Strong Families and Successful Students: A Qualitative Study of Families Involved in a Strength-Based Community Program

Jennifer Sanguiliano, Kim Anderson, Shawn Welcome, Philip Hissom, Brandy Hannah, and Natalie Lovero

Abstract: *Although researchers have found that family involvement impacts educational outcomes for children, there remains a dearth of knowledge regarding the connection between strengthening families and children's academic success. This study examined what parents' perceptions regarding the internal and external factors that strengthen families who face economic disadvantage are and how parents' perceptions of what strengthens families relate to children's academic outcomes. Using thematic analysis, this qualitative study explored the perceptions of economically disadvantaged parents (n = 33) regarding the internal and external factors that strengthen families and how this relates to children's academic achievement. Strong families communicate respectfully with each other, spend time together, and are active in the community. Further, participating in extracurricular activities strengthens families. In addition, the inclusion of agency/organizational oversight and accountability of student progress, along with access to educational resources, are important for economically disadvantaged families. As education begins in the home, families who encourage communication, extracurricular activities, quality family time, and social capital are setting their children up for success in schools.*

From Title I allocations introduced with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, to the reforms within 1998 Nation at Risk and the infamous 2001 No Child Left Behind, the education world has encountered policies and reforms aimed at increasing the academic gains of underserved populations (Kessinger, 2011). Despite over fifty years of reform, there is still an academic gap along economic lines within the United States (Reardon, 2013). Federal policies such as No Child Left Behind highlight the significance of impacting both educational delivery and school operations to address such educational disparities, yet other factors including the role of families in children's academic achievement is highlighted less (Hursh, 2007).

With the understanding that academic achievement is not solely dependent on the classroom, researchers have examined the educational influence of family and the community (Barnard, 2004; Fantuzzo, McWayne, Perry, & Childs, 2004; Houteville & Conway, 2008; Woolley & Grogan-Kaylor, 2006). Organizations such as the Search Institute underscore how the family is one of the primary indicators of student success, with the idea that strong families lead to strong students (Roehlkepartain & Syvertsen, 2014). Although research regarding increased parental school involvement and support is associated with academic success (Banard, 2004; Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001; Houtenville & Conway, 2008), we have found no research that has examined the perspectives of economically disadvantaged parents regarding family assets and student achievement. Given such, additional research is warranted that would examine parental perspectives to address the gap regarding how strong families influence student success for marginalized children.

Approach to Study

The community participatory-based research (CPBR) design involved a collaboration between a university public affairs doctoral research practicum and The City Project, a local community agency. The CPBR design allowed for a community to be a part of the study, rather than simply serving as the subjects (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998). In this way, roles and research responsibilities were shared, ensuring equity among agency staff, community residents, and university researchers. The current study was part of a comprehensive program evaluation of The City Project's Family Builders, a family academic initiative. It focused on how parents of economic disadvantage describe the practices and actions associated with strong families and how those qualities impact the educational outcome of their children.

While community and educational programs that aim to close the achievement gap via family academic encouragement and participation exist, there is limited research demonstrating the link between family strengthening activities and student academic achievement. The present study aims to further address this link through two research questions:

1) What are parents' perceptions regarding the internal and external factors that strengthen families who face economic disadvantage?

2) How do parents' perceptions of what strengthens families relate to children's academic outcomes?

Literature Review: Families and Academic Success

Family, Early Childhood, and Elementary School

Family contribution to academic success starts early in a child's educational experience. Fantuzzo, McWayne, Perry, and Childs (2004) looked at the role of family in early academics by studying 144 preschool students enrolled in the HeadStart program. Simple family activities such as reading as a family, incorporating

education at home, and discussions about the school day lead to increased student motivation to learn. This was particularly noticeable with language-based activities (through reading and discussions) which promoted vocabulary retention in young students. Additionally, students who had parents providing at-home support for education had fewer discipline issues (Fantuzzo et al., 2004). Similar results were found with older children.

While school takes up approximately one third of a day and sleep another third, how the remaining time is spent can relate to academic outcomes. Hofferth and Sandberg (2001), in their aptly titled article "How American Children Spend Their Time," looked at weekday and weekend time allowance diaries for 2,818 children under the age of 12. From these journals, time eating, sleeping, participating in family activities (chores and free time), school/daycare attendance, and leisure activities were reported. Ethnicity was found to play a role in how free time was spent, with the authors noting that White, non-Hispanic children watched less television while Asian and African American children logged more hours per week in front of the television (5 and twenty-five additional hours, respectively). Asian children were also more likely to indicate time at home spent doing academic activities; African American children spent more time at church; and Hispanic children reported more household chores and family meal time (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001). For school-aged children, standardized test scores were reported and compared to their activity logs. Students who had greater amounts of family time (dinners, chores, church, etc.) had higher academic test scores (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001). In this way, simply spending time with family may increase academic gains, regardless of interaction context. Coleman (1988) alluded to this phenomenon as social capital within the family; children who feel important and valued do better in school.

The combination of family time and parental education interaction in and out of school has lasting results. A Chicago longitudinal study of families (1,165 students, 94% African American, 6% Latino, 88% eligible for free or reduced lunch) and educational outcomes found for each activity that the parent regularly completed on the family involvement scale (cooking with family, talking about school, reading together), the benefitting child was expected to stay in school two months longer than similar students without parental involvement (Barnard, 2004). Simple family activities can have a lasting impact on educational attainment.

To validate the parents' claims of involvement in educational activities in the home, Barnard (2004) also asked teachers to rate the parents on their involvement. For every year of parent involvement in the schools, as rated by a classroom teacher, there was a 21% decrease in the possibility of high school dropout (Barnard, 2004). As there are many factors that influence academic retention and success, it is encouraging to recognize a potential intervention that can be easily implemented by a family. These studies all highlight the importance of family involvement in early educational endeavors.

Family and Secondary Education

Young children are not the only ones who benefit from family interaction with their education. Two large-scale studies conducted by Woolley and Grogan-Kaylor (2006) and Houtenville and Conway (2008) looked at how family involvement enhanced academic achievement in middle and high school students. The first study of 2,099 middle and high school students examined family factors of integration, satisfaction, support, and home academic environment as determinants of school outcomes (behavior, school coherence, academic performance), finding that different parts of family life translated to diverse areas in the education world (Woolley & Grogan-Kaylor, 2006). With a link between perception of family support to school coherence, or feelings about school, Woolley and Grogan-Kaylor described family satisfaction and family integration to be significant deterrents to misbehavior at school.

Where Woolley and Grogan-Kaylor (2006) addressed behaviors and attitudes towards school in relation to the home, Houtenville and Conway (2008) used data from the more than 10,000 student responses in a National Education Longitudinal Study to further understand the link between parent effort and student outcomes. Measured via eighth-grade student responses to questions regarding parental discussions of student interests, school activities, volunteering, and attending meetings, the researchers were able to quantify parental effort. Participating students' scores were then tracked for the next two years to determine academic growth. Houtenville and Conway (2008) found that parental effort had a similar effect on achievement as an increase in the state education budget or additional parental educational attainment. In other words, simply discussing school at the dinner table may result in similar academic gains as substantial educational budget increases.

While parental effort was also found to be positively related to family income and parental education, race and ethnicity were found to have little impact on parental effort with the exception of increased frequency of attending school meetings for parents of color. Similarly, Woolley and Grogan-Kaylor (2006) found that students of color self-reported greater feelings of school coherence, indicating that interventions at the family level (home academic culture) may work to further increase positive feelings towards education and academic success. This supports previous studies that linked parental involvement and interest in school (Race, ethnicity, and income were not associated with a change in school behavior in the Woolley and Grogan-Kaylor (2006) study.). Just as with elementary school studies, family strength and parental effort increases academic achievement for middle and high school students.

Family, Social Capital, and Education

In Coleman's (1988) seminal article regarding social capital as a predictor of human capital, two different forms of social capital are shown to make significant differences in educational outcomes. The first, social

capital within the family, as described earlier, relates to the student's perceived role in the family, the support of the family, and the attitudes towards one another. Similar to Woolley and Grogan-Kaylor (2006) and Houtenville and Conway (2008), students who feel that they are valued by their family were more likely to graduate and succeed academically (Coleman, 1988). Intrafamily relationships are not the only ones that matter. Families that are part of a larger group (i.e., religious affiliation while enrolled in a private school) also have a greater network that leads to a reduction in dropout rates (Coleman, 1988). Hill and Taylor (2004) recognize this form of social capital and add that when parents are involved in the school and meet with other parents, a new network of academic accountability is formed, strengthening the family ties to education. Echoing Woolley and Grogan-Kaylor's (2006) findings of school coherence, a family's pro-education message is amplified when matched by other parents in the community and social network.

This form of social control allows parents to work together and with schools. When positive beliefs about education and school behavior are promoted "across settings and from different sources, the messages become clear and salient, reducing confusion about expectations" (Hill & Taylor, 2004, p. 162). Woolley et al. (2008) agree, highlighting that an increase in social capital within a neighborhood leads to a subsequent increase in K-8 academic success. Furthermore, Woolley et al. (2008) note that neighborhood physical conditions relate to academic success. When a neighborhood declines, so does its students. This leads to the assertion that neighborhood projects to improve the physical attributes of the community, in conjunction with group meetings addressing common concerns, will lead to academic gains for the children who live in the area. Through the inclusion of other families and the community, the nuclear family expands into a support system which may benefit students.

Methods

In line with the collaborative principles of CBPR research, the agency, community, and university engaged in nearly every aspect of the research. An increased level of community and agency involvement allows for the project to become more authentic by sharing power and ownership of the research (Padgett, 2012). While the overarching community agency and university partnership used a CBPR approach to examine the Family Builders program, this qualitative study focuses on the education component using a multiple case design. Case studies use multiple perspectives to better understand a social question within a specified time and place (Mertens, 2009; Padgett, 2012). In this case, parents and guardians associated with a family-strengths program shared their beliefs and ideas in small focus groups. As case studies focus on a small area, it is often argued that they are not generalizable, a common concern in research. This study addresses this by encouraging open dialog among participants and working towards understanding the reality of the families, rather than attempting to find an overarching solution (Mertens, 2009).

Setting

The City Project provides a variety of services and programs to a community that is 79% African American, 39% below the federal poverty level, and 10% unemployed (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). One of these programs, Family Builders, works towards the goal of strengthening families within the community. Family Builders provides local families with monthly dinner meetings with guest speakers on topics of interest, community engagement activities, exposure to local culture and resources, and monitoring of student report card grades with opportunities for tutoring and mentoring.

Procedure and Sampling

Working collaboratively, The City Project and students of a university public affairs doctoral research practicum discussed and determined shared research goals and proposed focus group questions prior to entering the community setting (see Appendix). At one of the regularly scheduled Family Builders monthly meetings, prospective participants/participating families were introduced to the researchers and provided a consent form as well as a flyer explaining the goals of the study. Following this introduction, The City Project and student researchers remained in contact to plan the focus group research for the following monthly meeting. A week prior to the meeting, the agency reached out to residents reminding them of the upcoming meeting and study.

The Family Builder's meetings are voluntary and vary in attendance. They have served 95 individuals since the program began in 2015. For this study, 33 individuals attended the monthly meeting and agreed to be a part of the study. These 33 individuals formed five focus groups. This convenience sample was representative of the population that engages with Family Builders on a regular basis. Qualitative studies traditionally have smaller sample sizes to allow for more in-depth research, this study's sample size allowed for the participants voices to be heard within the focus groups (Padgett, 2012).

To ensure anonymity, participants used pseudonyms during the study. To determine group differences by attendance, participant attendance rates were determined by The City Project and assigned different regions of the United States. On the night of the focus groups, the participants chose their pseudonym from the region that matched their level of attendance, with the Northwest, for example, representing individuals who attended 75%-100% of the monthly meetings (see Table 1). There was an overflow category (Midwest) for three participants. Once the participants chose their pseudonyms from the predetermined region, they were given a paper survey requesting information regarding demographic data, their children's student information, and generic information regarding the program (see Table 2). After dinner, the children of the participating families went to

an activity while the adults moved to their region groups. Each group, led by a student researcher, was recorded using a digital recorder. The group session was 35-55 mins in length.

Table 1

Participant Data by Assigned Region

Region	Attendance Range	Number of Participants	Average Age	Total Number of Children
Northwest	76-100%	8	47	15
Southwest	50-100%	7	37	16
Northeast	25-49%	8	37	13
Southeast	1-24%	7	45	12
Midwest	Overflow	3	54	2

Table 2

Participant Group Data

Participant Data	
Ages	26 – 68 years old
Race/Ethnicity	African American/Black (75%),
Relationship Status	Married (40%), Single (37%)
Education Levels	Community College/Junior College (30%), College/University degree (24%), Masters' Degree/Beyond (10%)
Employment	Full time (75%), Part time employees (12%), Not employed/retired (12%)

Data Analysis

Following the focus groups, the student researchers transcribed the recordings. Key words throughout the transcripts were observed, noted, and discussed to identify subcategories within the framework of the interview questions asked. Common codes included family communication, unity, structure, respect, exposure to opportunities, and participation in activities. The researchers then used axial coding to determine connections between the identified codes (Padget, 2012). For example, exposure to opportunities and family participation in activities both were related to the concept of outside factors that strengthen families.

The findings and analysis were presented to the agency and then to the community at a following monthly family meeting. The research team also produced a white paper outlining key findings that was given to the agency.

Ethical Considerations

To be enrolled in the practicum research course, the student research team had to complete the core coursework of their public affairs doctoral program (minimum of 27 credit hours). Supervised by the course professor, and operating under the auspices of the university IRB, the research team was careful to safeguard the privacy of those involved in the Family Builders program. To further ensure that the interview and survey questions were relevant and appropriate for the community, The City Project shared the proposed questions with community leaders. The final interview and survey questions reflected the suggested edits by both The City Project and the community leaders.

To maintain participant confidentiality, minimize potential risks, and ensure database security, we implemented several risk management procedures. Our IRB-approved consent form delineated several elements for individuals to better appraise the costs-benefits of their participation:

1) a clear statement of the general purpose of the research,

2) an invitation to voluntarily participate in the study,

3) an explanation of all research procedures,

4) a clear statement of any reasonably foreseeable risks or discomforts,

5) a description of any benefits to the participants that may be reasonably expected from the research, and

6) confidentiality assurances.

All data were coded, summarized, and quoted in such a way that the participants could not be identified. At the research site where information was processed or maintained, all confidential records that would permit identification of individuals were kept in locked file cabinets when not in use by authorized personnel. Password-protected computers were used, and electronic data transfers were protected by data encryption.

Results

Parents identified that practices and actions of strong families include respectful communication between parents and children, spending quality time together, and being engaged in the school and community, particularly in activities that strengthen families. Specifically,

internal traits within the family included four categories: communication, respect, structure, and unity. External family factors included three categories: Attending community activities, engaging in new opportunities, and working together/spending time outside of the home. Education-focused themes included the agency's student accountability and access to educational resources.

Internal Factors: Communication and Togetherness

Internal factors were heavily discussed during the interviews, the four categories (i.e., communication, respect, structure, and unity) merged to form two themes: communication allows for respect and strong families spend time together. Communication was often described as a form of mutual respect between parents and their children. One participant observed: "Also respect. We respect our children as well as ourselves...knowing that our children have an opinion too, when sometimes it may not be what we want to hear, but we have to listen" (South Dakota, age 38). New Hampshire (age 32) agreed, noting that it is important to family strength that children feel that they can express their concerns.

> Sometimes you listen to your kid and they're like complaining about something that you take is just irrelevant...but you know, it's really important to them is really big for them and being able to sit down and even if you tell them...don't worry about it. It's OK. Giving them the respect to know that, hey, you matter to me what you feel about that matters.

Respect also was mentioned in terms of tone and forging the expectation for open communication and conversation within the household.

> I allow my son to talk, not in a disrespectful way, but I allow him to voice what's on his mind because I started this from the time he could talk. I always have an ongoing conversation with him and he's ok so far. And I think it's a big difference for the child to be able to respectfully tell the parent what's on their mind and in their heart. That way you get to know your child as well and you're not just a sergeant in the house but you're allowing them to communicate with you and you communicate with them. (Georgia, age 51)

Several of those interviewed also highlighted the importance of listening to their children. New Mexico (age 35), for example, stated, "I feel communication is a big part of it... especially with kids, having them feel comfortable enough to talk to you about certain things and being open minded with them and basically not putting anything off limits." South Dakota (age 38) added, "Also respect [is important]. We respect our children as well as ourselves. Letting our children have an opinion too, when sometimes it may not be what we want to hear, but we have to listen." This sentiment was repeated with Alaska (age 40) who stated:

> I just want to add, listening to each other [parents and children] helps a lot because I think a lot of times as parents we provide the information. We tell them what to do and then they give feedback as to why they don't want to do or why they don't feel like it. So I think if you listen to each other, that helps a lot too because at least you'll get a better understanding where they're coming from and you can get the same understanding. And so that goes with communication. But definitely listening, too.

Another theme found within internal support was that strong families do things together. This theme, merging spending time with unity, was seen in Georgia's (age 51) comment:

> Within the family, I think spending time together to do things together. The whole family. Not just the children doing stuff and the mother and father someplace else doing what they want to do. But to bring the whole unit together...spend time together as a whole.

Vermont (age 49) mentioned that family time was important, even if it is during every day travel, noting "quality time together...we still got a lot of times in the car going here, going there, going here. They're going to get home and you're covering things, books, quality time outside of the school." New Hampshire (age, 32) equated intentional time with family time:

> I feel like it's in the intentional time day to day. We can spend that time in the morning or taking them to school or when we are picking them up from school or whatever it is. We're taking the activities. Just engaging with them and talk with them saying how was your day? What are you learning? What did you like about school? What didn't you like about school? And so that intentional time together is really what makes it quality time in my opinion.

Family time, according to participants, could consist of a variety of activities. The general idea, however, was that the time spent together is important. Montana (age 68) said: "Family is having family gatherings and family time together, doing things together, especially dinner time. Having that special time."

External factors

Events and entities outside of the home also provide a way to strengthen families. Participants mentioned a variety of external resources, such as church, community, extracurricular activities, mentors, resources, organizations, and the Family Builder's program that they were a part of as ways to externally strengthen the family. From this list emerged two themes: Strong families are active in the community and participating in activities strengthens families.

As the participants were active in a neighborhood group provided by the The City Project, it was appropriate that community came up as a way to strengthen families. Maine (age 33) equated the neighborhood to a village:

> It literally takes a village to raise a family. So just having that, knowing that your village, or those people that are going to be involved in your family, who do have those relationships with your kids. When you have those you work to build those relationships too.

The City Project's Family Builders program, was also considered a community, consisting of greater area outside of the neighborhood. Louisiana (age 56) touched upon this, "The community, no matter what your socioeconomic status is, here we all get along and we all interact. And it doesn't matter whether you're in a house or an apartment, we're all in one family".

The theme of participating in activities together makes families stronger looked at parental support of activities and experiencing new things together. The parents spoke fondly of supporting their children in extracurricular activities, "like activities that are part of their student plays or track or basketball. Just being there to support them in more than one of the things that they enjoy" (New Jersey, age 35). Oklahoma (age 30) mentioned that one external way to strengthen families is by

> Figuring out what your children love to do and supporting them in that. Finding outside services to support that. So from my daughter, she loves dancing and singing… same for my son. He loves basketball, he loves soccer. So just really making sure that I'm honing in on their skills and their talents and I'm supporting it.

Many noted that the monthly meetings were helpful and that The City Project's Family Builders exposed the families to find new things.

> My kids are getting involved in a lot of activities that they normally wouldn't do. My kids have been getting to a lot of activities that normally they wouldn't go. Cause like in August they went to the Science Center downtown. At first I said this is going to be boring, but when I get in there – I did not want to leave… I mean it's just awesome a lot of stuff that normally I wouldn't do, but now they get to do it now. (South Carolina, age 55)

Being involved with the Family Builder's program also helped families to engage in preplanned activities to ease their burdens, "It takes away the burden and the time of just trying to figure out what to do that the kids would enjoy… My kids have enjoyed, I've enjoyed it" (Alaska, age 40).

Strength and Education

One of the main goals of The City Project's Family Builders is to strengthen academic achievement for the families in the program. The parents in the focus groups spoke about two main areas in which Family Builders helps: keeping students accountable and providing resources for families.

One of the ways Family Builders holds students accountable for their grades is by collecting report cards at the end of every term. South Carolina (age 55) exclaims that their kids brought up their grades knowing that someone else would be looking at the report card, and that low grades were unacceptable, "they [the kids] want to get praised for the grades they got". Another parent spoke about the idea of having additional reminders about report cards and progress reports, and the impact that it has on the children.

> Having these meetings and conversations it makes them [children] want to do better and they know we're watching. Like you say, Family Builders text us and say don't forget report cards or progress reports. And they will text us to say they are coming out today or like they let us know ahead to be on the lookout you know here it comes. So you know It's good to know that someone is watching. (Alabama, age 44)

One of the coordinators provides support to families by visiting schools, meeting with teachers, and suggesting resources for families. "He went to the school to see what's going on… If the kid does not have his grades in order, he will talk to the counselor and see what we need to do for the kids" (Kentucky, age 59). Another way the Family Builders helped was by providing access to tutoring.

> My kids have benefited because now they're on honor roll and everything. Cause this group introduced us to a program on Saturdays for tutoring for the kids and my daughter has been. I was so proud. She was on honor roll. (Texas, age 29)

Through consistent monitoring and assisting with resources Family Builders is considered an asset to the families involved.

Discussion

While the families did not explicitly connect the activities that strengthen families to the educational outcomes of their children, the descriptions of what makes families strong parallels the literature regarding family time and parental interest, social capital, and parent school engagement. These themes align with the participants' discussion of communication and support, respect and community, and Family Builders school engagement.

Researchers have shown that families spending time together and talking about student interests increases academic achievement (Bernard, 2004; Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001; Houtenville & Conway, 2008). In the current study, both the internal and external factors related to strengthening families focused on conversations

between family members, quality time together, and support in extracurricular activities. Asking about school and spending time together brings families closer and supports the education of the children. Support was also heavily mentioned in the findings, as several parents spoke about attending their children's sporting events, dance recitals, and supporting their interest and hobbies. Each of these activities inherently includes quality time and allows the child to feel like their interests matter. Replicated in the activities and field trips provided by Family Builders, the monthly meetings also revolve around family dinners, increasing the opportunities to build into strength within families along with increasing academic attainment.

Another similarity between the literature and the focus group results revolve around the concept of Social Capital within the family and within the community. Social capital is created and maintained through relationships with others (Coleman, 1988). Ranging from advice to friendship networks, social capital can be seen in this study as children being considered a respected member of the family or in the participation of families within the community, both of which were highlighted in the focus group discussions. The participants overwhelming exclaimed the need for communication and feelings of mutual respect between children and parents, ensuring that children felt like valuable members in the family. Increasing social capital in the family directly relates to lower school misbehavior, in other words, students who feel that their families care are less likely to misbehave, leading to better focus in the classroom and better grades (Woolley & Grogan-Kaylor, 2006). As discussed multiple times within the focus groups, raising children really "takes a village". By becoming involved in the community, being a part of the village, the parents are raising the social capital of their family, thus increasing their children's chances of a better academic future (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Again, involvement with Family Builders assists in this as parents are brought together in a community setting.

Academic development discussed in the literature revolves around school engagement, which was less pronounced in this study's findings. Visiting schools, meeting with teachers, and keeping track of student grades assists in ensuring that students were doing well and succeeding (Houtenville & Conway, 2008; Woolley & Grogan-Kaylor, 2006). For this study, parents described Family Builders as the source for school engagement. While the parents seemed more aware of report cards and the resources available to their children, the real credit lay within one of the coordinators acting as a substitute/support for the parent at meetings and maintaining the level of accountability that may be lost otherwise due to busy schedules and inconvenient meeting times. This engagement via the Family Builders parallels the family/community social capital and accomplishes the community interest factor as discussed by Hill and Taylor (2004). When there are multiple adults promoting education (parents, Family Builders, monthly meeting community), the group message is that academic achievement is not only accessible, but expected.

Limitations

As this paper is part of a larger subset of data collected from focus groups, the questions were geared towards a process program evaluation rather than a study strictly on educational outcomes. Additionally, while the researchers were all trained during class and had the same set of questions, there was variation in the conversations, and comments related to educational attainment may not have been fully explored. As data were collected during the focus groups only, with anonymous participants, follow up questions were not an option.

Despite the limitations of this study, there were several strengths. Since the City Project, Family Builders, and the university student researchers had a collaborative presence during the introduction and the focus groups, participants were open and felt comfortable with the researchers. The qualitative approach allowed for participants' voices to be heard, adding to the body of research, and confirming what had previously been seen in quantitative inquiry.

Implications and Conclusion

The findings of this study align with the literature regarding how strong family habits can impact education. This study also adds to the body of research with the inclusion of an outside agency that assists in the education process by providing support, resources, and additional opportunities for families in an underserved location. Future research should identify other organizations that provide similar services, speak with children, and look to refine the themes found within this study. As education begins in the home, families who encourage communication, extracurricular activities, quality family time, and social capital within their family are setting their children up for success in schools. Programs such as Family Builders that encourage strength within the family and community can help to bridge the achievement gap, grow capacity within the community, and promote academic achievement among the children in the group. After all, strong families can create strong neighborhoods, and enhance academic achievement.

References

Barnard, W. M. (2004). Parent involvement in elementary school and educational attainment. *Children and Youth Services Review, 26*(1), 39—62. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2003.11.002

Coleman, J. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology, 94*, S95—S120. https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/toc/ajs/current

Fantuzzo, J., McWayne, C., Perry, M. A., & Childs, S. (2004). Multiple dimensions of family involvement and their relations to behavioral and learning competencies for urban, low-income children. *School*

Psychology Review, *33*(4), 467–480. https://naspjournals.org/
Hill, N. E., & Taylor, L. C. (2004). Parental school involvement and children's academic achievement: Pragmatics and issues. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 13*(4), 161–164. https://journals.sagepub.com/home/cdp
Hofferth, S. L., & Sandberg, J. F. (2001). How American children spend their time. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *63*(2), 295–308. https://www.ncfr.org/jmf
Houtenville, A. J., & Conway, K. S. (2008). Parental effort, school resources, and student achievement. *Journal of Human Resources*, 43(2), 437–453. doi:10.1353/jhr.2008.0027
Hursh, D. (2007). Exacerbating inequality: The failed promise of the No Child Left Behind Act. *Race, Ethnicity and Education, 10*(3), 295–308. https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cree20
Israel, B., Schulz, A. J., Parker, E. A., & Becker, A. B. (1998). Review of community-based research: Assessing partnership approaches to improve public health. *Annual Review of Public Health*, *19*(1), 173–202. doi:10.1146/annurev.publhealth.19.1.173
Kessinger, T. K. (2011). Efforts toward educational reform in the United States since 1958. *American Educational History Journal, 38*(1/2), 263–276. http://www.edhistorians.org/journal.html
Padget, D. (2012). *Qualitative and mixed methods in public health.* Los Angeles, CA. SAGE.
Mertens, D. M. (2009). *Transformative research and evaluation.* New York: The Guilford Press.
Reardon, S. F. (2013.). The widening income achievement gap. *Educational Leadership*, *70*(8), 10–16. http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership.aspx
Roehlkepartain, E. C., & Syvertsen, A. K. (2014). Family strengths and resilience: Insights from a national study. *Reclaiming Children & Youth*, *23*(2), 13–18. https://reclaimingjournal.com/
U.S. Census Bureau. (2011). American FactFinder: Community facts. Retrieved from https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml
Woolley, M., Gorgoran-Kaylor, A. (2006). Protective family factors in the context of neighborhood: Promoting positive school outcomes. *Family Relations*, *55*(1), 93–104. https://www.ncfr.org/index.php/fr
Woolley, M., & Grogan-Kaylor, A., Gilster, M., Karb, R., Gant, L., Reischl, T., & Alaimo, K. (2008). Neighborhood social capital, poor physical conditions, and school achievement. *Children & Schools, 30*(3), 133–145. https://www.ncfr.org/index.php/fr

Authors

Jennifer Sanguiliano is a doctoral student in the Public Affairs program at the University of Central Florida. Ms. Sanguiliano's research interests include the influence of family on education, teacher collaboration, gifted education, and the role of teacher professional development in reducing inequity in the K-12 classroom.

Kim Anderson, PhD, LCSW, is a professor in the School of Social Work and the Public Affairs doctoral program at the University of Central Florida where she teaches clinical practice and evaluation courses, qualitative methods, social inquiry, and public policy. Dr. Anderson has extensive experience in blending academic and applied research to bridge the gap between scholars and practitioners with empirical results that are accessible to diverse audiences.

Shawn Welcome is the Family Engagement Coordinator for Polis Institute, facilitating all activities and engagement related to MVP Families and Diverse Word. Since 2006, he has served youth through direct mentorship, nonprofit agencies, and high schools using his gift of poetry and communications to connect with the broader community.

Philip K. Hissom, MDiv, founded the Polis Institute in 2009 to improve quality of life with Orlando's 100 distressed neighborhoods. He has extensive experience creating solutions to complex social problems and holds a Master of Divinity degree. His family has worked with the poor for four generations after his great-grandfather founded a Christian mission in Charleston, West Virginia, in 1934.

Brandy Hannah is the Director of Operations at the Polis Institute. Her nonprofit and community experience spans over 15 years and includes extensive experience in the areas of Program Development and Management, Community Building, Community Engagement, and Volunteer Management. Ms. Hannah attended the University of South Florida with a major in Criminology, but gained most of her work experience working with multiple family-service and community-based nonprofit organizations in New Jersey.

Natalie Lovero, MSW, works with LIFT Orlando, a nonprofit that works to revitalize housing and break the poverty cycle in the Greater Orlando area. As an original LIFT Orlando team member, she serves in the role of community partnerships and is currently working to organize community partners around a collective impact model that ensures organizations are working together in the most effective way to impact the lives of individuals and families.

Appendix

University and Agency Shared Research Goals*

(1) How do families' perceptions of what strengthens families align with Family Builder's/Search Institute's developmental framework?

(2) What are the families' perceptions regarding what is working for strengthening families for the Family Builders program?

(3) What are the families' perceptions regarding what is needed for strengthening families for the Family Builders program?

Focus Group Interview Questions

We will be asking 4 questions with about 10 minutes allowed for discussion per question.

1. Our first question is: What do you think helps to strengthen families? This is a two-part question.
    - We will be asking about what within the family helps to strengthen it.?
    - And we will be asking about what outside of the family/home helps to strengthen families.
2. Our second question is: How does participating in Family Builders impact your family?
3. Our third question is: What advice do you have for other families who might want to participate in Family Builders but haven't yet?
4. Our fourth question is: What advice do you have for the Family Builders program?