parent, Ruth, who was "just not happy with the weekly deadlines" because she found in some cases they served as disincentives for her son to do the work. She recalled that in one course her son earned a 59% on an assignment because the assignment was submitted late "and so the next time [she] said 'don't even bother doing that [late assignment].'" However, when asked for recommendations to improve the policy she struggled to provide an alternative: "The weekly deadlines and the points stuff could be somewhat different and I'm not sure how because there needs to be deadlines. You can't just say 'oh do this whenever' but some things take more time."

Instructing.

Parents recognized the importance of teachers providing personalized instruction to their students in addition to offering well-designed and organized courses. In general parents found that students could easily obtain instructional support because their "teachers are always there." Parents credited teachers' availability during the four daily office hours they were required to provide. They reported that teachers would commonly provide instructional support to students via G-chat, but would also talk to students on the phone or in a video call as needed. Ashley, who had enrolled her sons in other online programs, described teachers' availability as "phenomenal" and

was "the thing that keeps [them] in MHA—the accessibility to the teachers." Leslie found that the level of instructional support at MHA was better than at a brick-and-mortar school because in a brick-and-mortar school she was required to help on homework projects that challenged her and her students' abilities. Alice added that even when she could help her student on an assignment it was "so much easier for her [daughter] to just talk to her [MHA] teacher and the teachers [were] always so helpful and kind." Anne summarized, "[Students] get more help and attention from the teachers at MHA than our kids did at a public school."

Students also appeared to vary in the level of instructional support that they needed. This was especially true in math and science courses. On one end of the spectrum were students who required little or no instructional support, and on the other end of the spectrum were students, similar to Leslie's son, who "struggled so badly with math" that his teacher would almost daily "take time out of her schedule to sit with him and explain whatever he needs help with, and he has improved in math immensely." Although the majority of parents were satisfied with the level of support their students received, Janice believed that her daughter's math teacher did not provide sufficient support and "needed to work with her more and not make the questions so hard for the students."

Facilitating interactions.

In addition to providing quality courses and making themselves available to students, parents explained that they appreciated it when teachers proactively facilitated student engagement by encouraging communication with students and parents, nurturing caring relationships with students, and motivating students to engage in learning activities.

Parents explained that teachers would initiate personal communication with students throughout the semester, but especially near the beginning of the course. These communications would most commonly occur via email or G-chat, but Anne explained that one teacher called her students on the phone:

> *It took them by surprise. They thought they had done something wrong and that the teacher was calling to fix it, but they realized that the teacher wanted to see how they were doing and find out if they had any questions. My kids were relieved, and they thought that it was really cool that they had talked to their teacher on the phone.*

Another teacher had mandatory video calls with students periodically throughout the course. Ruth valued those types of communications but also found that her son was somewhat anxious before the first video call and told

her, "Oh my gosh this is going to be terrible. Look at my hair, look at my room." However, Ruth explained that her son quickly became confortable with the video call and the second call "was no big deal."

Although it was less common for teachers to personally contact parents, they tended to copy parents on email communication that they had with their students. This included regular progress reports that teachers sent via MHA's LMS. The progress report contained students' course grades and a statement such as "Hey, this is your current grade. Let us know if you don't like your current grade or if there's something we can do to help bring it up. If there's something that you're struggling with, please give me a call." However, parents viewed these progress reports somewhat differently. Most parents agreed with Leslie that they were helpful, "The teachers are constantly emailing. I get emails from every one of their teachers, sometimes once, twice, three times a week just checking on them…It's amazing the support that they give." However, Leslie believed that the progress reports were unnecessary because she "can just log on [to the LMS] and get more up to date information." She also stated, "[Teachers] send out progress reports ad nauseam…it's a form letter and it's just clogging up my email, frankly." Instead, Leslie appreciated personal communications with teachers when necessary but found that the need varied across her students. More specifically, she found that she "rarely" needed to communicate with her daughter's teachers but communicated weekly with at least one of her son's teachers. Pam received some personal emails from teachers following the success of her student and believed that those types of communications were "really outstanding." Ruth also communicated personally with her son's teachers but found that she had to initiate the communication herself. Edith added that when she has contacted a teacher, they responded "instantly" or "within the hour." However, Laura appeared reluctant to initiate contact with teachers: "Maybe I was supposed to call them when I noticed the grades were falling. It's probably just my fault I would guess."

Parents also found that through these personal interactions with students, teachers were able to nurture caring relationships by extending their conversations to topics beyond the course content. For instance, Pam recalled one teacher contacting her student around Thanksgiving and asking, "We had such-and-such pie for Thanksgiving. How was yours?" Anne added that when her daughter worked with teachers they made the interactions "very fun" and that she believed her daughter "appreciated the relationships that she had built with her teachers." Overall parents agreed that it was important for their students to know that their teachers "are actually a 'real' teacher, not a digital face on a screen." Alice believed that her daughter became more "comfortable contacting them" once she had formed a relationship with teachers and in some cases viewed her teachers as a type of

"friend." Pam added that developing these relationships required teachers to be "comfortable being around teenagers" and to have the "ability to interact well with teenagers." Ashley believed that some teachers were better at interacting with their students than others and that some were unable to bridge that divide: "They feel 'real,' but they feel 'teachery.' I don't know how to describe it."

Parents explained that these relationships had a motivational effect on students because they were more likely to enjoy a course "if they feel that they like the teacher and the teacher likes them." They related that this was especially true when teachers showed "enthusiasm" and maintained an "upbeat," "positive," and "cheerful" disposition. Parents were also aware that teachers attempted to motivate students with verbal encouragement. For instance, Sylvia believed that it was motivating to her daughter when she received messages from her teachers that told her "You can do this! You know how to do this!" Leslie explained that when teachers know students personally they are better able to "push" students to "take it one step further."

DISCUSSION

The findings from this case study should be understood within the context of this cyber school and should not be generalized. Wolcott (1994) explained that qualitative researchers are often tempted to speculate about implications of their research in ways that extend well beyond the research environments. Although findings should not be generalized, Merriam (1998) explained that "insights gleaned from case studies can directly influence policy, practice, and future research" (p. 19). In this section we highlight ways that this research may prove insightful for researchers and practitioners in similar environments while also cautioning against generalizations.

Implications for Practice

In this study parents reported that most courses were well designed and that teachers were responsive in modifying the course materials when they became aware of challenges. When MHA began in 2009, they were named the Open High School of Utah to emphasize that one of their core missions was to design courses using open educational resources (OER) (Tonks et al., 2013). In their *Keeping Pace* reports Watson, Pape, Murin, Gemin, and Vashaw (2014) explained, "Mountain Heights is the only school in the country whose course materials are based entirely on open educational resources" (p. 160). However, as MHA's course offerings expanded they were required to purchase some of their courses. In previous research, MHA teachers appeared most satisfied with OER courses as opposed to purchased courses because they could more easily personalize the course to meet their

students' needs students' needs (Borup & Stevens, 2016). Allowing cyber school teachers to design course materials appears to be the exception rather than the rule. Gill et al.'s (2015) national survey of cyber schools found that only 38% of cyber schools serving 26% of students were required to develop curriculum. Many supplemental online programs do not allow teachers to modify course content to ensure consistency and quality across teachers (Harms et al., 2006). While this instructional model narrows the scope of teachers' responsibilities, Hawkins, Barbour, and Graham (2012) found that teachers who are not allowed to design or modify their courses can feel disconnected from the teaching profession, and it is possible that parents would also view these teachers as somewhat disconnected from the course. Additional research examining parent perceptions of course quality is needed in a variety of programs.

Some parents were critical regarding the amount of work some courses required and that not all learning activities were engaging for students. Parents also found that students' off task behavior increased during the less engaging activities. Previous research has found that teachers especially enjoy teaching online because they do not have classroom management responsibilities (Borup & Stevens, 2016; Archambault & Crippen, 2009). However, it is important to note that student management issues do not disappear; they are simply shifted to parents (Liu et al., 2010; Borup et al., 2015). Because teachers' physical separation from students can make it difficult to assess students' affective engagement and off-line behavior, parents can provide teachers with important insights regarding students' engagement. Although student evaluations are commonplace in higher education, they are relatively uncommon in high schools despite recent efforts to include them as part of teacher evaluations. This research suggests that even greater insights could be obtained if students and parents participate in course evaluations.

MHA is somewhat unusual in their use of regular deadlines in all of their courses. Gill et al.'s (2015) national survey research found that more than three-quarters of online charter schools provided students with self-paced courses and that 60% provided most of their courses using a self-paced model. In general, interviewed parents appreciated deadlines and believed that they helped their students to stay on pace. One parent believed that weekly deadlines actually discouraged her son from completing work because he would rather not do the work at all as opposed to receiving partial credit. However, even this parent stated that "there needs to be deadlines." Any-pace courses have increasingly been criticized for their high attrition rates, and deadlines may help students maintain an adequate learning pace (Freidhoff, 2016). At the same time, Smith (2009) explained that strict deadlines are often not enforced because online students' personal situations

demand a high degree of flexibility. Furthermore, Close (2009) argued that course grades should be impartial, consistent, and based entirely on students' competence—not on attendance, effort, and citizenship. However, Immerwahr (2011) argued that there is a "pedagogically appropriate use for what might be called 'motivational grading'" (p. 335) and that motivational grading is especially valuable in student-centered courses. However, Immerwahr explained that motivational grading policies are not appropriate in all courses and that it should not be used as the exclusive means of motivating students. Unfortunately, there is surprising little research examining grading policies, and more research is needed that examines and develops policies that find a balance between students' need for flexibility and their need to be held accountable.

Parents valued teachers' efforts to communicate and nurture relationships with their students and believed that students were more motivated when they understood that their teachers "are actually a 'real' teacher, not a digital face on a screen." Parents' comments are similar to Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's (2000) definition of social presence as "the ability of participants in the Community of Inquiry to project their personal characteristics into the community thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as 'real people'" (p. 89). In the ACE framework, Borup et al. (2014) viewed social presence as an "enabling element" because teachers' efforts are more likely to be successful once they have established a degree of social presence in the course.

Parents further believed that some teachers were more effective at establishing their social presence than others. As a result, the strategies and skills needed to effectively establish social presence and develop relationships with students should be taught and developed by teachers. In fact, "strong communication skills" was the most commonly cited prerequisite to effective online instruction by practicing online teachers on a national survey (Archambault & Larson, 2015). Parents explained that some teachers attempted to establish these relationships more quickly using phone and video calls. These synchronous modes of communication made students feel uncomfortable temporarily, and students may feel more comfortable initially if teachers sent them recorded video communication and feedback. Research in higher education settings have found that asynchronous video communication can help teachers establish a high level of social presence while maintaining some of the benefits of asynchronous text and synchronous video communication (Borup, West, & Graham, 2012; Borup, West, & Thomas, 2015; Borup, West, Thomas, & Graham, 2014; Moore & Filling, 2012). More research is necessary that examines additional strategies that teachers use to establish their social presence. This type of research is especially important because in previous research parents have cited the lack of social interactions as being a

major concern with learning online (Sorensen, 2012; Shoaf, 2007).

Lastly, researchers, administrators, and teachers should work with parents to identify best practices for parent-teacher communications. MHA teachers regularly communicated with parents by copying them on their communications with students and sending weekly progress reports. While most parents were happy to receive these communications, some found the number of emails overwhelming and wished for a more targeted and personalized approach. For instance, cyber schools may choose to send one weekly report that includes students' progress across all of a student's courses. Gill et al. (2015) reported that 91% of cyber schools require their teachers to communicate with parents, but little is known regarding how these communications are received by parents. A better understanding about how cyber school parents communicate is critical and could lead to a better understanding of how teachers and parents can collaborate to improve student engagement.

Implications for Research

Because this research is not generalizable, replication research is needed. Spector, Johnson, and Young (2015) stated, "Replication studies add confidence in findings and are necessary to generate a basis for generalization beyond the original project setting" (p. 2). By only interviewing nine parents, we also cannot make claims of saturation in our data analysis and the perceptions that we identified are ultimately incomplete. As a result, replication research in similar settings will likely provide additional insights. Similarly, teacher responsibilities can vary greatly across online programs and additional research is needed examining parent perceptions of teacher engagement in a variety of settings.

Additional research is needed that varies in methodology. The participants from this research were not randomly selected, and all parent participants had students who were engaged in learning activities but varied in their dependence on facilitator support and interactions. A more general understanding of parents' perceptions would be obtained if researchers randomly selected parent participants. Furthermore, additional insights would be gained if researchers purposefully sampled parents of students who were disengaged from their online courses. Merriam (1998) explained, "In qualitative research, a single case or small nonrandom sample is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many" (p. 208).

This research also relied exclusively on parent interviews. Greene, Caracelli, and Graham (1989) explained that all data collection methods have inherent biases and limitations and that greater understanding is pos-

sible when researchers use a variety of methods to collect and analyze data. For instance, analysis of actual course communications and documents could support or contradict parent perceptions. Surveys could also be used to obtain perceptions from a large number of parents.

The ACE framework proved helpful in guiding this research. Mishra and Koehler (2006) explained that research frameworks help to coordinate research efforts by "highlighting relevant issues and ignoring irrelevant ones" (p. 1043). However, researchers should also recognize that all frameworks are limited in their ability to describe phenomena and should not limit their efforts to only what is described in a specific framework. Additional descriptive and exploratory research would be especially helpful to "refine and/or expand the ACE framework and, more important, identify the critical components to student success" (Borup et al., 2014, p. 23). This type of qualitative research can also help to inform the creation of validated instruments that quantitatively measure the different constructs identified in the ACE framework. These types of validated instruments would be especially helpful in identifying factors that are most highly related to student performance and learning.

CONCLUSION

In this case study we examined parents' perceptions of teacher engagement at a cyber charter school. Our analysis of 19 interviews with nine parents was guided by the ACE framework and found that parents held largely positive views of the course design and the support that teachers provided to their students. Parents appreciated course content that contained a variety of media and learning activities with clear expectations that engaged students' situational interests. Although parents were largely positive about the courses, at times parents found that learning activities were vague or poorly paced. However, parents found that teachers' instructional efforts largely compensated for any perceived weaknesses in the course design and organization. In fact, parents found that students received more personalized instructional support than they received previously in face-to-face environments. Most teachers were also effective at developing relationships with students and motivating them to engage in the course. While these findings are not generalizable, they can provide important insights to teachers and administrators. Researchers can also build on these findings in future research in differing learning environments and using varying research methods. While difficult, this type of coordinated research effort is necessary to identify practices that effectively improve student engagement, learning, and performance.

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