Creando Confianza: How Middle School Leaders Create Cultures of Trust to Foster the Engagement of Latino Families

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A Capstone Project

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By

Rachel W. Sweeney

B.A. Duke University

M.Ed. George Mason University

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past twenty years, the cultural diversity in classrooms across the United States has increased exponentially. More specifically, from 1999 to 2016 the number of Latino students enrolled in American schools, from pre-Kindergarten through college, rose by 80 percent, from 9.9 million to 17.9 million (Gramlich, 2017). Latinos now comprise the largest minority group in the United States, making up 18 percent of the population and 25 percent of all school-age students (Gándara, 2017). The National Center for Education Statistics projects that by 2029, Latinos will make up nearly one-third of all public school students in this country (Wang & Dinkes, 2020).

Despite recent gains, Latino students lag behind their peers on a number of measures including grades and achievement test scores (Ceballo, Maurizi, Suarez, & Aretakis, 2013; Gándara, 2017), and have the highest high school dropout rate when compared with other ethnic groups (Gramlich, 2017; Hill & Torres, 2010). Accordingly, the academic achievement of Latino students has become a growing focus of researchers. Several studies have highlighted the transition to middle school as a particularly critical time for Latino students both socially and academically (Crosnoe & Ansari, 2016; Murakami, Valle, & Mendez-Morse, 2013); these studies show that during periods of transition, systemic differences in student achievement typically become “amplified” for traditionally marginalized groups (Weiss, Lopez, & Caspe, 2018, p. 23).

Research supports the engagement of Latino families in the education of their middle schoolers as a potentially effective lever in the creation of more equitable opportunities and outcomes for these students. In a report for the

Carnegie Corporation, Weiss, Lopez, and Caspe (2018) argue that the goal for educators should be "ensuring that all families and communities-- not just economically advantaged ones-- have what it takes to build equitable learning pathways for their children" (p. 5). The fostering and nurturance of trust between home and school has also been highlighted as a potentially important element in this dynamic (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

This research study investigated how effective middle school leaders build the trusting relationships necessary between administrators, teachers, and parents to begin to close the existing gaps in opportunity and access for their Latino students. The study was based on the hypothesis that by strengthening the ability of middle school leaders to build trust with their Latino families within a culturally responsive school culture, increased engagement will be fostered, leading to positive outcomes for all stakeholders. The study was guided by three research questions: the first sought to understand how both middle school leaders and teachers define trust in the context of school-family relationships, while the second question asked if these same stakeholders viewed trust as a critical building block of family engagement. Finally, the third question examined the policies and practices enacted by a middle school leader to establish a trusting community.

This single, qualitative case study was conducted at a large, public middle school in the mid-Atlantic region with a Latino-majority student population. Data was collected during an eight-month period between February and September of 2020; due to the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic during this time, all data was collected virtually. Semi-structured interviews with leaders and teachers

were conducted via video conferencing software and triangulated with observations of virtual events and relevant documents. This data was then analyzed and discussed through the lens of the study's conceptual framework and the relevant literature base.

Five major themes emerged from the data. First, trust was found to be the foundation of all aspects of family engagement, rather than standing as an independent construct as previously conceptualized. Next, it was revealed that leaders and teachers each contribute to the building of trust but in different, yet equally critical, ways. It was also determined that successful family engagement requires an aligned and committed staff to make it all work. These staff members must focus on building relationships but growing those relationships into partnerships should be the ultimate goal. Finally, it was made clear that the work involved both in building trust and engaging families requires an ethic of care, a sense of purpose, and a commitment to reflection and growth in order to be successful and sustained over time.

Based upon the findings from this study, five recommendations were identified for practitioners at Lake Middle School and a wider audience of interested educational leaders. In order to foster both trust with and engagement of Latino families, it is suggested that leaders: 1) acknowledge and challenge deficit thinking and embrace an asset-based approach on a schoolwide level; 2) reframe engagement by placing importance on both school-based and home-based involvement; 3) take care not to mistake deference to authority for trust; 4) acknowledge that newer teachers need more support with this work and find

ways to provide this support; and 5) embrace the silver linings of the COVID-19 pandemic and work to apply the lessons learned moving forward.

It is hoped that the findings of this qualitative study will inform middle school leaders as they strive to build trusting communities and leverage family engagement to close the opportunity and achievement gaps for Latino students in our schools today.

Rachel W. Sweeney

Department of Leadership, Foundations, and Policy
School of Education and Human Development
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, Virginia

APPROVAL OF THE CAPSTONE

This capstone, "*Creando Confianza*: How Middle School Leaders Create Cultures of Trust to Foster the Engagement of Latino Families," has been approved by the Graduate Faculty of the School of Education and Human Development in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

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Sara Dexter, Ed.D., Capstone Chair

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E. Benjamin Allen V, Ed.D., Committee Member

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Sandra Mitchell, Ed.D., Committee Member

_____Date

DEDICATION

To my husband, Barry: You dedicated your dissertation to me fifteen years ago and listened to my dream of being next; thank you for ensuring that I made that dream come true, even if it took me a while to get here. Your combination of encouragement, sometimes (mostly?) unsolicited advice, tough love, and a steady stream of frozen pizzas to feed the troops enabled me to see this dream to fruition, and I am eternally grateful. Happy 25th wedding anniversary with much love always.

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"All the world is made of faith, and trust, and pixie dust." –J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Problem of Practice

The effectiveness of family engagement as an educational strategy is largely undisputed by both researchers and educators. Thousands of empirical studies, spanning the past five decades, have highlighted the importance of involving parents in their children's learning; this vast body of literature suggests positive outcomes ranging from gains in student achievement, to increased attendance, to higher high school graduation rates for students who have engaged parents (Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006; Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Put simply, "when parents are engaged in their children's education, students succeed" (Weiss, Lopez, & Caspe, 2018, p. 1).

Unfortunately, the promise of parent engagement is often left unrealized. As Hargreaves (2001) explains, "While the rhetoric that teachers should treat parents as partners in their children's education is widespread…the reality is often very different" (p. 374). When surveyed, many administrators and teachers report feeling woefully unprepared to work with parents (Caspe, Lopez, Chu, & Weiss, 2011). Mapp and Kuttner (2014) assert "Without attention to training and capacity building, well-intentioned partnership efforts fall flat" (p. 6). In turn, parents, especially those with limited English skills or from lower socio-economic backgrounds, may feel overwhelmed without the social or navigational capital to understand how the system works or how to help their children succeed. Though family engagement should be viewed as more of a process than a one-time event (LaRocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011), schools

often resort to tried and true “one off” parent nights and the same one-way communication that has been used for decades.

To further complicate this already complex landscape, researchers have more recently focused their attention on middle school and the specific factors that come into play when fostering family engagement in this context. Hill and Tyson (2009) describe a situation where the developmental stage of early adolescence, wherein students are becoming more autonomous and resisting parental assistance, meets a larger, more bureaucratic school environment that is harder for parents to navigate than the smaller elementary school that had become so familiar. Instead of one teacher with 20 to 30 students, families suddenly find themselves with up to seven different teachers, each of whom can be responsible for as many as 150 students, making the forming of deep and meaningful parent relationships difficult at best. This new terrain can be further complicated by differences in parental cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, which can lead to different levels of involvement and beliefs about the role of parents in education (Kohl et al., 2000; Lareau, 1987). Couple this with the newly added middle school pressure of “long-term implications of achievement for educational and occupational attainment” (Hill & Tyson, 2009), and it is no wonder that many middle school teachers and parents decide instead to avoid engagement.

Decreased levels of parent involvement at the secondary level reflect the effects of this avoidance. Although the benefits of parent engagement have been well-proven to continue through middle school and high school (Epstein, 2001; Hawes & Plourde, 2005; Wright & Willis, 2003/2004), multiple studies have

shown that levels of involvement drop during the transition from elementary school to middle school and on to high school (Brough & Irvin, 2001; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Simon, 2004). While some parents intentionally decrease their involvement, to give their children the independence that they think they need, others may become less involved as the school environment and the curricula become more complicated because "they do not know *how* to be involved" (Simon, 2004, p. 186). Unfortunately, school staff may misinterpret a decrease in involvement as disinterest or lack of family investment in academic success. This negative perception can then alienate these parents even further (LaRocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011), leading to even less engagement on their part. A negative cycle is then established, with misunderstanding and a fundamental lack of trust anchoring both sides. While trust is a complex concept that can be defined in many different ways, in this context trust will be defined as "one's willingness to be vulnerable to another based on the confidence that the other is benevolent, honest, open, reliable, and competent" (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, pp. 19-20).

This lack of trust highlights one of the key elements of the home-school relationship; Tschannen-Moran (2014) asserts "Building and extending high trust between families and schools lies at the heart of cultivating productive relationships between home and school" (p. 188). Trust between the family and the school has been connected to a host of positive outcomes, including increased parent engagement, a heightened sense of collective responsibility among all stakeholders, and enhanced student achievement (Bryk & Schneider, 1996; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Adams and Christenson (2000) suggest that trust is an

essential piece of the family-school relationship but found that parent trust of teachers decreases during the transition from elementary to middle school, which they attribute in part to the structural differences between the two.

Building trust between home and school can be even more difficult when working with diverse families (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Brewster and Railsback (2003a) state that "a critical first step in engaging diverse families…is to focus on building relationships of mutual trust, confidence and respect" (p. 18). Latino families certainly fall into this category; while research shows that middle school is a particularly critical time for Latino students both socially and academically (Murakami, Valle, & Mendez-Morse, 2013), studies also show that engaging Latino families, and involving them more effectively in their children's education while in middle school, can be a key lever in improving educational outcomes (Carpenter, Ramirez, & Severn, 2006). The transition to middle school is especially important, as during periods of transition systemic differences in student achievement typically become "amplified" for traditionally marginalized groups (Crosnoe & Ansari, 2016; Weiss, Lopez, & Caspe, 2018). However, standard views of and frameworks for involving parents can "miss the multiple ways nondominant parents participate in their children's education because they do not correspond to normative understandings of parental involvement in schools" (Baquedano-Lopez, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013, p. 150). In addition, the perceptions of teachers and school leaders are too often based on a deficit model, wherein parents are blamed for their non-involvement and are assumed to have "internal defects, or deficits, that thwart the learning process" (Valencia & Black, 2002, p. 83).

Latinos are now the largest minority group in the United States, comprising 18 percent of the population and 25 percent of all school-age students (Gándara, 2017, p. 4); the National Center for Education Statistics projects that by 2029, Latinos will make up nearly one-third of all students in this country (Wang & Dinkes, 2020). From 1999 to 2016 the number of Latinos enrolled in American schools, from pre-Kindergarten through college, increased by 80 percent, from 9.9 million to 17.9 million students (Gramlich, 2017). As more than 90 percent of these Latino school-age students were born in this country, Gándara (2017) argues:

> They are U.S. citizens and our responsibility. How we view these students-- primarily as challenges or as assets-- will determine to a large extent how we choose to educate them and the kind of success they are able to achieve. (p. 5)

Gándara's warning is timely, given that despite recent gains in academic achievement, Latino students still lag behind their peers on a number of measures including grades and achievement test scores (Ceballo, Maurizi, Suarez, & Aretakis, 2014; Gándara, 2017; Gramlich, 2017), and have the highest high school dropout rate when compared with other ethnic groups (Gramlich, 2017; Hill & Torres, 2010). This disparity has been attributed to a host of social and structural barriers, including lack of access to preschool, attendance at lower quality schools, difficulties with learning English, and obstacles consistent with poverty and systemic racism (Araque, Wietstock, Cova, & Zepeda, 2017; Ceballo, Huerta, & Epstein-Ngo, 2010; Ceballo, Maurizi, Suarez, & Aretakis, 2014; Gándara, 2017). Given this reality, it is incumbent upon school leaders to find

ways to form trusting relationships with Latino families, fostering and strengthening their involvement in the education of their children.

Developing a better understanding of how middle school leaders and teachers define trust and defining each group's perception of the importance of establishing trust in fostering family engagement, can lead to practical implications for how middle school leaders can more effectively engage Latino families in their children's learning.

Context of the Problem

The topic of family engagement in education is both extremely broad and exceptionally well-documented. As the research base has grown over the past 50 years, the terminology has evolved: "parent involvement" has shifted to "family engagement," and more recently to "family-school partnerships" (Yamauchi, Ponte, Ratliffe, & Traynor, 2017). Goodall and Montgomery (2014) frame this progression as a continuum of involvement, with each subsequent term implying decreasing school agency (involvement) and increasing parental agency (engagement and partnership). All of these terms are used interchangeably in the literature and will be used as such throughout this study to refer to the central concept of families being involved in some way in the educational lives of their children.

Underlying these studies is an attempt on the part of researchers to clearly define family engagement. All agree that there is "a lack of stakeholder consensus about what 'parent involvement' entails," (Hutchins, 2011, p. 14); it has proven to be surprisingly difficult to pin down a clear definition, mainly due to conflicting frameworks and perspectives, both cultural and contextual. Parent

involvement is often measured qualitatively rather than quantitatively since teachers and school leaders only see what happens inside the school, making it more difficult for them to see the less visible, broader involvement of families in their children's education (Olivos, 2006). In addition, the growing intersection of different cultural and ethnic groups within our schools serves to make defining expectations even more challenging (Bell, Grant, Yoo, Jimenez, & Frye, 2017; Valdes, 1996).

Understanding the role that trust plays in engaging families is one way to begin to narrow down this evolving definition. A growing body of research has explored the connections between building trust and effective leadership, both in the educational and business realms (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Hacker & Willard, 2002; Hurley, 2012; Kochanek, 2005; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). This research has included the role of the school leader in fostering trust between home and school in order to increase family involvement (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Adams, Forsyth, & Mitchell, 2009; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Perhaps more importantly, several researchers studying Latino students and families have identified *confianza*, or trust, as a significant concept for these families and essential for building relationships (Olvera & Olvera, 2012; Quintanar & Warren, 2008; Rodriguez-Brown, 2010; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). While preliminary studies claim a relationship between parent trust and positive student outcomes, research in this area is limited (Santiago, Garbacz, Beattie, & Moore, 2016); the studies that have been done have primarily found that parent trust in teachers predicts increased levels of family engagement (Adams & Christenson, 1998; Beycioglu, Ozer, & Sahin, 2013; Nzinga-Johnson, Baker, & Aupperlee, 2009;

Santiago, Garbacz, Beattie, & Moore, 2016), while the research on the role of the school leader in this trust dynamic is scant.

With growing attention being paid to cultural, racial, and socio-economic diversity in our schools, there has been a push to view family engagement as a significant part of the effort to create more equitable opportunities for all students. In a report for the Carnegie Corporation, Weiss, Lopez, and Caspe (2018) frame family engagement as a "public good," explaining that "public benefit results when every family can play a robust role in ensuring that their own children and other children get the 21st-century knowledge and skills they need" (p. 3). Within this context of equity and inclusion, there is a significant focus on recognizing and building on the strengths that diverse families bring to our schools, acknowledging their "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), and recognizing that there is a wide range of ways that different families engage with their children's learning. Weiss, Lopez, and Caspe (2018) pose the challenge that the goal for educators should be "ensuring that all families and communities-- not just economically advantaged ones-- have what it takes to build equitable learning pathways for their children" (p. 5). This study was designed to dovetail with this newer emphasis on family engagement as a lever for equitable educational outcomes, focusing specifically on the families of Latino middle schoolers.

Additionally, this study was conducted during the global COVID-19 pandemic, which proved to be both challenging and enlightening; as educators searched for creative ways to respond to the changes brought as a result of virtual instruction, new and interesting ideas for family programming and engagement

emerged, which added to the richness of the data collected. Priorities shifted as more time and attention to schooling were required of family members, and as physical barriers to involvement were removed, interest in engagement expanded from both sides. Collecting data during this unique time allowed an interesting window into the possibilities of effective outreach and engagement and showcased the commitment of school-based leaders and teachers to this important work.

Local Context

Newport County Public Schools is a pseudonym for a large, well-resourced, Mid-Atlantic school division covering more than 400 square miles and educating close to 190,000 students. It is a highly diverse system, both socioeconomically and ethnically; over 29 percent of the student population is Economically Disadvantaged, while almost 30 percent of students are English Learners, with over 200 different languages spoken. 26.8 percent of the students attending Newport County schools are Latino, with seven of the 23 middle schools in the district serving Latino populations greater than 40 percent of their total student bodies (NCPS, 2020a; NCPS, 2020b). Despite a substantial investment of resources over an extended period of time, a persistent gap in opportunity, access and achievement remains between Latino students and students from other ethnic groups within the school division (NCPS, 2019e). District leadership acknowledges that “increases in disadvantaged and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) student populations have created greater demands on the resources of the Division. Stakeholders want greater

consistency in programming and implementation across schools…to provide all students with equal opportunities" (NCPS, 2019e).

To this end, the district superintendent announced a Strategic Plan for the school system that focuses on four main goals: Student Success, Caring Culture, Premier Workforce, and Resource Stewardship (NCPS, 2019e). Within the Caring Culture goal is a focus on establishing a "welcoming environment" at each school where both students and families "feel respected," and staff "will demonstrate cultural responsiveness when supporting families, students, and other staff" (NCPS, 2019f). Drilling down even further, the division leadership rolled out a "Closing the Gap Framework" to detail the drivers, goals and strategies that the school system will implement to close the gaps between minority groups; one of these six drivers is titled "Family and Community Involvement," with the goal of building "a collaborative relationship between families and schools as active partners for the purpose of student success" (NCPS, 2019b). The strategies listed for this goal include:

- Create welcoming school environments that connect and are culturally responsive to diverse families;
- Engage families in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication about student learning;
- Ensure that family engagement opportunities are relational, linked to learning and social/emotional development;
- Provide regular opportunities to strengthen or build the capacity of families' knowledge and skills to support learning at home;

- Build the capacity of staff to connect, engage and partners with families;
- Engage families as equal partners in making decisions that affect their children and school community (NCPS, 2019c).

All of the goals identified as part of this driver align with the objectives of this research study. Further confirmation that the study supports the overall aims of the Newport County Public Schools system are these key beliefs stated in their "Beliefs, Mission, and Vision" statement:

- Dynamic and supportive partnerships among students, parents, educators and the community are critical to meet student needs and provide enriching experiences;
- Families play a fundamental role in their children's education;
- Our diversity is a strength that creates resilient, open, and innovative global citizens (NCPS, 2019a).

This research study was designed to support these beliefs and goals by both recognizing the importance of families to their children's education and facilitating the types of partnerships necessary to close the existing gaps in opportunity, access, and achievement. By strengthening the ability of middle school leaders to build trust with their Latino families, increased engagement will be fostered, leading to positive outcomes for all stakeholders.

Connection to Leadership

Research has confirmed that school principals are the "primary agents of change to improve student achievement in their schools" (Allensworth & Hart, 2018). Several studies point to the school leader's impact on school climate as the

primary lever to make these changes, including "creating an environment of openness for fostering meaningful community engagement" (Leithwood & Louis, 2012, p. 94) and building an atmosphere of trust within a building and between parents and the school (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Adams, Forsyth, & Mitchell, 2009; Bryk & Schneider, 2002). The onus is ultimately on the school leader to prioritize parent engagement in her school, extending a model of shared leadership and relational trust to the wider community. Leithwood and Louis (2012) suggest that school leaders who want to engage families in meaningful ways need to stop viewing parents as "'clients'…and to actually start viewing parents and community stakeholders as vital partners in the learning process" (p. 100). Unfortunately, studies suggest that even though administrators 'talk the talk' of engaging parents as partners, they tend instead to use parent involvement in ways to support the school agenda, acting as "a buffer rather than a bridge to the community" (Auerbach, 2009, p. 10).

The middle school administrator who desires to be more of a bridge than a buffer must be intentional about planning opportunities for her staff to build their capacity to communicate and engage with parents, in order to build the trust required to make these connections between home and school work (Auerbach, 2009). However, before these relationships can be fostered, trust first needs to be established between leaders and teachers within the school. In their study on higher-performing middle schools, Wilcox and Angelis (2012) found that "a climate of respect and trust that enacts the school and district vision" (p. 40) is essential for effective collaboration. One way that a leader can build trust within her school staff is to encourage, and listen to, teacher voice whenever

possible; as Quaglia and Lande (2016) explain, “establishing an atmosphere of trust and respect is the first step” towards welcoming teacher voice and cultivating trusting relationships (p. 34). This study serves in part as a vehicle for teacher voice regarding family engagement, furthering the building of these essential relationships.

Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, and Walberg (2005) posit that schools that embrace a “partnership orientation—in which student achievement and school improvement are seen as a shared responsibility” between parents and teachers, can establish trusting and respectful relationships which will result in successful family engagement and heightened student achievement (as cited in Mapp & Kuttner, 2014, p. 5). Teachers need to be taught explicitly how to make this a reality, be given time and administrative support to make it happen and understand that families from diverse cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds sometimes require a special level of attention before diving into this type of partnership.

For these partnerships to become levers for equity, school leaders must first embrace an asset-based orientation, acknowledging the resources and knowledge that all parents can bring to the school, and then communicate this mindset to teachers in a way that supports a “shared-responsibility, integrated, sustained, and family-strengthening approach” (Quezada, 2016, p. 31) to involving families. This means shifting from a framework of “providing more services to parents and offering them opportunities, such as ‘coffee with the principal’” (Quezada, 2016, p. 30), to truly viewing parents as partners. The conclusions generated by this study will assist these school leaders with the first

step of assessing where teachers are in terms of their perceptions of trust, particularly as it relates to family engagement, and it will serve as an opportunity for teacher and leader self-reflection on the areas in which they feel that they can strengthen their capacity to engage in this work. These first steps will pave the way for a smoother path towards true partnership between home and school. As Tschannen-Moran (2014) argues, "the example that [the school leader] sets for trust in students and parents radiates as ripples in a pond" (p. 217).

Unit of Analysis: Stakeholder Perspectives

This study is predicated on the idea that teacher voices and perspectives matter and should be valued by school leaders. While teacher voice has long been acknowledged as an important factor in educational decision making, and is arguably "the most important school input influencing student outcomes" (Gozali, Claasen Thrush, Soto-Peña, Whang, & Luschei, 2017, p. 32), it has also historically been neglected by researchers and educational leaders alike. In their international study on teacher voice, Gozali et al. (2017) conclude that "the voices of teachers have continued to be marginalized in the literature and in policy-making" (p. 31), an unfortunate reality that leads to decreased teacher investment in enacting the decisions that are made without their input. As this study highlights the perspectives of teachers regarding family engagement, it helps to fill this gap in the literature.

Several studies that have looked at policy implementation and enactment have found that teachers who believe that their voices have been heard, valued, and included in the policy-making process are then more likely to implement these policies with fidelity (Bangs & Frost, 2012; Heneveld, 2007); Hargreaves

and Shirley (2011) explain that trust is a factor in this shift, as including teacher voice can increase trust in the policy-makers, leading to a willingness to implement change. The conclusions of this study support these findings, again underscoring the importance of trust in all aspects of educational relationship-building.

Research Questions

This descriptive study was guided by a central research question: How does a middle school leader create a culture of trust (between leaders, teachers, and parents) that fosters the engagement of Latino families? The study was designed to answer the following three research questions:

- Research Question 1: How do middle school leaders and teachers define trust in the context of school-family relationships?
- Research Question 2: Do middle school leaders and teachers view trust as one of the critical building blocks of family engagement?
- Research Question 3: What policies and practices does a middle school leader use to establish trust with Latino families?

Introduction to Methodological Approach

Semi-structured interviews were the primary means for data collection in this qualitative case study. Interviews have a great deal of utility in a study such as this one that seeks to uncover the perspectives of two different groups of stakeholders, through the sharing of individual experiences and feelings and allowing for intentional probing around topics of particular interest. By asking open-ended questions, the interviewer is able to "elicit meaningful and 'deep' responses that take the shape of narratives" (Butin, 2010, p. 97). These

interviews were triangulated with observations of events designed by school leaders to engage parents, and document collection and analysis; due to the self-reported nature of interviews, it is important to verify information through more objective sources.

By utilizing qualitative measures in this case study, it is possible to tell a fuller story of the perceptions of teachers and school leaders in the middle school setting. By analyzing the similarities and differences in perspectives, it is possible to build a broader conceptualization of home-school trust at the middle school level. The analysis and synthesis of this data will hopefully allow middle school leaders to build a culture of trust in a targeted way, in order to engage the Latino parents in their schools more effectively, ultimately leading to improved educational outcomes for Latino students.

The study's conclusions will be shared at the district level so that key implications can be disseminated to educational leaders interested in fostering family engagement at the middle school level. In addition, this study will contribute to the wider field of educational research; while researchers such as Henderson and Mapp (2002) posit that "building trusting, collaborative relationships among teachers, families, and community members" (p. 7) is one of three key practices for engaging parents from diverse backgrounds, few studies have been done to confirm this assertion, or to more deeply investigate the nuances of the differences in perspectives among stakeholders and their implications. Finally, as detailed above, there is presently a gap in the research examining teacher perspectives and experiences; this study begins to fill this hole

in the literature by valuing teacher voice and finding commonalities between teacher and leader points of view.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations. This study examined the perceptions of middle school teachers and school leaders in one school in a large, suburban, Mid-Atlantic school district. These two groups of stakeholders were interviewed in order to understand their sensemaking around building trust as a necessary condition for increased engagement of Latino parents at the middle school level.

As data was collected during the COVID-19 global pandemic, and parents were not accessible during this time, parents were not interviewed. However, parent voice was included more indirectly through both observations and document collection and analysis. Additionally, while the ultimate goal of this study is to improve school achievement for Latino middle schoolers, student outcomes were not measured, and the perspectives of students were not included as a source of data.

Limitations. This study has several potential limitations. First, the small sample size limits the researcher's ability to generalize the findings of the study. Similarly, by having all participants come from the same school, there might be additional impacts on the generalizability of the findings to other settings. Next, the design almost completely relies on self-reported data, which is known to have limitations in terms of accuracy and bias (Hays & Singh, 2012). The inclusion of observations and document collection is intended to buffer these limitations by enabling the researcher to triangulate some of this data.

Introduction to the Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is based on the five functions of instructional leaders (visioning, modeling, coaching, managing, and mediating) and the five facets of trust (benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence) both as defined by Tschannen-Moran (2014). Interviews were utilized to evaluate how each of the two stakeholder groups (middle school leaders and teachers) views the importance of these functions and factors, as well as their perceptions of the ways in which leaders employ policies and practices to foster trust in the middle school setting.

This framework is situated within the tenets of culturally responsive school leadership practices; this perspective aims to make "the entire school environment responsive to the schooling needs of minoritized students" (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016, p. 1272) by focusing on the role of the school-level administrator in setting the course for school reform. Proponents of culturally responsive school leadership argue that without principal support, culturally responsive instruction will not be sustained, and district-level mandates will not be enforced. In outlining the behaviors of a culturally responsive school leader, Khalifa, Gooden and Davis (2016) state that engaging families is a primary function, and that an effective school leader should be able to "engage students, families, and communities in culturally appropriate ways" (p. 1282). Khalifa (2018) also underscores the need for the culturally responsive school leader to build trust with families who may be distrustful of educators, "due to historical and current practices of marginalization" (p. 172).

Background and Role of the Researcher

The researcher in this study was positioned as both insider and outsider (Hays & Singh, 2012); as a teacher in NCPS for over 20 years, with many of those years spent in schools with large Latino populations, in many ways I approached this work as an insider. Over the past two decades, my experiences as a classroom teacher and a teacher of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and as a parent engagement specialist working predominately with Latino families, have afforded me great insight into both the systems and processes of this school division and the culture of this community. My personal background as a mother to two teenagers, and my current professional role as an educator in an NCPS middle school, provided me with knowledge of, and empathy for, the challenges of both educating and parenting adolescents. Taken together these experiences allowed me to connect with both of the stakeholder groups in the study.

However, without prior personal connections to the staff at the school that was studied, I also approached this research as an outsider. Each school has its own culture, and time was taken early on to build relationships and gain an understanding of the priorities and values of the staff and community, though this was a bit more difficult given the physical limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. On a larger scale, my cultural background as a white, English-speaking woman who was born in the United States could have led to inadvertent bias. Being cognizant of this positioning, and paying careful attention to researcher self-reflexivity, enabled me to address the possible limitations that might have arisen as a result.

Summary

This qualitative case study explores the perceptions of school leaders and teachers regarding building trust as a necessary condition for increased family engagement at the middle school level. Both stakeholder groups were interviewed, and observations and document collection were included to triangulate the findings.

In the next section, the extensive literature base surrounding this topic will be reviewed, with a focus on family engagement more generally, Latino family engagement more specifically, and including literature on trust and middle school and adolescence. There will also be a summary of the literature on the intersection of leadership and family engagement, including research on the importance of teacher voice, as well as an analysis of research supporting the theoretical underpinnings of the study's conceptual framework. This framework will be described in more detail in the next section: primarily relying on the trust framework created by Tschannen-Moran (2014), and situated within the theoretical framework of culturally responsive school leadership practices (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016), it provides structure to all aspects of the study. Finally, the most recent literature on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on family engagement will be explored.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The body of research supporting the importance of parental involvement in education is both deep and compelling: five decades of researchers have consistently linked family engagement with outcomes ranging from positive student attitudes towards school to increased achievement test scores, with multiple benefits highlighted for students, schools, and families alike (Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Engaging families is an empirically proven, high-yield strategy that cuts across socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural lines, as well as school contexts. As Antunez (2000) states, "students achieve more, regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnic/racial background, or the parents' education level" (p. 53) when families are involved in their children's schooling.

Despite the universality of these benefits, the majority of families who are viewed as most involved are white and middle income, "typically those whose home culture most closely matches the norms, values, and cultural assumptions reflected in the school" (Brewster & Railsback, 2003a, p. 1). Recent research has focused on fostering engagement that is more tailored to the needs of families with cultures that diverge in some way from the mainstream: minority or lower-income families, for example, or those who speak limited English (Araque, Wietstock, Cova, & Zepeda, 2017; Baquedano-Lopez, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013; Ceballo, Maurizi, Suarez, & Aretakis, 2014; Hill, Witherspoon, & Bartz, 2018). By trying to reach all families, schools are hoping in turn to reach all learners, especially given the rapidly growing diversity in our schools. Many of

these more recent studies show that the perceived dearth of involvement of minoritized families is due not to a lack of interest on the part of the parents, but rather to perceptions and misconceptions by teachers and school leaders, as well as to "differing needs, values, and levels of trust" (Brewster & Railsback, 2003a, p.3).

The identification of trust as a factor in the establishment of effective home-school partnerships is a thread through much of this literature (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Karakus & Savas, 2012; Kim, Minke, Sheridan, Koziol, Ryoo, & Rispoli, 2012; Santiago, Garbacz, Beattie, & Moore, 2016), which led to the central question of this study: How can middle school leaders create a culture of trust in order to foster greater family engagement, specifically of Latino families? To answer this question, it was important to uncover the key elements of trust and determine which elements each of the stakeholder groups perceived as most important. The literature examined in this chapter will help to build the case for the importance of this question, as well as underscore the important implications that can result from its investigation.

Search Strategy

To begin this literature review, a search was done for articles and dissertations related to parental engagement using the EBSCO databases, Google Scholar, and ProQuest. The goal of this initial search was to get a sense of the literature base in order to narrow the focus of the study that was to follow. Various combinations of the following keywords were used in the search: *parent, family, engagement,* and *involvement*. This initial search was not bounded by publication date so as not to exclude foundational work, though preference was

given to more recent articles and empirical studies. Dissertations primarily were mined for potential sources.

Once this initial scan was complete, and the focus of the study narrowed to the engagement of Latino families in the middle school context, the search was fine-tuned. Various combinations of the following keywords were used in the search: *middle school, junior high, adolescence, family, parent, engagement, involvement, teacher, educator, leader, leadership, principal, diverse, Latino, English Language Learners, perceptions, assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, voices, social capital, cultural capital,* and *navigational capital*. Again, these searches were not bounded by publication date, and preference was given to empirical research studies, while dissertations were used primarily for extracting additional potential sources.

Once this literature was reviewed, a focus on trust as the main construct to be studied in this study was identified. As such, a subsequent search was conducted using the keywords *trust* or *confianza* in various combinations with the following: *parents, families, engagement, involvement, teachers, principals, school leaders, middle school, adolescence,* and *Latino families*. Once again, these searches were not bounded by publication date, though preference was given to more recent empirical research studies. Dissertations were again used primarily as a source for more resources on the topic.

Several books and chapters from handbooks were also identified through these searches. The handbooks and most of the books were available through the University of Virginia library, while others were found online. These resources

proved to be a main source of background information and provided a base for the conceptual framework developed for the study.

Family Engagement

The sheer volume of research on the topic of family engagement makes generating a concise yet comprehensive review of the literature a daunting task. This vast literature base can be divided into two main themes: first are studies led by researchers who endeavor to establish both a definition of and a framework for parent involvement work, using their research to support their theoretical and conceptual framing (Epstein, 1987, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Kim & Bryan, 2017). Many of these studies have become foundational to subsequent research, as they have created the lenses through which educators and scholars view parent engagement. Using these lenses, the second, and larger, group of researchers attempt to show the impact of involving families on a variety of outcomes, ranging from student achievement to increased attendance to higher graduation rates, as well as to find effective strategies for how to foster this involvement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; LaRocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011). In addition, multiple large-scale meta-analyses have been done to synthesize these studies (Fan & Chen, 2001; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2011, 2012).

An elusive definition. Underscoring all of the literature is an attempt to clearly define family engagement. Researchers agree that there is "a lack of stakeholder consensus about what 'parent involvement' entails" (Hutchins, 2011, p. 14). Coupled with differing perspectives, both cultural and contextual, Hutchins (2011) asserts "the reality is that such a definition is near impossible

and perhaps even undesirable because of the growing diversity of families and teachers" (p. 18). Amidst this uncertainty, researchers establish their own definitions of involvement in order to clarify their sense-making, which further complicates attempts to synthesize findings.

Boonk, Gijselaers, Ritzen, and Brand-Gruwel (2018) note that "the concept of parental involvement has been operationalized, measured, and applied in so many ways that it has become somewhat unclear what is meant by the concept" (p. 10), and this uncertainty makes it difficult both to compare results from study to study, and to make statements about trends in the research with confidence (Harris & Goodall, 2008; Tran, 2014; Miller, Lines, Sullivan, & Hermanutz, 2013; Yamauchi, Ponte, Ratliffe, & Traynor, 2017). Given the diversity of the families in today's schools, it is particularly important to define engagement within specific contexts, as "not all parents are the same, have the same needs, [or] face the same barriers" (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014, p. 400). In fact, some researchers go so far as to argue that "employing a traditional definition of parent involvement serves to promote prejudices and further marginalize children and families as a whole" (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006, p. 189).

Existing definitions of family engagement range from more inclusive (Grolnick & Słowiaczek, 1994; LaRocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011), to more specific (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Goodall and Montgomery (2014) frame this progression as a continuum of involvement "from parental involvement with schools to parental engagement with children's learning" (p. 399), with each subsequent term implying decreasing school agency (involvement) and increasing parental agency (engagement and partnership).

These shifts "acknowledge that there is no singular way for parents to be engaged and that no matter how small the behavior may be…it may have a positive effect" (Jensen & Minke, 2017, p. 169). A newer recognition of the importance of community influences on academic and social development has expanded the definition of engagement even further; Joyce Epstein, one of the original advocates for involving parents, whose framework from the 1980s is still used today in many schools, now advocates for the term "school, family, and community partnerships" (Epstein, 2011; Epstein & Sheldon, 2006), as this "emphasizes the shared responsibility for children's learning" (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014, p. 401) that exists in many communities.

Within this conceptualization, engagement behaviors can be categorized in different ways. Lawson (2003) divides these behaviors into school-centric, or behaviors that are initiated or invited by and visible to school staff, and community-centric, or behaviors that are less visible to the school but are more likely happening at home or in the community. Boonk et al. (2018) divide engagement similarly, into home-based and school-based involvement. The recognition of the existence of engagement in a variety of forms represents a "change in relational agency, with the relationship being between the parents and schools, and the object of the relationship being children's learning" (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014, p. 399), and acknowledges parental engagement as a "dynamic, interactive process" (Calabrese Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004) that is continually evolving. It also supports a greater commitment on the part of educators to understand both the strengths and the realities of families, validating actions that families take to ensure the well-being of their

children (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006, p. 188), but that might be invisible from the school's perspective.

Theoretical and conceptual framing. The first grouping of parent engagement literature centers on creating theoretical and conceptual frameworks to explain the structures of family engagement and support its implementation. Yamauchi, Ponte, Ratliffe, & Traynor (2017) studied 215 journal articles published between 2007 and 2011 in order to determine which frameworks were utilized the most frequently by researchers in this field. An analysis of these studies found that four theories were used most often: Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory (1978); social capital theory, based on the work of Bourdieu (1986, 1989), Coleman (1988), and Lareau (1987); Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence (1987); and the funds of knowledge described by Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992). The researchers also identified the two most commonly cited conceptual frameworks: Epstein's types of family involvement (1987), and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model of the parent involvement process (1997). Toren (2013) posits that as schools become more diverse, frameworks for conceptualizing family involvement need to be broadened; additional researchers have created frameworks which attempt to accomplish this more inclusive conceptualization of family involvement (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011; Elias, Patrikakou, & Weissberg, 2007; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Kim & Bryan, 2017; Mapp & Kuttner, 2014), each with a particular spin on the mechanisms through which parents become engaged in their children's education.

The current study targets the specific factors impacting the formation of trust between families and schools, recognizing the critical importance of

establishing trust as a precursor to engagement. While the study does not attempt to uncover how or why parents become involved, pieces of some of these existing structures influence the thinking behind the study's conceptual framework. These elements inform the role of the culturally responsive school leader in moving this work forward, including: recognizing the funds of knowledge that families bring to the table (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), acknowledging the critical intersections between school, family, and the larger community (Epstein, 1987), building the capacity of both families and staff to work together as partners (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011), and focusing on building "respectful and trustful relationships" between home and school (Mapp & Kuttner, 2014, p. 9).

Impacts and strategies. The second grouping of family involvement research studies, and by far the largest, are those that show the impacts of involvement and/or strategies for fostering it in schools. These studies are often cited to make the case that family engagement is an effective strategy for everything from increasing academic achievement and motivation, to lowering levels of depression, anxiety, and aggressive or violent behaviors, and heightening a sense of competence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy in students; other studies show that parent engagement can also result in increased attendance, more positive attitudes towards school, and higher rates of high school graduation (Altschul, 2012; Anguiano, 2004; Beltran, 2012; Davidson & Cardemil, 2009; Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006; Epstein, 2011; Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). Several large-scale meta-analyses help to synthesize this research (Castro et al., 2015; Fan & Chen, 2001; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Wilder, 2014), all leaving little to no

doubt about the potential power of family involvement. After analyzing 51 studies in their synthesis, Henderson and Mapp (2002) stated that the evidence is:

> consistent, positive, and convincing: families have a major influence on their children's achievement in school and throughout life. When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more. (p.7)

Henderson and Mapp are not unrealistic, however, about the limitations of this body of research. They explain that these limitations include: a lack of experimental or quasi-experimental studies; a shortage of long-term research studies; generally small sample sizes; and a preponderance of studies using survey data that are based on self-reported information that cannot be verified. While Henderson and Mapp concede that many of these same constraints are shared with other areas of educational research, it is still important to be cognizant of them when using the literature to inform educational decision making and practice.

In addition, some researchers have found that while family engagement is undoubtedly important and effective, when not done in a coordinated or systematic way it will simply not produce the effects desired. Zarate (2007) studied middle and high school teacher, parent, and student perceptions of family involvement in Miami, New York, and Los Angeles. While she uncovered several differences in how the stakeholder groups interpreted and defined involvement, Zarate concludes "The strongest message that can be conveyed from this study is that parental involvement needs to be an organizational expectation if stakeholders are interested in increasing parental involvement" (p. 15). In interviews with school leaders and teachers across schools and cities, she found a

noticeable lack of a "clear organizational vision" to increase family engagement (p. 12). This is an important finding that will be revisited when discussing the importance of leadership in fostering effective family engagement later in this chapter.

Other researchers concur that positive impacts require intentionality on the part of both parents and educators in order to be realized. Harris and Goodall (2008) argue "it is what parents do to support learning in the school *and* in the home that makes the difference to achievement" (pp. 278-279); in this view, engagement needs to include both school-centric and community-centric behaviors in order to maximize impact. Boonk et al. (2018) also point out that some of these findings are inconsistent, and that "empirical research does not provide a clear picture about which specific types of parental involvement are predictive of achievement" (p. 11); they also highlight the many potential mediators and moderators that can change the degree of impact, including ethnicity, race, socio-economic status, level of maternal education, and the specific characteristics and competencies of each child.

Measuring different perspectives. While most researchers and practitioners agree that it is important to measure "both engagement and barriers to engagement" (Miller, Lewis Valentine, Fish, & Robinson, 2016, p. 277), the measurement of engagement is "deceptively challenging" (Schueler, McIntyre, & Gehlbach, 2017, p. 275), and "study outcomes vary depending on whose perceptions are measured" (Jensen & Minke, 2017, p. 173). While many studies have been done from the school perspective (Kuperminc, Darnell, & Alvarez-Jimenez, 2008), there is a limited amount of research focused on understanding

this topic from the parent perspective (Crozier, 1999; Fan & Chen, 2001; Rodriguez, Blatz, & Elbaum, 2014; Yoder & Lopez, 2013) or from a student perspective (Jensen & Minke, 2017; Vega, Moore, & Miranda, 2015). Despite the difficulties involved, understanding all perspectives is key to developing responsive and effective approaches to engagement; Lopez, Kreider, & Caspe (2004/2005) identify "responding to family interests and needs" and "engaging in dialogue with families" as two of the top strategies for "co-constructing" family engagement initiatives (p. 2). They emphasize the importance of listening to the voices of both families and schools before crafting programs, in order to build upon the funds of knowledge of each stakeholder group.

When working with diverse families, listening takes on a new level of importance: in their longitudinal study of literacy learning among children from low-income families, Compton-Lilly and Delbridge (2019) argue that "hearing the voices of parents living in high-poverty communities is critical" (p. 531) in order to understand both their needs and their strengths. Additionally, there is a gap in the research on the alignment or misalignment of these perceptions with those of teachers and educational leaders. Miller et al. (2016) posit that "the potential for misaligned perceptions in the relationship between parents and teachers may be especially high when the cultural or linguistic background of parents does not match that of school personnel, leading to increased opportunities for misunderstanding" (p. 38). While some studies have probed these differences in perceptions, few have measured how much the alignment or misalignment is due to cultural differences, and, more specifically, "in-depth qualitative work is needed to more fully understand why teachers and Spanish-dominant Latino

parents do not have more aligned perceptions" (Miller et al., 2016, pp. 58-59). Along these lines, researchers such as Wright and Willis (2003/2004) assert that while "teachers and parents may define involvement differently" (p. 54), few studies have been done to confirm this assumption, or to investigate more deeply the nuances of the differences in perspectives among stakeholders and to examine the implications of these differences.

To further complicate matters, using self-reported data can be problematic in and of itself. Barnard (2004) discovered that parent reports of their own engagement did not correlate with the high school completion rates of their children, while teacher reports of parent engagement did show a strong correlation. Such a disconnect supports the case for measuring the perceptions of multiple groups of stakeholders in order to triangulate results and see common themes more clearly. Similarly, in a study by DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, and Duchane (2007), teacher rankings of parent involvement were lower than parent rankings; while the researchers posit that the "parents overestimated their involvement" (p. 367), such a mismatch begs the question of whether the parents were including the types of involvement that are invisible to teachers but valued by many families.

Additionally, further research could shed more light on the interactions of perceptions (teacher, parent, student) and student achievement (Barge & Loges, 2003). Jensen and Minke (2017) assert "parent engagement behaviors that are visible to teachers may influence teachers' perceptions in ways that have beneficial effects on students' academic success" (p. 173), while Miller et al. (2016) theorize that teachers tend to like Spanish-speaking parents because they

are quiet and do not question the teacher's authority. Each of these dynamics could have impacted the findings of this study in different ways.

Engaging Diverse Families

Researchers now recognize that the rapid increase in diversity in our schools has led to a need to change our thinking around family engagement and ways to foster it (Amatea, Cholewa, & Mixon, 2012; Boethel, 2003; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Norris, 2010). Ramos (2007) states that "as the faces of parents change, then so should the ways in which we conceptualize parent involvement and home-school connections" (p. 33). One risk of trying to create a 'one size fits all' family involvement plan is that certain forms of parental engagement in schools can actually reinforce "the existing power divisions between schools, teachers, and parents, and reproduce, rather than break down, existing educational inequalities around class, gender and ethnicity" (Harris & Goodall, 2008, p. 279). The good news is that regardless of income level, race, ethnicity, or education level, research shows that "parents believe that their involvement is central to their child's academic success" (Bridgeland, Dilulio, Streeter, & Mason, 2008, p. 4).

Boethel (2003) asserted "the need to improve academic achievement among 'diverse' student populations…is one of the most persistent and challenging issues that education faces" (p. v); fifteen years after these words were written they still ring true, and engaging diverse families remains a potential lever to close this achievement gap. While socioeconomic status is the most common factor studied in this grouping of research (Anfara & Mertens, 2008; Crosnoe, 2009; Malone, 2017; McNeal, 2001), it often intersects with

membership in minoritized racial and ethnic groups; nearly two-thirds of Latino children in this country live in poverty or close to it, for example (Wildsmith, Alvira-Hammond, & Guzman, 2016). Researchers are interested more specifically in how race and culture interact with involvement and how schools can best position themselves to involve diverse parents successfully (Gonzales & Gabel, 2017; Jefferson, 2015). All of the studies analyzed in the meta-analysis conducted by Wilder (2014) consistently found that the relationship between parent involvement and student academic achievement is "generalizable across race" (p. 393), confirming that family engagement truly might be a key to closing the achievement gap.

When schools assume that families are relatively homogeneous, which is definitely not the case today, they run the risk of masking "the complexity of needs, the roles that ethnic minority parents are playing or the constraints that impede their involvement" (Harris & Goodall, 2008, p. 280); research by Crozier & Davies (2007) confirms that these types of assumptions may contribute to widening gaps both between involved and uninvolved parents and the achievement of students from different ethnic groups. While there are some promising avenues to be explored vis-a-vis the involvement of diverse parents, the recognition that each family has differing strengths and needs is an important first step. Given that the foundation of family engagement is relationship-building, this recognition is especially critical; Colombo (2006) argues "Parent/teacher relationships are formed with relative ease when groups share a common culture, language, and background. Relationships that must bridge

cultures and languages, however, require more effort to create and sustain" (p. 315).

Much of the current research is being framed by the theoretical framework of capital and capacity building (Potter & Roska, 2013; Stevens & Patel, 2015; Tan, 2017; Trainor, 2011). Simultaneously, equity-minded researchers continue to move away from a deficit model of viewing diverse parents as "lacking" and instead are acknowledging the "funds of knowledge" that they possess (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992, p. 133). In a more recent study, Hill, Witherspoon, and Bartz (2018) analyze the perspectives of ethnically diverse teachers, parents, and students, finding that effective communication between stakeholders is among the most consistent strategies for promoting student achievement. Starting with a foundation of trust and understanding on both sides is key to developing this type of successful communication.

Engaging Latino Families

Under the larger umbrella of working with diverse families, and particularly relevant to this study, is a more specific focus on better understanding the strengths and needs of Latino families (Baird, 2015; Gonzales & Gabel, 2017; Medina, Guzman, & Wong-Ratcliff, 2015; Sibley & Brabeck, 2017; Walker, 2016). Since 2000, growth in the Latino population has accounted for half of all population growth in this country; making up 18 percent of the nation's population, Latinos are now the largest minority group in the United States (Flores, 2017). How best to meet the educational needs of this sizeable group has quickly become an urgent question of national interest; while Gándara (2015) describes this area of study as being "woefully underresearched" (p. 459), several

studies have focused on potentially effective strategies to impact the academic growth of Latino students. Among these strategies has been fostering engagement among Latino families (Garcia-Reid, Peterson, & Reid, 2015; Hill & Torres, 2010).

While some studies have shown that schools often perceive Latino parents negatively (Quiocho & Daoud, 2006), viewing Latino parents as having low academic expectations (Miller et al., 2016), quite the opposite appears to be true: researchers have shown that Latino parents are actually more likely to hold high academic expectations for their children (Ho Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Ramirez, 2003; Ryan, Casas, Kelly-Vance, Ryalls, & Nero, 2010). As Latino parents tend to have "fewer direct interactions with school personnel" (Miller et al., 2016), teachers may misinterpret lack of direct involvement with a lack of interest in their children's learning. To make matters even worse, schools commonly use this perceived lack of interest to explain the achievement gap; over time, "deficit beliefs become a filter that blocks educators' abilities to examine their assumptions and to look beyond traditional solutions for real and meaningful change" (Garcia & Guerra, 2004, p. 151).

In a promising study by Carpenter, Ramirez, and Severn (2006), the authors found that, more than for any of the other ethnic groups studied, parent engagement played the biggest role in increased achievement for Latino students. Jeynes (2003) agreed with these findings, determining through his meta-analysis that parents who are involved had a significant positive effect across racial groups, with the most benefit shown by Latino and African American students. As Hill and Taylor (2004) state, "parental school involvement seems to function

differently or serve different purposes in different ethnic and cultural groups" (p. 162), making it even more critical to study each group as a separate entity.

In order to begin the work of understanding and building trust with Latino families, it is important to appreciate their unique cultural orientation. In their summary of parental influences on the academic success of Latino students, Ceballo, Huerta, and Epstein-Ngo (2010) assert that it is "imperative that future work directly examine the role of Latino cultural values…and thereby move the field beyond easy-to make, post-hoc attributions to 'culture'" (p. 304). Attempting to utilize a multidimensional, and more inclusive, conceptualization of family involvement in their study measuring the effect of involvement on Latino adolescent academic progress, Ceballo, Maurizi, Suarez, and Aretakis (2014) explain that these cultural values are "shared commonalities" despite the heterogeneous nature of the Latino community (p. 118).

Guerra and Nelson (2013) add an important caveat to this conversation, cautioning that stereotyping can occur when discussing cultural groups with such a broad brush. They suggest that shared cultural values should be viewed more as "tendencies" rather than absolutes, and recommend that teachers and leaders get to know parents and students as individuals rather than make sweeping assumptions, using a values framework as a starting point for continued dialogue (p. 433). Working from this perspective, they examined twenty years of literature on the involvement of Latino parents and concluded that the mismatch between the value structure of Latino culture and that of mainstream American schools explains many of the misunderstandings between the two stakeholder groups. They explain that individualism is the orientation most valued by schools, while

"approximately 70% of the world's cultures have a collectivist orientation" (p. 426), a group that includes Latinos. These differing orientations impact everything from ways of thinking to communication styles and expectations for behavior.

In the individualistic culture of most American schools, teachers and parents are both viewed as having responsibilities for a child's educational success; this is the model represented in most traditional parent involvement frameworks (Epstein, 1995; National Parent Teacher Association, 2008), and held up as the model for 'good' parenting. However, in a collectivist culture, families tend to see parents and teachers as having "distinct roles and responsibilities in the educational process" (Guerra & Nelson, 2013, p. 429) and may feel that a parent approaching a teacher without an invitation might be viewed as showing disrespect or distrust in the teacher's ability. Instead, parents from a collectivist culture focus more on their children's behavior and socialization, work that largely happens at home and not in view of the school, which often goes unrecognized as involvement. Educators that continue to try to use an individualistic, or traditional, approach with collectivist families will not be successful; instead of building trust, Latino parents get the message that they "need to be 'fixed' to function more like their middle-class White counterparts" (Guerra & Nelson, 2013, p. 444).

These researchers, and others who have studied Latino culture and who have looked more specifically at the predominant value orientations within this large and varied group (Cruz-Santiago & Ramírez García, 2011; Hill & Torres, 2011), have described several cultural values that seem to be consistent across

families. First is the high priority that Latino parents place on education for their children; despite many deficit-based stereotypes and assumptions to the contrary, the value of *educación*, which integrates morals and values with academic learning, is a "consistent and long-standing research finding" across multiple studies over time (Ceballo, Huerta, & Epstein-Ngo, 2010, p. 295). Other important cultural values include (a) *confianza*: trust, with a focus on committing to take care of one another, providing hope, and giving confidence that you will follow through on your commitments (Quintanar & Warren, 2008), (b) *respeto*: politeness and respect, especially towards those older than you and those in professional positions, with an emphasis on establishing harmony in relationships (Ceballo, Maurizi, Suarez, & Aretakis, 2013), and (c) *simpatía*: warmth, with an emphasis on understanding and respecting the feelings of others (Suizzo, Pahlke, Yarnell, Chen, & Romero, 2014). All of these values fall under the wider umbrella of *familismo*, or the concept of close family ties with a heightened sense of duty, attachment, and loyalty to the family unit, both nuclear and extended, and the understanding that one's behavior reflects on the collective family (Cruz-Santiago & Ramírez García, 2011; Garcia-Reid, Peterson, & Reid, 2015).

In their research, Zambone and Alicea-Sáez (2003) highlight the potential conflict between Latino cultural values and the mainstream educational culture. Focusing on the value of *respeto*, the researchers give an example that shows how the emphasis on respecting teachers and accepting their judgments can actually get in the way of student achievement; in this example a teacher, underestimating a Latino student's strengths and potential, delivered a negative message to him

about his future educational and career trajectory. The student, who felt deep respect for the teacher, simply accepted this negative message as truth and allowed it to impact his self-concept and expectations moving forward. This type of damaging miscommunication can arise when cultural values are not in sync.

Similarly, researchers suggest that some Latino parents may not become directly involved in schools "due to a respect of and fear of encroaching upon knowledgeable school professionals" (Ceballo, Huerta, & Epstein-Ngo, 2010, p. 297). To combat this type of cultural misalignment, Zambone and Alicea-Sáez (2003) contend that "cooperation between schools, family, and the community plays a key role in assuring [*sic*] that there is the alignment of values that is important for academic attainment" (p. 72). This alignment is essential for the establishment of trust between all parties, which is critical for the building of effective relationships between home and school. De la Vega (2007) notes that understanding the importance of *confianza* in Latino culture "is central to developing relationships with Latino parents and to working with the Latino community" (p. 207).

Middle School/Adolescence

It is no surprise that the turbulent nature of adolescence makes middle school an emotional and confusing time for both students and parents. Researchers have tied the transition from elementary to middle school to a host of negative outcomes, including a decline in grades and motivation, lowered self-esteem, and increased stress (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Alspaugh, 1998; Anderman, Maehr, & Midgely, 1999). Key developmental changes during these years, including rapid physical and cognitive growth and social development, can lead

to “renegotiations of family relationships, especially the parent-adolescent relationship” (Hill & Tyson, 2009, p. 740), as adolescents seek increasing independence and autonomy from their parents (Bhargava & Witherspoon, 2015; Hill & Chao, 2009). Despite these shifts, or perhaps because of them, Billig (2002) stresses that middle schoolers still “need stability and people they can rely on” (p. 42). In fact, Xu (2002) asserts, the adolescent desire for autonomy can be viewed as a gateway rather than a barrier to meaningful middle school family involvement, giving families opportunities to help their students “develop and exercise their autonomy in more responsible and self-rewarding ways” (p. 70).

While multiple studies have shown that levels of parent involvement drop during the transition from elementary school to middle school and on to high school (Brough & Irvin, 2001; Cheung & Pomerantz, 2011; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Shumow & Schmidt, 2014; Simon, 2004; Wang, Hill, & Hofkens, 2014), especially for low income and ethnic minority families (Bridgeland, Dilulio, Streeter, & Mason, 2008), other researchers have underscored its importance; given that adolescence is widely regarded as “the most complex social period in the life of an individual,” it appears that “families provide the social, cultural, and emotional supports that youth need to function well in school” (DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, & Duchane, 2007, p. 361). In fact, several studies have found that the students who are most likely to transition successfully to middle school report having caring adults who are invested in their education (Akos, 2002; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Toren, 2013).

Researchers have surmised that parents who choose to decrease their involvement do so as everything else seems to increase: the complexity of

homework, the number of teachers, and the desire of adolescents to become more autonomous (Anderman & Mueller, 2010; Brough & Irvin, 2001; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Simon, 2004). However, parental involvement remains an "important predictor of school outcomes through adolescence" (Hill & Taylor, 2004, p. 161), and some studies have shown that not only is family involvement even more strongly related to achievement in middle school and high school than it is in elementary school, but that it also has longer term effects in terms of academic achievement (Kim & Hill, 2015). In their research synthesis, Jordan, Orozco, and Averett (2002) pointed out that these effects can accrue over time, so that the longer families stay involved, the more students' grades increase. Some researchers have also posited that while visible involvement might decrease in middle school, involvement at home might be holding steady and even increasing during the middle and high school years (Hill & Taylor, 2004). More recently, after reviewing 75 studies, Boonk et al. (2018) conclude that "parental involvement does not diminish as children grow older but it does change in nature" (p. 25). They suggest that future research should focus on specific parent involvement behaviors that lead to more impactful engagement at the secondary level.

Most researchers agree that this kind of impactful engagement involves some combination of involvement at school and at home (Epstein, 1987; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Comer, 1995). While involvement in elementary school might involve mostly school-based activities such as volunteering in the classroom, the most effective involvement at the middle school level is largely done at home, and includes two prongs that can be influenced by teachers and

administrators: helping parents to build their social and navigational capital so that they can best guide their children in making sound educational decisions (Hill & Taylor, 2004), and simultaneously supporting parents as they learn to incorporate "academic socialization," a term coined by Hill and Tyson (2009), into that guidance. This may include "communicating parental expectations for education and its value or utility, linking schoolwork to current events, fostering educational and occupational aspirations, discussing learning strategies with children, and making preparations and plans for the future" (Hill & Tyson, 2009). It is a shift in parental mindset, which hopefully then leads to a corresponding shift in student mindset as well, leading to positive learning outcomes. The development of the communication systems and structures for this type of interaction is a good first step for a middle school staff to take in creating a family engagement program.

It is also important to consider how the unique developmental phase of adolescence affects engagement and its impacts in middle and high school. Existing research shows a connection between parent-adolescent relationship quality and achievement (Chan, Rhodes, Howard, Lowe, Schwartz, & Herrera, 2013; Gordon & Cui, 2012), but also indicates that there are significant changes in these relationships, specifically in the amount and type of parent-child communication during adolescence, as students aim for increased autonomy and independence (Keijsers & Poulin, 2013). Adolescents report a decrease in relationship quality between the ages of 11 and 14, contending that their relationships reflect more conflict, less parent engagement, less positive regard

for their parents and the perception that their parents also have less regard for them (McGue, Elkins, Walden, & Iacono, 2005).

It is possible that parental behaviors may shift in response to the perceived needs of their children (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Hill & Wang, 2015; Hill, Witherspoon, & Bartz, 2018; Wang, Hill, & Hofkens, 2014; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). Goodall and Montgomery (2014) argue that the forms of engagement change to fit the needs of the adolescent, stating "children change as they age, and parental engagement with their learning needs to adapt to these changes" (p. 399); Oxley (2013) echoes this sentiment, asserting "adolescent development necessitates adjustments in parent support to reap benefits" (p. 2). Catsambis & Garland (1997) found that some behaviors remained consistent across grade levels (e.g., rules around maintaining grades), and some changed (e.g., a decrease in talking about homework and school activities, and an increase in talking about educational expectations). They also found that communication between home and school also shifted: there was more communication from secondary schools about academic programs and volunteering, and less about academic performance and behavior.

Other possible reasons behind the changes in engagement include the increased difficulty of school work in secondary school and a decrease in parental self-efficacy relative to this increased rigor, and the shifts in structure and environment from the elementary setting with one teacher and many chances to be in the building, to secondary schools with multiple teachers and fewer opportunities to volunteer (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Harris & Goodall, 2008). While additional research is needed on the roles of adolescence and the

structure of middle school as possible mediators of engagement, Ferguson and Rodriguez (2005) stress "involvement at the secondary level is often much less visible, though just as valuable" (p. 1).

Middle school and Latino students. While the middle school years are a vulnerable time for all young people, for Latino students the transition can be even more challenging. Murakami, Valle, and Méndez-Morse (2013) stress that these years are especially critical for Latino students as "academic gaps become prominent" (p. 159), while Cruz-Santiago and Ramírez García (2011) highlight that Latino youth have been found to be at high risk for many psychosocial problems, including substance abuse, sexual activity and academic difficulties, many of which tend to surface during adolescence (pp. 92-93). Labeling middle school as a "critical stage," Cruz-Santiago and Ramírez García (2011) warn that Latino adolescents "are at risk for derailing their formal education trajectory" (p. 95) during these formative years. Similarly, in a study of students in Florida, Nesman, Barobs-Gahr, and Medrano (2001) concluded that Latino students were at a higher risk to drop out of middle school and were more likely to be suspended for discipline-related infractions than students of other ethnic groups.

On a somewhat more positive note, a study on Latino adolescent antisocial behavior by Morrison, Robertson, Laurie, & Kelly (2002) found that during the transition from elementary to middle school, lower levels of problem behavior were "associated with the students' perception of the extent to which they felt supported by their peers, family, and others"; the researchers concluded that parental support can therefore serve as a "protective factor" against poor

behavioral choices (p. 285). Even more encouraging were the findings of Ceballo, Maurizi, Suarez, and Artekakis (2013), who found that having their parents present at school events and programs continued to be "an important source of motivation and academic inspiration" for Latino adolescents in low-income families, and that overall, Latino families "continue to play an influential role in their children's educational beliefs and school effort during adolescence" (p. 124).

Noting that Latino young people are often looked at through a deficit-based model, Garcia-Reed, Peterson, and Reid (2015) suggest that there needs to be more research focused on the assets that these students bring to their academic lives; they state "in particular, the strong family connections of Latino youth and the social interactions that they experience with other adults in their lives may influence their perception of social connectedness and their ability to avoid trouble at school" (p. 330). Their study investigated new Latino immigrants in an urban middle school setting, and found that strong parental support, coupled with strong teacher support, were the keys to success; their findings were so compelling that they conclude "the connection between parents and school may be even more important for recently immigrated Latino middle school-aged adolescents than for other populations" (p. 337), and suggest that middle schools collaborate with parents more effectively in order to "create an emotionally supportive atmosphere that children feel accepted and welcomed, and are afforded the opportunity to flourish socially, emotionally, and ultimately succeed academically" (p. 339).

While there is much still to discover about family involvement during these important middle school years, especially for our diverse learners and their

families, the intent of this study reflects our need to "deepen our understanding of the types of involvement that matter for adolescents" (Hill, Witherspoon, & Bartz, 2018, p. 12).

Trust

Trust is a recurrent theme in the family engagement literature (Brewster & Railsback, 2003a). Researchers have suggested that the building of trusting relationships between home and school is the cornerstone of effective family engagement (Adams and Christenson, 2000; Amatea, 2009; Beltran, 2012; Boethel, 2003; Bryk, 2010; Olender, Elias, & Mastroleo, 2010; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). However, while some studies show a relationship between parent trust and positive student outcomes, "research on parent trust of teachers and schools is limited" (Santiago, Garbacz, Beattie, & Moore, 2016, p. 1004), especially when thinking about diverse families; Brewster and Railsback (2003b) suggest that few studies have "considered ways in which issues of race, class, culture, home language, family involvement, and trust intersect" (p. 11).

In their comprehensive literature review, Henderson & Mapp (2002) identified the building of trusting and respectful relationships between teachers, leaders, and families as one of three key practices for engaging diverse families; they state "the quality of relationships [within a school community] influences whether connections among schools, families, and communities will be formed and sustained" (p. 43). However, while it has been identified as one of the factors necessary for the fostering of positive and productive home-school partnerships, until recently there has been little research done to connect the building of trust with an increase in family engagement. Tschannen-Moran (2014) explained

"researchers have only recently begun to recognize the critical role that trust plays in the relationships that connect families and schools" (p. 203). Brewster and Railsback (2003b) suggest:

> Part of the problem, no doubt, is the fuzzy nature of the word "trust." Although most of us can easily identify relationships in which trust is or is not present, pinning down precisely what trust entails is harder to do. From the perspective of educational researchers, the level of trust present within a school is a difficult thing to measure, much less connect to concrete outcomes such as…parent involvement. (p. 1)

Two books, one by Bryk and Schneider (2002) and the other by Tschannen-Moran (2014), have attempted to clear up some of this "fuzziness" by outlining the elements that constitute trust in the educational setting. Building on existing work done to describe trust as a construct in the business world (Hacker & Willard, 2002; Paliszkiewicz, 2011), these researchers offer frameworks to define trust and then attempt to build both theoretical and practical connections between these definitions and educational practice.

Bryk and Schneider (2002) use the term "relational trust" to explain the form of trust that is found in the school setting. As opposed to organic trust, which is found in social systems where individuals trust unconditionally and believe in an unquestioned moral authority, or contractual trust, in which roles and expectations are defined through a legal relationship, relational trust describes the mutual dependence of stakeholders within the complex social system of a school. This mutual dependence is necessary as the actors (teachers, students, leaders, and parents) understand and maintain their roles and their relationships with each other. Vulnerability necessarily results on all sides, as each group depends on the others to fulfill their responsibilities towards a

common goal. Bryk and Schneider (2002) point out that this vulnerability is "especially salient in the context of asymmetric power relations," such as those between school leaders and non-English speaking parents, and that it is the responsibility of those more powerful to both recognize the imbalance and be committed to alleviate it as much as possible (p. 20). Tschannen-Moran (2014) also notes that power differentials can impact the formation of trust in a relationship, positing "it is the responsibility of the person with greater power to take the initiative to build and sustain trusting relationships" (p. 41).

Tschannen-Moran (2014) devotes an entire chapter of her book, *Trust Matters: Leadership for Successful Schools*, to "Building Bridges of Trust with Families" (pp. 187-220). She explains that trust is a "complex and dynamic process" and defines it as "the willingness to be vulnerable to another based on the confidence that the other is *benevolent, honest, open, reliable,* and *competent*" (pp. xi-xii), then goes on to define each of these five qualities as they relate to the five constituencies of schools (administrators, teachers, students, parents, and the public):

- Benevolence: expressing an attitude of caring, goodwill, positive intentions, fairness and support; protective of others' well-being, showing consideration and sensitivity;
- Honesty: showing integrity by telling the truth, keeping promises, being authentic, and accepting responsibility not just for positive things but also for mistakes;

- Openness: communicating openly, sharing information, power, and decision making; willing to be vulnerable, but in the context of good judgement;
- Reliability: being consistent, dependable, dedicated, and diligent; combining predictability with caring and competence;
- Competence: being a problem solver and a hard worker, being flexible and able to resolve conflicts; being able to complete a task according to expected standards (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, pp. 21-39).

These five "facets" of trust as described by Tschannen-Moran form a critical layer of the conceptual framework of this study; however, it is important to note the author's assertion that trust is not unilateral, but rather is differentiated. She explains "Although all of these facets of trust are important, their relative weight will depend on the nature of the interdependence and consequent vulnerability in the relationship" (p. 39). This is especially important in light of the two stakeholder groups that were involved in this study; key to the study's success was uncovering which facets were perceived as most important to each group and then analyzing any overlaps or gaps between their perceptions.

Also relevant to this study is Tschannen-Moran's argument that "People have a tendency to extend trust more readily to those they perceive as being similar to them, based on the assumption that they have adopted similar norms of obligation and cooperation learned through similar cultural structures" including similarities in family background, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (2014, pp. 57-58). Given the inherent differences between school staff and the parents with whom they work, it is possible that this tendency to proffer trust to

those who are similar, rather than those who are different, may play an outsize role as a barrier to the formation of trust between school and home. Tschannen-Moran (2014) contends that individuals from different groups need time to come to see themselves as part of a collective, and that "they need knowledge of one another's culture and values so that they can understand the behaviors and attitudes of the other and can come to have confidence that their expectations will be met" (p. 61). By soliciting the voices of different stakeholder groups, and then disseminating the results, this study will hopefully serve as a step towards building this knowledge as a base for creating trust across a school community.

Other researchers have similarly emphasized the importance of building trust for traditionally minoritized students and their families. While the impact of such differences as ethnicity and income level have shown inconsistent effects on the quality of home-school relationships (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001), there is no question that these differences complicate the creation of trust to some degree. Tschannen-Moran (2014) argues that "Schools serving increasingly diverse student populations may have to work especially hard to cultivate trust with parents" (p. 213), while Wooley, Glimpse, and Johnson (2010) concur, stating "In communities where many adults had negative experiences with schools and schooling, educators must work even harder to develop that trust" (p. 37). Antunez (2000) and Mapp (2002) point out several barriers that may impede the formation of trust between diverse parents and schools, including: negative past experiences with school, lack of self-confidence and self-efficacy as well as lack of confidence in the school, and past experiences with racism and discrimination. By anticipating these possible

barriers, school leaders can be proactive in creating structures to minimize their impact. Henderson and Mapp (2002) suggest "When outreach efforts reflect a sincere desire to engage parents…as partners in children's education, the studies show that they respond positively" (p. 66).

Additionally, some studies have shown that trust between home and school declines as students enter middle school (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Stone, 2003). At the secondary level, trust appears to be especially vulnerable in schools with heavily minority populations; Stone (2003) conducted an analysis of teacher survey data from Chicago schools and found that secondary schools that were predominantly Latino had lower levels of teacher reported trust overall, and that these levels showed a significant decrease from elementary school data. She suggests that the same structural issues that are at play in the changes in family engagement across the middle school transition may also be working against the establishment of trust at this level.

Finally, while research has found that parent trust in teachers predicts increased levels of family engagement (Adams & Christenson, 1998; Beycioglu, Ozer, & Sahin, 2013; Nzinga-Johnson, Baker, & Aupperlee, 2009; Santiago et al., 2016), the research on the role of the school leader in this trust dynamic is less definitive. Santiago et al. (2016) argue that more research needs to be done on the congruence of parent and teacher ratings of trust, which might impact the formation of truly trusting relationships between home and school. One obstacle to this avenue of research is that building trust takes time, and few studies are done longitudinally. In addition, of those researchers who have studied how trust is built and maintained, some of the lessons learned have been contradictory: for

example, Buchanan and Buchanan (2017) conclude that "a purposeful plan for multiple interactions with families over time" is critical to success (p. 242), while Adams and Christenson (2000) posit that the types and quality of interactions between home and school are better predictors of trust than was the frequency of those interactions. No matter the form that it takes, however, it is clear that for trust to be built between home and school, it is incumbent on school leaders to "foster it, maintain it, and exemplify trusting relationships with all parents" (Shelden, Angell, Stoner, & Roseland, 2010, p. 159).

Leadership for Family Engagement

With mandates ranging from student achievement to equitable allocation of resources and staffing, the role of the school leader is undeniably complex. As principals are seen as "the primary agent of change" for school improvement (Allensworth & Hart, 2018, p. 1), it is incumbent upon them to create strong learning climates for their students and staff. Research shows that a principal's work to transform their school climate into one of trust, support, and high, consistent expectations is the primary way that a leader can influence school achievement (Allensworth & Hart, 2018).

Part of building this trusting climate is fostering respectful partnerships between home and school. Ensuring that families of all racial, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds are welcomed into these partnerships is an important function of a culturally responsive school leader (Allensworth et al., 2018; Khalifa, 2012). In fact, trust is "increasingly recognized as a critical element of leadership" (Tschannen-Moran, 2003, p. 162), and school leaders are increasingly being seen as playing a "vital role" in creating and sustaining trusting relationships with

parents and community members (Allensworth et al., 2018). The literature reviewed in this section will build the case for the importance of leadership to the effective engagement of families.

Importance of building capacity. In spite of the many potential benefits of engaging families, teachers largely feel unprepared to do the work needed to make such benefits a reality (Caspe, Lopez, Chu, & Weiss, 2011; Miller et al. 2013). As Hargreaves (2001) explains, "while the rhetoric that teachers should treat parents as partners in their children's education is widespread…the reality is often very different" (p. 374). Teachers, both new and seasoned, report anxiety as they navigate the "complex and tender geography" that lies between families and schools (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003, p. xi). Educators can be unsure of how best to engage parents who are from backgrounds that are different from their own, making "assumptions about groups of parents based on very little actual knowledge about them or their situation" particularly when "parents and teachers do not share the same worldviews, experiences, or social capital" (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014, p. 400). Misunderstandings can result when teachers assume that ethnically diverse and low-income families are less engaged and invested than middle-class white families, a myth that has been disproven in multiple studies (Moll et al., 1992; Weiss et al., 2018).

Much of the disconnect between the research-proven benefits of family engagement and the reality of what is actually happening in schools across the country can be attributed to a lack of teacher and administrator training, both pre- and in-service. Weiss et al. (2018) suggest that this lack of training has long been holding educators back from making valuable connections with parents and

recommend an investment in building the strategies and skills needed for effective engagement. In fact, when surveyed, many administrators and teachers report feeling unprepared to engage parents (Caspe et al., 2011). They are not alone in this feeling: after surveying more than 150 administrators of teacher education programs, Epstein and Sanders (2006) confirm that most of the leaders reported that their graduates were not well prepared to create and participate in partnerships with families, with only 7.2% of the leaders agreeing strongly that the new teachers who graduated from their programs were prepared for this type of work (p. 96). Unfortunately, Mapp and Kuttner (2014) assert, "without attention to training and capacity building, well-intentioned partnership efforts fall flat" (p. 6).

It is the responsibility of school leaders to build this capacity in their staff. Attention must also be paid to the inherent power differentials in these relationships and finding ways in which they can be mitigated so that parents and educators can truly be seen as partners. Calabrese Barton et al. (2004) contend that schools view the culture of poor, minority, & linguistically diverse families as "subordinate" (p. 5). Instead, schools must "build off of families' strengths to help parents support their children's learning and development," focusing on "trust, ongoing communication, mutual respect, and attention to each party's needs" (Beltran, 2012, p. 2), in order to create programs that are "responsive, rather than prescriptive" (Colombo, 2006, p. 317). Research supports the need for targeted professional development to facilitate cultural proficiency, particularly focused on asset vs. deficit-based thinking and funds of knowledge, as well as the skill to communicate and collaborate with others, in order to build

the capacity for relationship-building (Bell, Grant, Yoo, Jimenez, and Frye, 2017; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Pushor and Amendt, 2018; Vega et al., 2015).

In order to be appropriately responsive, leaders need to understand the potential barriers to involvement that might stand in the way of diverse parents. Research has shown that "there are clearly material…and psychological barriers which operate differentially (and discriminatingly) across the social classes and individual differences among parents that operate within social classes" (Harris & Goodall, 2008, p. 280). Unfortunately, teachers might see initial parent reluctance to engage in partnerships as "resistance or intransigence" (Harris & Goodall, 2008, p. 286) instead of understanding the barriers that might be holding them back. More research, which hopefully can lead to enhanced professional development, is needed to begin to build the capacity necessary to engage in these interactions with sensitivity (Bartels & Eskow, 2010; Dearing, Sibley, & Nguyen, 2015; Matthews, Portes, & Mellom, 2010; Turney & Kao, 2009).

Importance of valuing and validating teacher voice. An essential ingredient in effectively building teacher capacity is for leaders to understand the value of teacher voice. Quaglia and Lande (2016) define teacher voice as a "teacher's ability to speak openly about opinions, ideas, and suggestions in an environment that is driven by trust, collaboration, and responsibility" (p. 33). Ensuring that teachers feel valued and that their ideas are respected cannot be overstated, as classroom teachers are the "primary connection point" between schools and families (Allensworth et al., 2018, p. 21); before a school leader can

begin to establish trust with the community, she must first build trust within her staff. Allensworth et al. (2018) state, “relational trust is key to successful collaboration so that all staff are able to work together on the factors that matter for success” (p. 25). Fostering family engagement is one of these critical factors.

By first soliciting teacher voice in decision making, and then enacting that voice by integrating teacher perspectives into policies and practices, this essential trust begins to build over time. The most effective school leaders understand that developing relationships requires an intentional investment of time and energy, since “building trust cannot be rushed. It is an interactive process, involving the sharing of information, ideas, and feelings” (Margolis & Brannigan, 1986, p. 71). Once these relationships are established, and teachers feel comfortable with sharing and collaborating, leaders can then focus on supporting “shared leadership” among staff, empowering teachers to “have collective ownership of the school vision and goals” (Allensworth & Hart, 2018, p. 4). In their study on higher-performing middle schools, Wilcox and Angelis (2012) found that it was trust that “enabled [these schools] to collaboratively develop and enact a shared vision of success for all students” (p. 43). Without developing this sense of collective responsibility, such a vision cannot be realized.

Appreciating the role of social capital. Unfortunately, American schools have traditionally seemed like closed systems to many families, especially those who have not had the capital to navigate their complexity (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011; Ferrara, 2015; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Based on the research of Bourdieu (1986), social capital theory explains the impact of differences in such social dimensions as class, income, and culture

on “the material and immaterial resources that individuals and families are able to access through their social ties” (Weininger & Lareau, 2003, p. 323). These differences in access often translate to difficulties in negotiating the American school system (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011), leading Delgado-Gaitan (1991) and other researchers to argue for “underrepresented families to create mechanisms for action that share power and decision making with schools” (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011, p. 6). Much of the social capital research provides a base for the current argument that effective family engagement can be a lever for more equitable outcomes for students, through empowerment and education (Kao & Rutherford, 2007; Lareau, 1987; Lee & Bowen, 2006).

Leaders should recognize that, in contrast, middle-class families tend to come to school with “culturally supportive social networks” and are comfortable with “the vocabulary of teachers, feel entitled to treat teachers as equals and have access to childcare and transportation,” all of which facilitate their engagement (Harris & Goodall, 2008, p. 280). This heightened social capital allows them to construct their relationships with the school more easily and to establish trust more quickly; Coleman (1988) listed trust as the first of three mechanisms through which social capital is facilitated, underscoring the importance of its establishment as a precursor to successful relationship building, especially for those families who come with a history of distrust or unease about interacting with school staff. Through the intentional building of trust, leaders and teachers can also begin the process of strengthening the social capital of these families.

Culturally responsive school leadership practices. With the increase in diversity in classrooms across the nation, school systems are

beginning to acknowledge the importance of training educators to be culturally proficient and responsive to the needs of their students and parents. While much of this professional development has been targeted at teachers, there is also a growing awareness of the critical role of the school leader in creating a "climate of belonging" that is inclusive and welcoming to all stakeholders (Theoharis, 2012, p. xiv). Culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) aims to make "the entire school environment responsive to the schooling needs of minoritized students" (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016, p. 1272) by focusing on the role of the school-level administrator in setting the course for school reform; proponents of CRSL argue that without principal support, culturally responsive instruction will not be sustained, and district-level mandates will not be enforced.

In outlining the behaviors of a culturally responsive school leader, Khalifa, Gooden and Davis (2016) state that engaging families is a primary function, and that an effective school leader should be able to "engage students, families, and communities in culturally appropriate ways" (p. 1282). Khalifa (2018) also underscores the need for the culturally responsive school leader to build trust with families who may be distrustful of educators, "due to historical and current practices of marginalization" (p. 172). By using the CRSL framework as an impetus for culturally sensitive family engagement, school leaders can move this work forward. Theoharis (2012) agrees, stating "there is consensus that school leaders are one of a few essential components in creating more equitable and socially just schools" (p. xiii); he argues that it is incumbent upon the culturally responsive school leader to ensure that all voices are heard when decisions are being made, and more specifically, to demonstrate "a commitment to authentic

listening to families" (p. xiv). Khalifa (2012) emphasizes the importance of both listening to and valuing the input of the entire school community, stating "Trust, rapport, and social capital can all be built when principals expand their role to include community leadership *as defined by the community*" (p. 428).

Leadership and trust. The role of a leader in supporting and facilitating the building of trust between home and school cannot be overstated. Tschannen-Moran (2014) suggests that the example set by a school leader "radiates as ripples in a pond" (p. 217), while Handford and Leithwood (2013) state that trust is "a core component" of leadership (p. 194). Bryk (2010) found that "principals play a key role in nurturing trust formation" and that relational trust "operates as both a lubricant for organizational change and a moral resource for sustaining the hard work of local school improvement…absent such trust, schools find it nearly impossible to strengthen parent-community ties" (p. 27). In addition, studies show that leaders can build this trust regardless of "poverty status, school size, diverse ethnic composition, and school level," by "aligning policies and practices to address the affective needs of parents" (Adams, Forsyth, & Mitchell, 2009, p. 4).

Ultimately, research shows that it is the principal's responsibility to develop a school climate where trust can be built and nurtured; Riehl (2012) states "leaders establish priorities, set the tone, and provide the means for involving families and communities in education or for keeping them at bay" (p. 10). Several studies point to the school leader's impact on school climate as the primary lever to effect change, including "creating an environment of openness for fostering meaningful community engagement" (Leithwood & Louis, 2012, p.

94). In her research with Latino parents, Zarate (2007) found that "parental involvement needs to be an organizational expectation if stakeholders are interested in increasing parental involvement" (p. 15), and that it is the responsibility of the school leader to make this expectation clear and to enforce its implementation. Effective school leaders also recognize that family engagement is a process, and that the first step is to convey its importance as a "core strategy to improve teaching and learning" to staff and community alike (Quezada, 2016, p. 28). While Bryk and Schneider (2002) are careful to note that trusting relationships will not compensate for poor instruction or ineffective school structures, they argue that the leader that establishes trust creates a set of organizational conditions that can lead to effective reform and school improvement.

Tschannen-Moran (2014) asserts that a principal sets the tone for a school and applies the previously described five facets of trust to the five functions of instructional leaders in order to show, in practical terms, how this works. These five functions of leadership and their connections to trust follow:

- Visioning: trustworthy leadership characterized by benevolence must precede a participative, strengths-based visioning process in order to nurture trust. Change that is pushed through too quickly can be damaging;
- Modeling: leaders must be positive role models, demonstrating how to be caring and respectful in relationships, while combining personal humility with determination and focus. Trustworthy leaders model norms of

conduct that respect all stakeholders, and invite others to operate according to the same norms;

- Coaching: leaders are active and constructive partners with their staff and community members, guiding them towards change rather than coercing or forcing;
- Managing: trusting school leaders delegate responsibilities and cultivate a culture in which they are able to balance their handling of policies, rules, and procedures without manipulation or abuse of power; they nurture a climate of flexibility in which problems can be resolved;
- Mediating: school leaders deal with conflict and work to repair trust and relationships when things break down; they also build the capacity of others to manage conflict and negotiate solutions

(Tschannen-Moran, 2014, pp. 254-264).

Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The unexpected events of 2020 have brought an unprecedented amount of upheaval to teaching and learning throughout the world. As researchers scramble to make sense of these changes, and their impacts on our priorities and ideas around education moving forward, it has been clear that the pandemic has brought many of the gaps and inequities in our systems to light. One of these gaps has undoubtedly been the importance of family and community engagement, especially when working with diverse families; while during normal times communicating and engaging with families was viewed as important by many educational leaders, during COVID-19 the importance of this communication has reached a critical level. Families have gone from “being

valuable stakeholders to being essential partners in the work of educating students" (Uro, Lai, & Alsace, 2020, p. 28). Educators worldwide have been working to "stretch to interact in new ways" (Banwo, Anderson, Childs, & Stone-Johnson, 2020, p. 4), innovating and creating solutions to bridge the home-school divide, leading some to question whether the pandemic will "finally force school systems to treat parents as the priceless academic resources they have always been" (Seale, 2020).

One of the primary concerns of the COVID-19 closures and resulting instructional uncertainty has been the very real possibility of a widening student achievement gap. With students learning at home, families have necessarily become instrumental in ensuring that learning progresses; Seale (2020) explains that "the only way to prevent COVID-19 from deepening inequality for an entire generation of children is to equip families to support learning at home." At the same time, families have had the unique opportunity to see inside the 'black box' of their children's education, giving them new insights into teaching and learning. They now bring new understandings and relevant questions to the table, and perhaps will be more invested in the educational decision-making process moving forward, which could permanently change the face of the home-school dynamic (Winthrop, 2020). In a study conducted by Learning Heroes (2020), 85 percent of all parents surveyed across the country, including 72 percent of Latino parents, indicated that they were somewhat or very likely to "develop a stronger relationship with my child's teacher(s) than I've had in the past" (p.31); such interest is hopefully the harbinger of more positive and robust connections to come.

Trust has proven to be an essential ingredient to success during this challenging time. In a study of school principals, Kaul, VanGronigen, and Simon (2020) found that those who had "built a culture of trust among teachers, staff, students, and families were able to leverage existing structures to better support their school communities. As one principal said, 'when you trust the people you're working with… [it is] easy… to work together to make things happen'" (p. 6). This trust extends past the home-school relationship to relational trust between leaders and teachers who, feeling overwhelmed and often under resourced in the online environment, have relied on trusting relationships with their school leaders and colleagues to navigate uncharted waters and negotiate new boundaries with families.

Additionally, given the focus of this study, it is important to acknowledge that the Latino community has been particularly hard hit during this time. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nationwide Latinos have been nearly three times more likely to be infected with the virus than their white peers (Samuels, 2020). In Newport County, where this study was conducted, Latinos made up 62 percent of all COVID-19 cases and only 16 percent of the population as of June 2020, while statewide Latinos made up more of the state's cases than any other racial or ethnic group (Masters, 2020), and as of this writing, are "infected, hospitalized and dying from the coronavirus faster than every group and at more than double the rate of whites" (Moreno, 2021). These higher rates of infection have been tied to a number of social determinants related to persistent racial and economic disparities in conditions and health care (Lopez, Hart, & Katz, 2021). These include pre-existing medical conditions,

spotty access to healthcare, work conditions, high-density living conditions, immigration status, and language barriers (Gil, Marcelin, Zuniga-Blanco, Marquez, Mathew, & Piggott, 2020; Masters, 2020). In terms of employment, nationally a quarter of Hispanics work in "key service occupations," while only 16.2% of Hispanics hold jobs that allow them to telecommute, raising their exposure to the COVID-19 virus significantly (Gil et al., 2020, p. 1593).

Presumably because of a combination of these factors, an *EdWeek* survey found that Latino parents, of all ethnic groups, were most likely to say that they had "low, or no, trust that schools could keep their children safe" (Samuels, 2020), leading to a high percentage of Latino students opting to remain in virtual school settings even when given the choice to return to school buildings. In a recent poll disseminated by Axios/Ipsos, 40% of Latino parents reported that they were "extremely or very concerned about schools in their community reopening too quickly," compared to 25% of white parents surveyed (Walsh, 2021).

Leading during a time of crisis can provide new ways of looking at things and positive changes for the educational landscape beyond the immediate emergency. However, many still question whether or not the current changes in perspective and priorities will last beyond this crisis. In a study by the National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement (NAFSCE) (2020), 57 percent of survey respondents were concerned that "the role families play in their children's success will not be properly emphasized or valued when the crisis is over." Seale (2020), however, emphasizes the "silver lining" of the pandemic when he states, "it has provided us a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reset the

relationships between schools and… families," allowing us to rethink relationships and "build new habits." Whether or not we are able to take advantage of lessons learned, and substantively strengthen and improve family engagement past the COVID-19 era, remains to be seen. Perhaps the results of this study, and others like it conducted during this pivotal time, will provide the encouragement needed to continue and even expand those efforts that have proven to be successful during this time of crisis.

Conclusion

While fifty years of research have given us quite a bit of information on how and why to engage families, given the ever-changing context within which we work, there is always more to learn. The challenge presented by the burgeoning Latino population in our schools is the perfect impetus to push the research boundaries further in order to effect practical change and ensure positive outcomes for all stakeholders. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought many existing inequities to light, and simultaneously has shown us the possibilities inherent in intentionally and effectively engaging parents in the education of their children.

In the next chapter, several of the perspectives described in the literature will be brought together into a conceptual framework that will serve as the foundation for the study, and the methodology planned in order to investigate more deeply the formation of trust at the middle school level will be discussed in more detail.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Conceptual Framework

Introduction and Underlying Assumptions

The conceptual framework underpinning this research study unites the five functions of instructional leaders with the five facets of trust, both as defined by Tschannen-Moran (2014), building on a foundation of culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) practices as described by Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis (2016). This framework rests on three assumptions:

1. Instructional leaders who are grounded in CRSL theory and practices are more likely to value building trusting relationships with diverse families as a leadership priority.
2. Instructional leaders with this priority will then be more likely to implement the five functions of leadership with an eye towards building trust with diverse families, resulting in the successful creation of trusting relationships with Latino parents.
3. These trusting relationships will facilitate greater family engagement for Latino students.

The resulting conceptual framework informed the research design of this study and analysis of the data generated through the methods selected. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of how these three assumptions have been woven together to create a cohesive vision of the connections between leadership practices, trust, and Latino family engagement. A base of culturally responsive leadership practices facilitates the creation of trusting relationships between

home and school, which in turn enables diverse families to become more engaged.

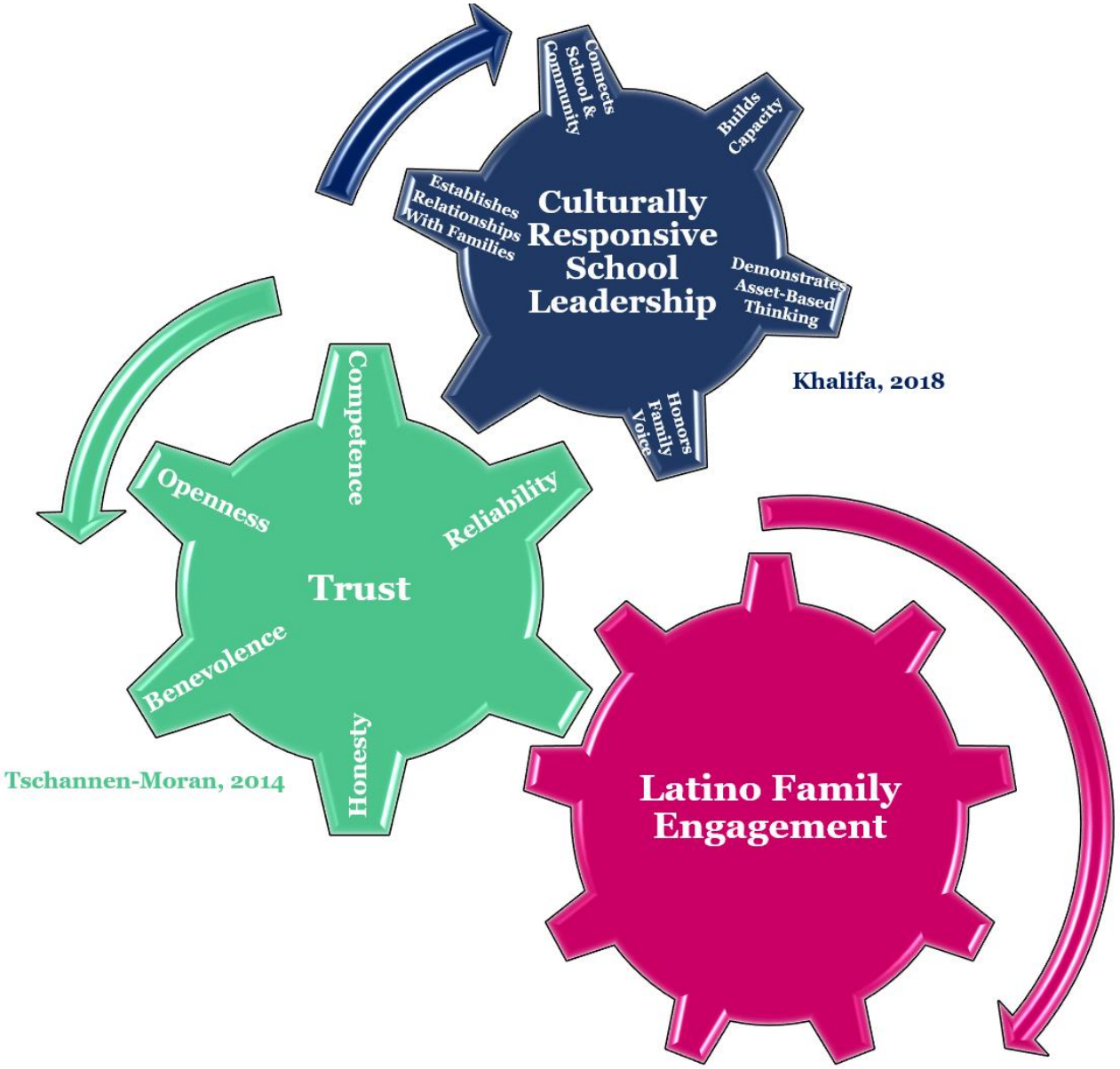

Figure 1. Visual representation of the conceptual framework for this study. As gears turn, they either increase the speed or force of, or cause a change in direction to, the other gears to which they are linked (Woodford, 2019). The assumption framing this study is that the three elements represented through each gear are interconnected, such that by enacting culturally responsive

leadership practices in a school, trust between stakeholders within that school increases, which leads to a responsive school culture that fosters heightened family engagement.

Connections Between CRSL, Five Functions, and Five Facets

Culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) encompasses a variety of best practices, all with the goal of strengthening the ability of school leaders to "improve the lives of minoritized children who face structural barriers in school and society" (Khalifa, 2018, p. 13). One of CRSL's key core practices is focused on the formation of relationships between the school and its larger community; Khalifa (2018) distinguishes between "*community engagement*," through which schools are able to connect with their communities in culturally responsive ways, and "*community empowerment*," through which these communities can become "healthy, whole, free from oppression, and positioned to craft and live out their own vision" (p. 21). By examining the literature detailed in Chapter Two, five of the culturally responsive leadership practices facilitating movement towards these goals have been identified and mapped to the five functions of instructional leaders and five facets of trust as defined by Tschannen-Moran (2014). Table 1 summarizes these connected practices and concepts, which not only form the base of the conceptual framework for this study, but also informed the coding and analysis of the data that was collected.

Table 1
Mapping of CRSL Best Practices with Functions of Leaders and Facets of Trust

CRSL Best Practices	Functions of Instructional Leaders	Facets of Trust
Develops positive connections between the school and the community	Visioning Modeling Mediating	Benevolence Openness Competence Reliability Honesty
Establishes respectful and meaningful relationships with families	Visioning Modeling Mediating	Benevolence Openness Competence Reliability Honesty
Builds the capacity of staff and families to be partners in education	Visioning Modeling Coaching Managing Mediating	Benevolence Openness Competence
Recognizes that all families possess funds of knowledge and avoids deficit thinking	Visioning Modeling	Benevolence Competence Reliability Honesty
Listens to and honors the voices of families in decision-making	Visioning Modeling Managing Mediating	Benevolence Openness Competence Reliability Honesty

Role of the Conceptual Framework

Research questions were crafted with the conceptual framework in mind, with the goal of getting to the heart of how each stakeholder group (leaders and teachers) defines trust and the leadership actions that build and sustain it, and to what extent each group views trust as a critical piece of family engagement. The research design and methods selected to best answer these questions were also

influenced by the elements of the framework, as each element of this qualitative case study was designed both to gain insight into the perceptions of the stakeholders in relation to these constructs, and to understand how these perceptions take shape in a more practical sense through the enactment of leadership practices that enable the building of trusting relationships. Coding and analysis were rooted in the elements of the framework, guiding how patterns and themes in the responses were understood through a lens that was both grounded in cultural responsiveness and focused on the elements that enable trust to be successfully established between home and school.

Research Methods

Research Questions

As described in Chapter One, this study is guided by a central research question: How does a middle school leader create a culture of trust (between leaders, teachers, and parents) that fosters the engagement of Latino families? The researcher then aimed to answer the following three, more specific, questions:

- Research Question 1: How do middle school leaders and teachers define trust in the context of school-family relationships?
- Research Question 2: Do middle school leaders and teachers view trust as one of the critical building blocks of family engagement?
- Research Question 3: What policies and practices does a middle school leader use to establish trust with Latino families?

Research Design

Tschannen-Moran states "The study of trust has been likened to the study of the roots of a delicate plant. Without great care, the examination can damage or even destroy the very thing about which greater understanding is sought" (2014, p. 283). With this admonition in mind, it was especially important to craft a data collection plan that would be able to capture the perceptions and understandings of both stakeholder groups, while still allowing for sensitivity and flexibility in the approach.

To meet these parameters, the decision was made to conduct a qualitative case study to examine middle school leader and teacher perspectives on how trust is built and nurtured at the middle school level. Case studies "allow researchers to capture multiple realities that are not easily quantifiable" (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011, p. 78). Yin (2014) explains that the case study model is used when "you want to understand a real-world case and assume that such an understanding is likely to involve important contextual conditions pertinent to your case" (p. 16); understanding is thus built on "contexts, communities and individuals" (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013, p. 3), which form the core of this study.

Setting and participants. This study took place in the Newport County Public Schools (NCPS) system, a pseudonym for a large suburban school district on the east coast of the United States. As described in Chapter One, this district serves a student body that is racially, ethnically, and socio-economically diverse, with 26.8% of the student population identifying as Latino (NCPS, 2020a).

For this study, one middle school was selected from the more than 20 middle schools in the NCPS system because it serves as an exemplar for how

school leaders engender the type of trust necessary for robust Latino family involvement. The largest middle school in the state, Lake Middle School welcomes almost 2,000 students in grades 6-8 through its doors each day. Serving a diverse student body from over sixty countries, speaking more than two dozen languages, Lake Middle School boasts a Latino population of more than 50 percent of its student body (NCPS, 2020b). The school was selected based on a combination of demographic data, data from a division-wide parent engagement survey completed in Spring 2019, and preliminary conversations with school system leaders who identified the principal as a leader known to facilitate positive engagement with families; having been at Lake Middle School for the previous 6 years, the principal was described by district leaders as a "transformation agent" who prioritized high quality instruction, teacher collaboration, and parent and community engagement. However, between identification of the school site and the start of the study, the school leader moved schools within the division and one of his assistant principals was tapped to be the interim principal. Since the climate the principal had established during his tenure at the school remained intact, and because the new interim principal was fully aligned with his priorities and highly knowledgeable about the workings of the school, the decision was made to continue the study at the selected site and to include interviews with both the former and current principals as part of data collection.

Within the school site, a purposeful sample of stakeholders was included in this study; in purposeful sampling, specific criteria for who will be included in a study are established ahead of time (Hays & Singh, 2012). The first group, school leaders, included the school's former principal, current acting principal,

and four assistant principals. The second group, comprised of seven teachers, included: two classroom teachers who also serve as schoolwide "equity leads," the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) department chair, the school's parent liaison, and three classroom teachers. In order to preserve confidentiality, random purposeful sampling was used to identify the three classroom teachers who were invited to participate. In random purposeful sampling, participants are randomly selected from the larger purposeful sample (Hays & Singh, 2012); in this case, the acting principal identified 10 classroom teachers who fit the established criteria and three were randomly selected from the group. In this way, the identities of the participating teachers are protected from the school leaders, strengthening the ability of the researcher to guarantee the confidentiality of their answers.

Among the thirteen participants were four men and nine women. Ten of the participants were white, one was African American, and two were Latino. The two Latino participants were the only fluent speakers of Spanish. Experience among the participants ranged from five years to more than thirty years in educational settings. Almost all participants had prior experience in schools with similar demographics to Lake Middle School, with the majority indicating that they had chosen to work at this school because of the diversity of the community.

By including both stakeholder groups in the study, multiple perspectives, as well as information on interactions, relationships, and communication, could be examined in more detail, leading to the collection of the type of "rich data," thought to be necessary in a successful case study (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013, p. 11). By soliciting both perspectives and then including document

collection and observations, data could be triangulated which served to "reinforce the legitimacy of the conclusions drawn" (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013, p. 11).

Data collection plan and rationale. The study was conducted over approximately eight months, from February to September of 2020. Unfortunately, shortly after the first interview was completed, NCPS school buildings were closed due to the global COVID-19 pandemic and the school system shifted to virtual instruction. As a significant element of case study research involves "spending time within the world of those being researched" (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013, p. 11), the researcher then pivoted to become a virtual 'situated knower,' learning about the culture of the school through digital means, including online document collection and virtual observations and interviews. Table 2 shows a description and rationale for each component of the data collection plan.

Table 2
Overview of Research Methodology

Research Method	Rationale	How Implemented	Analysis	Sample
Semi-Structured Interviews	Interviews help to build a more complete understanding of leader and teacher perceptions regarding the definition of trust, the	One interview was held at the former principal's new school, while the remaining 12 interviews took place using the Zoom platform.	Patterns in transcribed responses were identified through both inductive and deductive coding. Analysis included	6 middle school leaders 7 middle school teachers

	importance of trust to family engagement, and specific examples of how this trust is built at the middle school level.	Open-ended questions were crafted to uncover perceptions and individual sensemaking of the concepts being studied.	looking for gaps and overlaps in perceptions of stakeholder groups.	
Observations	Observing the interactions between school staff and parents provides evidence of the policies and practices detailed in interviews.	The researcher virtually attended 8 events held from May through September 2020. An observation protocol was used to maintain focus on the themes identified in the conceptual framework.	Patterns in observations were identified through both inductive and deductive coding. Analysis included looking for evidence to confirm reported policies and practices.	5 school-sponsored and region-wide family events such as town halls and family information sessions; 3 PTA meetings (parent-run)
Document Collection	Triangulating interview data with observations & document collection crafts a richer picture of identified policies and practices. It also can serve to confirm self-reported interview data.	More than 50 documents were collected and analyzed. Sources included leaders, teachers, and electronic platforms.	Patterns across documents were identified through both inductive and deductive coding. Analysis included looking for evidence to confirm reported policies and practices.	Documents included: weekly home-school newsletters, School Innovation & Improvement Plans (SY 2019 & 2020), End of Year Staff Survey (2019), PTA meeting minutes, and emails. Also included were

				documents related to district and state-wide policies and initiatives, including survey data.

Data sources. Hancock and Algozzine (2011) suggest that a case study is "richly descriptive because it is grounded in deep and varied sources of information" (p. 16). To ensure the collection of rich data, interviews, observations, and document collection were employed, and their data triangulated to address the research questions. Table 3 summarizes how these methods of collection are tied to each of the research questions in this study.

Table 3
Summary of Research Questions and Data Collection Plan

Research Question	Data Sources
1. How do middle school leaders and teachers define trust in the context of school-family relationships?	Semi-structured interviews with school leaders and teachers (Appendices D & E)
2. Do middle school leaders and teachers view trust as one of the critical building blocks of family engagement?	Semi-structured interviews with school leaders and teachers (Appendices D & E)
3. What policies and practices does a middle school leader use to establish trust with Latino families?	Semi-structured interviews with school leaders and teachers (Appendices D & E) Observations (Appendix F) Document Collection and Analysis (Appendix G)

Data Collection Process

Data collection part 1: Interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 6 school leaders and 7 teachers. Yin (2014) contends that interviews are one of the most critical sources of evidence in case study research, describing strong interviews as "guided conversations rather than structured queries" (p. 110). As such, interview protocols consisted of open-ended questions designed to "give an authentic insight into people's experiences" (Silverman, 1993, p. 91) rather than utilizing a more structured script. As there was an intentional decision made to eliminate surveys as a potential data collection tool in this study due to the sensitivity and nuanced nature of the information being sought and current "survey fatigue" in the school system, key questions from existing surveys instead guided the questions asked in the semi-structured interview protocols. These surveys include those published by Tschannen-Moran (2014) and the Equitable Parent-School Collaboration Research Project at the University of Washington (2015), and the Family Engagement and Trust (FEAT) Survey from the University of San Diego (Li, Jiang, Deng, & Bergman, 2018). Interview protocols are included in Appendices D and E.

Data collection part 2: Observations. As the role of observations in a case study is largely to "spend time within the world of those being researched" (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013, p. 11), the researcher welcomed every opportunity to observe leaders, teachers, and families virtually during the course of data collection. Interactions between school staff and parents at events were observed at eight events and, utilizing the "chat" feature of the Zoom platform, comments from participants were noted. In addition to three schoolwide parent

events, the researcher was able to observe, again virtually, three Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings and two regional parent events in order to observe these interactions in different contexts. As suggested by Butin (2010), it was important to keep the conceptual framework in mind during these observations, in order to "understand specific patterns and situations in a distinctive way" that "enhances validity" (p. 102). Appendix F contains an observation protocol which assisted the researcher in maintaining focus while simultaneously allowing for impressions to be recorded.

Data collection part 3: Document collection. Documents related to the building of home-school relationships were collected and analyzed in order to build a deeper understanding of both avenues of communication and family engagement programming. Leaders were asked to share documents that included leader-generated weekly home-school newsletters and announcement emails to families, recent School Innovation and Improvement Plans (SIIPs), school mission and vision statements, and survey data from both parents and staff. Teachers participating in interviews were similarly asked to share documents such as teacher-generated home-school newsletters and correspondence about family programming. Additional documents were collected from online sources, including minutes from PTA meetings and documents related to district-wide policies and initiatives, including survey data. Analysis of these documents will be described below.

Data Analysis

Rallis and Rossman (2012) stress that what is actually done with the data collected in a research study is what is most important; they assert "discoveries

and answers do not simply emerge; instead, you construct knowledge through a systematic reasoning process that begins when you conceptualize the study" (p. 129). This systematic process was rooted in the study's conceptual framework, which then informed the research design, and finally dictated how the resulting data was sorted, coded, analyzed, and interpreted. Perhaps most importantly, when conducting qualitative research, data analysis must begin from the very start, and be conducted concurrently with data collection; Hays and Singh (2012) argue that data analysis and research design influence each other in an iterative fashion, asserting "it is not possible to have a rigorous research design without beginning qualitative data analysis with the first data source- if not before- and continuing throughout data collection" (p. 294).

Data analysis in this study followed the steps recommended by Remler and Van Ryzin (2015) as data was collected:

1. Data Preparation: this included transcribing interviews, and organizing and cataloguing field notes, observation protocols, and collected documents to prepare them for analysis.
2. Data Reduction: this included memo writing and coding in order to narrow down the scope and volume of the data collected.
3. Data Presentation: this included creating narratives, figures, and charts to explain and display the patterns and trends found in the data.

Data analysis part 1: Interviews. Interviews were transcribed and data was analyzed using several cycles of thematic coding. Some of the codes were deductive and established ahead of time based on the study's conceptual framework, research questions, and themes in the literature review, while other

codes were more inductive, emerging as the data was analyzed. A listing of all codes is included in Appendix H. Remler and Van Ryzin (2015) suggest "the coding scheme typically evolves and changes as the analysis proceeds. Codes can be renamed, clarified, collapsed together, split apart, and otherwise reorganized" (p. 81). DeCuir-Gunby, McCulloch, & Marshall (2011) concur, explaining "creating codes and subsequently coding interview data is about meshing all of the theoretical underpinnings of a study with the data that has been generated by the study" (p. 18). As participants shared their perspectives, new understandings and themes naturally emerged and were incorporated into the coding scheme. Following coding, patterns and themes were identified both within interviews and across interviews. At each stage, analytic memos were utilized to capture insights and understandings. NVivo qualitative data analysis software (QSR International, 2019) was used to organize and streamline the coding and analysis process.

Data analysis part 2: Observations. Butin (2010) warns that as the researcher is in essence the research instrument when conducting observations, it becomes even more critical to "articulate the 'lens' through which you are seeing the data" (p. 102). A combination of observation protocols with clearly defined "look-fors" and consistent memo writing, both based on the conceptual framework underpinning the study, provided structure and validity to this data collection method. In addition, the virtual nature of the observations allowed for what Hays and Singh (2012) refer to as "noninterference" on the part of the researcher; as a virtual observer the researcher was invisible to those being

observed, which allowed “naturally occurring phenomena” to proceed undisturbed (p. 224).

Data analysis part 3: Document collection. As with the above methods, analysis of collected documents was conducted with a focus on the study’s conceptual framework and research questions. Butin (2010) argues that document analysis can be a particularly fruitful research method, but only if the researcher approaches the analysis with a “clear sense of what you are looking for and why” (p. 99), even if it is emergent in nature; in order to ensure this degree of clarity, a document analysis matrix was created to assist with tracking and evaluating the relevance of documents (Appendix G). In this study, document collection primarily helped to answer research question three, focusing on leader policies and practices, by providing concrete evidence of the information gathered in interviews and observations. It provided the third leg of the data triangle, helping to confirm and validate findings.

Methodological Limitations

Research design. Each of the research methods utilized in this study comes with its own potential strengths as well as limitations. While interviews can yield a great deal of rich and useful information, they also bring the possibility of “response effect bias,” which occurs when participants modify their answers to be “more socially acceptable and in general mute perspectives that are not culturally sanctioned” (Butin, 2010, p. 97). In order to counteract this potential shortcoming, the interviews had carefully structured protocols that attempted to elicit deeper responses involving the experiences, feelings, and perspectives of the participants.

Similarly, observations can be a source of "thick" data and a great way to gain a "holistic perspective" on the environment being studied, but they also are the "most time-intensive and least quantifiable mode of gathering data" (Butin, 2010, p. 100). To make the data more quantifiable, as well as to combat the onslaught of real-time data that needs to be processed quickly in an observation setting, observation protocols were created to heighten the focus and clarity of the researcher. As several different contexts were observed in order to build a more complex view of the interactions between home and school, these protocols were an essential tool for recording relevant information. In addition, all five of the virtual parent events observed were recorded, which gave the researcher the opportunity to rewatch the recordings afterwards to ensure that nothing of import was missed in real-time.

Finally, while documents can also yield a great deal of important information, and serve an important role in triangulating both interview and observation data, it was critical to have a "specific, standardized, and theoretically informed protocol" (Butin, 2010, p. 99) in order to keep analysis consistent and protect the validity of the themes and patterns that emerged (Appendix G).

Participants. This study involved a relatively small sample size in one school context. The size and scope of this sample might prevent the lessons learned in the study from being extrapolated to different school contexts or larger populations. It will also not allow for comparisons between different school communities.

Time frame and pandemic-related factors. The study was limited by the short time frame within which data was collected, and the fact that data collection was largely completed through virtual means due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the virtual environment did carry some benefits to the researcher as described above, it was difficult to become thoroughly immersed in the school culture during a time when the very nature of "school" was being questioned and redefined globally. Attempts to counteract these limitations included: utilizing a variety of data collection methods, consistent attendance at virtual events throughout the data collection process
in order to ascertain changes in needs and response as the pandemic shifted, and continuous analysis of data throughout the process, through the identification of categories, concepts, and themes that in turn strengthened protocols in an iterative fashion.

Conclusion

The methodology described in this chapter explains how this case study was implemented so as to learn from a middle school with a large population of Latino students, culturally responsive school leaders, and a strong focus on families. Weiss et al. (2018) contend "It is no longer enough for family engagement to be placed at the margins of our approach to children's development. A critical mass of research and practice shows that we should be looking for ways to place it at the center of our thinking" (p. 1). By examining the intersection of culture, adolescent development, and the creation of trust, this study aims to shine a spotlight on the importance of building relationships

between home and school, and the critical role that school leaders play in making it happen.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

In this chapter, leader and teacher perspectives on how trust is built and nurtured at the middle school level, particularly with Latino families, are presented from this qualitative case study. The goal of the study was to develop a stronger understanding of how to foster the types of home-school partnerships necessary to close existing gaps in opportunity, access, and achievement. The study was guided by the central research question: How does a middle school leader create a culture of trust (between leaders, teachers, and parents) that fosters the engagement of Latino families?

To share these findings, first data will be presented to describe how leaders and teachers define trust in the context of school-family relationships (research question one). Next, analysis will reveal the extent to which these leaders and teachers view trust as one of the critical building blocks of family engagement (research question two). Finally, policies and practices established and utilized by middle school leaders to establish trust with Latino families will be detailed (research question three), and connections will be made across all three research questions, and both stakeholder groups, in order to paint a broader picture of the role of trust in fostering family engagement at Lake Middle School.

When appropriate, distinctions will be drawn between teacher and leader responses. Going into the study, expectations for alignment between these two stakeholder groups were low, so the high degree of agreement between teachers and leaders across all three research questions is in itself a finding. However, while for the most part responses were aligned, there were several exceptions to

this trend, which are noted, and which will be explored in more detail in Chapter Five.

The presentation of findings for each research question includes key insights from semi-structured interviews, with relevant information from observations and document analysis included to triangulate the data and provide a richer understanding of both stakeholder perceptions and how these perceptions are actualized in the school setting. The realities and challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic are woven throughout the chapter to provide context, and whenever possible, findings are framed within the constructs established in the study's conceptual framework.

Research Question One: What is Trust?

Drawing on their experiences with families both at Lake Middle School and in other settings during their many combined years in education, the teachers and leaders interviewed for this study were able to discuss and define trust as it pertains to working with families. After a careful analysis of their responses, several common themes emerged in response to research question one: How do middle school leaders and teachers define trust in the context of school-family relationships? These themes comprise the following sub-sections and together they establish a baseline understanding of how the teachers and leaders at Lake Middle School perceive the formation and nurturance of trust in their setting.

Trust is nurtured starting in the classroom. Teachers were quick to explain that all trust begins with the relationships built between staff and students, placing great emphasis on the trust that they nurture within the

classroom community. While several leaders did concur that this type of trust is viewed as essential for both learning and communication to flourish, it was a unanimous finding across teacher participants. One teacher shared:

> I think that family engagement really starts with the student and the teacher, because I feel like if the student and the teacher have a relationship and have the trust, I think that gets brought home. And so, the kids then share that with family. The family then feels more open and willing to trust. I think once those conversations happen, and they need to start early on, it starts to build from there.

All of the other teachers interviewed echoed this message, with one stating "trust is really built with the students first." They emphasized that it is also important when fostering school-student trust to ensure that families understand the level of care that school staff have for their children. Several respondents shared that, once parents see that the school has the best interest of their child at heart, they are more likely to trust the decisions that are made. One teacher explained that she extends her ethic of care beyond just her interactions with students in the classroom, placing great effort in reaching out and getting involved in the outside lives of her students, attending events such as soccer games and dance recitals. She shared the results of these efforts:

> It can be hard to establish trust with parents. But I think being really involved in the students' lives, that a lot of the parents were like, "Oh my gosh, this girl is really caring about my kid?" And that created a sense of trust that I don't think would have happened if I hadn't put in that extra time and effort to get to know their kids more than just in the English classroom.

Another teacher agreed with this observation, sharing that when parents realize, "I am not just the English teacher, I'm here supporting your kid in all facets of life," they are more likely to understand and accept that "we're also here supporting you, as a parent."

Several leaders also expressed their view that building trust with students first is a priority, explaining "building those relationships with kids also helps the parents to trust me as well." They detailed several strategies that they use to build this type of trust, which will be discussed more thoroughly in the analysis of research question three below. One leader explained this from the perspective of an administrator responsible for enforcing the rules and regulations of the school:

> Just number one is showing that you care about their kid, it's not about discipline but rather that you care, showing that you're taking steps to work with them, and always, always following through.

While this theme was most consistent among teacher participants, it was clear that the majority of the staff interviewed shared the perception that by establishing relationships with students first, a foundation of trust is built that can then be extended beyond the school and into the home. This foundation was deemed by all who mentioned it to be essential to the building of lasting, trusting relationships with families.

Clear and consistent communication is essential when establishing trust. The idea of follow-through, through clear and consistent communication between home and school, was another common theme throughout the interview responses, viewed as necessary in order to build trusting relationships. Every educator interviewed for this study, whether a teacher or a leader, mentioned communication in some form when discussing trust, both in terms of the practicality of sharing information and the more symbolic nature of really hearing the message being shared. Lake Middle School's former principal emphasized the importance of listening to families, stating "I

think the trust comes in knowing that I am going to listen. They are going to be heard, they are going to be valued. And we are going to communicate clearly next steps." By being consistent when communicating with families, trust is nurtured. Unfortunately, this consistency is not always present. He explained further:

> I think what happens at times is we don't always take advantage. Administrators work really hard…but we don't take that next step of communicating it well to parents, or when parents communicate to us, we don't always close the loop. I think when parents come up and they say, "Hey, I just talked to [the principal], he said these are the next steps, and I was supposed to hear from him by tomorrow at the close of business," they're going to hear from me, even if it's like, "Hey, I haven't figured this out yet, but I just wanted to keep you posted." They respect that. So, I think that builds trust. I don't know if you have to have trust at first, but I do think that you have to ensure that people feel heard and valued, which leads to trust.

Several respondents agreed that it is incumbent on the school to initiate and maintain the type of two-way communication that can lead to trusting relationships. One teacher took this a step further, explaining that an important part of building trust with families is being flexible in how you communicate, utilizing the ways that are most convenient for them; the teacher explained, "establishing the idea that I'm available to you, in whatever way you would like to communicate, I think that that really did open people up. And they started to trust me more." Communication, especially in this context, appears to be as much about being responsive to the needs of families and students as it is about the sharing of information. Clear and consistent communication, while ensuring to "close the loop," appears to stand both as a matter of practice and a symbol of trust.

Several participants emphasized the outsize role that home-school communication had taken on during the COVID-19 pandemic. Suddenly, there

was a huge amount of ever-changing information to share with parents, and new avenues needed to be created quickly to funnel this information to families in an effective way, while simultaneously getting a read on student and family needs. Staff at Lake Middle School scrambled to reach parents through hundreds of individual phone calls; one assistant principal described the process:

> My number one job these days is just calling parents and kids every single day, just to make sure that they are okay and that their needs are being met, and to see how we can help them. Then we can talk about school, but that comes second right now.

The logistical challenges of pivoting to distance learning were huge in a school of this size, especially given the language differences that could possibly hinder home-school communication. After arranging for more than 500 students and parents to pick up laptop computers, for example, several teachers and leaders were able to reflect on the role that existing trust had to play in making sure things went smoothly. One assistant principal explained:

> We are fortunate in that parents already trusted that we have the best interest of their students at heart, so we didn't have to start building that trust when the pandemic started; we could build on the trust that we already had instead.

The pandemic also gave Lake Middle School staff an opportunity to strengthen and extend their communication in new ways. Leaders convened multiple virtual "Town Halls" throughout the spring, summer, and fall, to share information with their families; each of these Town Halls were conducted in either English, Spanish, or Arabic (the three most common languages in the school community), with separate links provided for each. The turn-out for these virtual events was quite positive, with well over 100 Spanish-speaking families attending each one. Parents were able to access the chat to ask questions, or to

virtually raise their hands and then ask their questions verbally when called upon, and robust conversations accompanied each presentation, with Spanish-speaking school staff on hand to facilitate.

The Town Halls, as well as virtual PTA meetings and other online classes and gatherings, served as examples of successful two-way communication that both delighted and surprised many of the teachers and leaders interviewed; several expressed their excitement at having so many Latino families dialing in and participating virtually, including many who had never participated in school events previously. Several leaders showed interest in figuring out how to sustain this level of involvement moving forward, hoping to possibly include a virtual component in events even after the dangers of the pandemic have passed.

Vulnerability is necessary to trust and be trusted. Several teachers called attention to the vulnerability required on both sides for trust to be realized. They emphasized that families need to see that the school is fully committed to working with and helping their students, and to being honest and open at all times, before laying their own insecurities or needs on the table. According to a Special Education teacher:

> I think one of the first things, which is similar to any relationship, is really letting the parents know who you are. From the second parents come into my classroom on Back-to-School Night, I make it very clear that this is my dream job, that I don't want to be anywhere else. This was my first choice. Your kids are my first choice. I think that being vulnerable is the best way to show parents that I care, and that they can trust me.

Similarly, teachers and leaders alike recognized that it takes a great deal of vulnerability from the family perspective for trust to be extended. Families may have previously had negative school experiences or have low self-efficacy when it

comes to their children's education, particularly families who may not have gone to school in this country or those who may not speak English as their first language. One teacher explained how open communication from the beginning is the key to making this work:

> Some of our parents are very vocal about how they don't necessarily understand everything about the school system, but the fact that they're able to be vulnerable just shows that we are able to have a strong connection with them where they now feel comfortable with saying, "Can you help me? I'm not sure how to help my child, what should I do?" And I think, just reaching out from the beginning is what's so important, to make parents more comfortable with asking for help.

This level of vulnerability, or "openness" as described by Tschannen-Moran (2014), was perceived by many to be necessary to build the types of trusting relationships that teachers and leaders seek. When teachers are asking parents to share information that may be personal, or potentially uncomfortable, trust needs to be in place first so that parents feel safe with sharing. One teacher discussed this process, and how it can positively impact a child and, by extension, the family:

> Because of the trust that is built, the conversations are really an open two-way street. We usually share something that we've seen, and we ask them if they've seen the same thing. And a lot of times they're like, "Oh my God, it's not just me." I am a parent and I share that with them often. Like, I don't have all the answers and it is hard. And just sharing that with them, sometimes it opens the door for them to feel vulnerable and share the things that are going on at home. I've encountered a lot of parents who don't really want to share what goes on at home for fear of embarrassment or just judgment. And that's where I think the trust really comes in. It really allows us to see the whole child and then helps us to put in place some supports to help that child.

Along these same lines, several leaders described how they have changed the way that they run meetings when families come into the building, or even over the phone, in order to be more open to hearing what the parents have to say.

Instead of going into a meeting assuming that they already know the solutions to the problem at hand, these leaders strive to be open to listening, which requires vulnerability on their part. One assistant principal shared that he viewed this as an area of growth explaining:

> Those conversations have evolved for me over the years. I would say at first it was like, a family's coming in and I'm going to tell the family what they need to know. But now I realize that it completely changes the tone of the interaction and it is not a partnership. So now I really try to change the tone of the conversations to "Here's what we're working towards, this is the goal. This is what we are seeing at school. Tell me what you are seeing at home." And then the conversation can really go more organically and naturally from there.

Trust must be built over time. The building of these relationships takes time, as almost every respondent mentioned time and consistency as key in creating trust, both with students and with parents. One of the challenges of middle school is the short length of time that a student is typically enrolled, especially when compared to the seven years spent in elementary school; compounded with the reality of at least seven teachers per child, rather than one consistent elementary school teacher who can more easily build a caring classroom community, it is clear that time is not on the middle school's side in this equation. Reputation in the community can have great power in this scenario, either positively or negatively. One leader observed:

> I think you gain a sense of credibility over the years you spend working in one place, but I would also argue that it's a new set of parents every year. Each year there's a third of the school that has a new set of parents. And they may have heard good things about you, but you need to continue to build those relationships as well.

Another leader emphasized this point, stressing that reputation in the community is something important that is built over time. She explained:

> It's that reputation in the community. Like the reputation is for Latino families that this is a good place to send your kids. They get taken care of here and that the teachers care about them and that's why they trust us. I think it's a little bit, it's not blind trust, but it's a little bit of that faith-based trust. That we're going to send our students to you and you're going to take care of them. And we're going to trust you because we respect that you are educators and that's what you do.

Within the school building, several teachers and leaders described ways to mitigate the limits of the three-year middle school span. This included starting as early as possible in the year to build trust as an important element in being successful. Leaders also discussed "setting the tone" early and often as a strategy that will be detailed in the discussion of research question three later in this chapter; one leader explained that from day one, school staff need to be asking themselves the question, "Are we creating an environment where students and families feel welcomed when they walk in, and that their voices will be heard?" A different leader stressed the importance of taking the long view, sharing "There are kids who have younger siblings, and so parents can potentially be at the school for 10 years or more. That makes it even more important to keep their trust and actually build it and make it bigger and stronger over time."

Sometimes the issue is not building trust but ensuring that inherent trust is not lost. Many of the respondents noted that in Latino culture, respect and trust for teachers and school staff are already established long before students even walk through the doors. Described by the leader above as "faith-based trust," another leader explained this as a cultural norm of sorts:

> I'm speaking kind of broadly, but I feel like especially our Latino parents, who often don't speak English or may be new to the country, often just inherently trust. They just are like, "You're the professional, you know what's best for my kid. I'm going to do whatever you tell me to do." So, you

> don't even have to earn their trust. They just inherently trust you based on being an English-speaking professional at their kid's school.

Several other respondents discussed the need to treat this type of inherent trust with respect, as once it is broken it can be extremely difficult if not impossible to repair. One teacher spoke of the need to capitalize on this "automatic trust," as it is something that "other schools have to fight for," and should not be taken for granted. An assistant principal explained how important it is for the school to prove to parents that their trust was placed appropriately, stressing the importance of working to build trust even when it seems to exist already:

> I mean, the easiest way to lose trust is just to not do what you said you were going to do. You need to do those little things to build the trust. We often talk about it like a bank account, making those deposits before you have to make withdrawals. When you've made all those deposits and you've built that trust, it's easier to call and suspend a kid or whatever the case may be. But it's interesting how many parents just inherently trust you based on position and skin color really.

The importance of leader-teacher trust cannot be overstated. The significance of trust between leaders and their staff was raised by multiple teachers in their interviews, but interestingly, this was a theme that was not mentioned by any of the leaders in their responses. One teacher explained, "Building a culture of trust works: parents have to trust you, kids have to trust you, you have to trust your administrators and they have to trust you back. It won't work otherwise." Another teacher, discussing a previous school in which she worked and where she did not feel trusted by her leaders, stated "I felt micromanaged, that my principal did not trust me, and therefore I was not able to do the things that I knew needed to be done to create trust myself."

Several teachers observed that at Lake Middle School, leader-to-teacher as well as teacher-to-teacher trust are part of the fabric of the school. One teacher shared:

> They [the administrators] put a lot of trust in us as teachers. Communication is the key and it is encouraged. Everyone is open and honest and even if the conversation's hard, they are willing to go above and beyond to make sure that what need to happen happens both among our staff and students, but also with our families.

Another teacher summarized the importance of leaders in the trust dynamic, and especially noted the role that this trust plays in fostering family engagement:

> What I've started to realize is that administrators make a really big difference in the connection with families. If I'm speaking frankly, at my old school the administrators were not supportive of teachers. I always felt like I couldn't go to the administrator and ask, “Hey, can you help me reach out to the family? Like I'm struggling to get in touch with them.” Because there was resentment and anger that we would be met with if we did that. Just asking for help. And now, I see that it is more like, these administrators and these counselors are working tirelessly to not only support families and students, but to also support teachers in supporting families and students. And that makes all of the difference.

In Lake Middle School’s 2019 End of Year Staff Survey, the manner in which administrators treat teachers was highlighted by several respondents. When asked to list successes from the school year, one teacher wrote, “Individual administrators treat with respect the teachers with whom they work…there is the willingness to believe that we as educators, do not need to be ‘over-managed’ as I have heard happens in other schools. You monitor us but treat us as professionals.” Additional comments included: “I appreciate the ways that admins work to ensure our voices are heard and we are kept in the loop,” “Both teachers and students feel they can go to their admin for counsel and support,”

and “I felt very supported by the administration this year.” Responses showed a clear pattern of teacher recognition of and appreciation for leader-teacher trust and respect.

While it is interesting to note that only teachers specifically acknowledged the importance of having leaders who trust in their professionalism and ability to engage families, it is possible that the leaders were working from an assumption that such trust was in place. Either way, it is important to note as an essential element of building a trusting school community; as one teacher explained, “From past experience, when you do not feel as if you are valued, it is very difficult to work effectively.”

Summary of Research Question One. Several themes around the concept of trust and how it is defined at Lake Middle School were identified following a series of semi-structured interviews with teachers and leaders, virtual observations, and several cycles of document analysis. These themes show patterns in responses to the question: How do middle school leaders and teachers define trust in the context of school-family relationships? Teacher and leader perspectives were mostly aligned, and can be described through the following themes: (a) trust is nurtured starting in the classroom, (b) clear and consistent communication is essential when establishing trust, (c) vulnerability is necessary to trust and be trusted, (d) sometime the issue is not building trust, but ensuring that inherent trust is not lost, and (f) the importance of leader-teacher trust cannot be overstated. This understanding of teacher and leader perceptions of the dimensions of trust will facilitate the discussion of research questions two and three in the following sections.

Research Question Two: Is Trust a Building Block of Engagement?

Building on these common understandings of trust and how it is fostered, research question two follows: Do middle school leaders and teachers view trust as one of the critical building blocks of family engagement? While it would seem that a simple "yes" or "no" answer might have emerged from the data, a more nuanced perspective surfaced instead. Instead of viewing trust as a stand-alone building block in the creation of family engagement as initially conceptualized, respondents instead spoke of trust as central to each of the elements viewed as necessary to create successful and positive engagement. After careful analysis and synthesis of these responses, four "building blocks" of family engagement were identified, each resting on a foundation of trust: (a) setting the tone, (b) developing relationships, (c) fostering communication, and (d) continual reflection.

Starting with an understanding of what the term "family engagement" actually means to teachers and leaders in the context of Lake Middle School, and then drilling down into the four building blocks identified by participants as most salient to its success, we can see how trust is woven throughout all of these elements in a way that highlights both its value and its importance.

What is family engagement? Defining the building blocks. In their interviews, almost all of the participants affirmed their commitment to involving parents in student learning, and most noted their own efforts to maximize their involvement, as well as their individual efforts at increasing their own capacity in this area. One leader summarized his thinking around family engagement as a schoolwide commitment to building partnerships, sharing:

> It's not a policy, it's not like a formula that we follow. It's more a commitment that we have to continually hold each other accountable to make sure that we are, to the best of our ability, asking and inviting parents to be partners in any given situation.

The large majority of leaders interviewed seemed to agree, focusing on the relationship piece, with many seeing their role as helping teachers to stay accountable and maintain this commitment by trying to bridge the gaps between home and school. Taking this a step further, an assistant principal expressed her role as a "barrier remover"; she explained, "Our job is to figure out what are all the barriers and break them down… you're never going to have family involvement until you figure out what the barriers to it are and start to remove them." This idea of removing barriers to successful engagement, whether it be assistance with translation, flexible scheduling of meetings and phone calls, or simply offering their presence and administrative support, was a common theme throughout the leader interviews.

One tension that appeared in the interview data was a lack of clarity around whether family engagement is defined as something that only happens at school, or if it is a combination of home and school involvement. Several leaders expressed their understanding that both forms of engagement are valid and important; one assistant principal summarized his thinking:

> I think family engagement is in two different buckets. There's the bucket of home involvement, and you can't control the family engagement that happens in the home. Is the parent able to help their kids with homework? Is the parent able to access the [newsletter] that goes out every weekend with all the information? Are they able to get messages via phone? And then there is a bucket from a school perspective…finding ways to engage not only their involvement in their kids' education, but in the school community as a whole.

While just about all of the leaders referenced this duality of home and school involvement in some way, more than half of the teachers interviewed talked only about the need to get parents into the school building. They discussed Back-to-School Nights, parent conferences, and attendance at school events, but rarely mentioned the home piece of the equation. One notable exception was a teacher of Latino heritage, who grew up in a community similar to one in which Lake Middle School is located. He explained:

> My parents weren't really comfortable speaking on the phone in English because it's not their native language. And my parents didn't go to every single parent teacher conference because they had to work. But I will tell you this, they were 100% involved in my educational life every single morning. My dad would tell me, son, you're going to go to school. You're going to do your best because in this country, education is the only way you can improve yourself. And that was their way of showing that education matters. It doesn't look the same as maybe a parent in a different community…[but] it doesn't mean that they don't care. It just looks different. We might not see it, but it doesn't mean it's not happening.

This powerful reflection was echoed by another teacher who shared, "Because parents are not physically there does not mean that they don't care…it means that they can't be there. And those are two different things." While this idea of "invisible engagement" at home was mentioned in different ways in multiple interviews, it did not appear to be a consistent and clear understanding across the Lake Middle School staff, particularly when looking at teacher responses. This will be investigated further in Chapter Five.

When discussions turned to how to assess whether efforts at family engagement have been successful or not, there were several different perspectives shared. One data point referenced by several leaders was a system wide Family Engagement Survey that had been completed by an outside research firm a year

earlier. On this survey, Lake Middle School did very well, especially when compared with similar schools. 89% of the parents who completed the survey indicated that they "feel respected" at the school, 94% agreed with the statement, "This school welcomes families of different backgrounds and cultures," and 92% responded affirmatively to the statement, "I feel welcome at my child's school" (Newport County Public Schools, 2019f). It is important to note, however, that only 128 out of a possible almost 1,800 families at the school that year responded to the survey, and the answers that were received are not broken down by ethnicity; it is possible that the majority of the parents who answered positively to the question asking whether the school is welcoming to all cultures, for example, were not themselves members of a minority culture. Still, the survey results stand as one data point as leaders try to ascertain whether or not their efforts have been successful.

Lake Middle School's former principal reflected on whether it is possible to objectively measure success in this area, noting:

> I also think too that, I think a lot of it comes in conversation. There are data points that you get, such as the survey results, but when you're talking with members of the community and you're soliciting their input and they say, "Listen, I just want to say thank you." The anecdotal stuff I think is also really important. And does the data that you get from official surveys, does it match what you're hearing in the community? That is how you can measure success.

Building Block One: Setting the Tone. Many interview participants shared that for family engagement to be successful, and for trust to be built, its foundation needs to be established from day one. Especially in the middle school setting, when time is at once limited and then diluted across several teachers, there is no room for waiting; families need to feel welcomed and included from

the start. Participants agreed that it is up to the leaders of the school to set these wheels in motion. They identified several components, including intention, presence, and the establishment of staff-wide mindset commitments, as critical to this important foundational process.

Intention. Fostering engagement starts with leaders who are intentional in how they set the tone for their staff and for their community, making it clear that engaging and respecting families is an organizational priority and expectation. One teacher affirmed this importance when she stated:

> You can't overemphasize the importance of good school leadership... I can't emphasize enough that I think that our school culture, led by our administrators, is just the biggest piece. We are grounded in our beliefs and our vision and our mission. Every time we come together as a staff, we review that unified message and it just becomes ingrained in who we are. It's almost a positive brainwash, but it's because that is really what we're trying to achieve every day. I don't think that it can be overemphasized that good leaders who believe in family and parent engagement, they create that culture, so that regardless of who you are, and what you teach, you find a way to embed that in your classroom too.

A teacher explained that being a lone wolf in the mission to partner with families is not enough; rather, there needs to be a whole school commitment in order for it to work. This commitment begins with the tone set by the administration and then filters from the top down. She noted:

> You can't just be that one teacher that calls home. You really have to establish a sense of connection with families of the whole entire school. You have to, as an administrator, be supportive of teachers and making sure that you're giving them the tools that they need to reach out to their families. It cannot just be one person; that's not going to change the connection with the family. It has to be everybody, together.

A leader confirmed the importance of building an intentionally focused and positive school culture and climate, and the role of the administration in making that a reality:

> I feel like principals especially really dictate, or help to dictate, the climate of the school just because of our role. We are dealing with not only students, but we really deal with all stakeholders every day, all the time. We're dealing with students, we're dealing with teachers, we're dealing with parents, our community, and that's a pretty daily occurrence. And so just as part of our interactions, we play a big part in the face of the school and what the school represents. Our actions really go a long way with every stakeholder, our staff, our students. And so, the way that school leaders conduct themselves in meetings, in conferences, all of that really helps to define the culture and the climate of a school. It is a responsibility that we must take seriously.

Presence. Several leaders spoke of presence as being an important part of reinforcing a positive school climate once it is created. They explained that it is not enough to set an intention, establish a mission and a vision for the staff, and then retreat to an office for the rest of the school year. Instead, it is clear that school leaders need to be present at events where parents will be attending and participating, and need to make themselves available and vulnerable, as expressed in many of the answers to research question one above. Lake Middle School's former principal was particularly passionate about the importance of presence, sharing:

> I think presence is just so important. I think many leaders don't take advantage of opportunities that they have and don't consider it an opportunity to build a strong relationship with your parent community. For example, administrators, we rotate or we stay after at events…instead of just sitting in the back and doing your administrative coverage, or just being there in case something bad happens, it's an opportunity for you to really greet parents as they come in. Having conversations, going out of your way to talk to parents, especially parents who you've never seen in that school before. There may be a language barrier, but there's usually an opportunity where the student's there, or someone else is able to translate for you. So, it's really taking advantage of every opportunity that you have to interact and build relationships with your parents, the key is that you take advantage of those times.
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> It feels a little bit like being a politician, but those are opportunities to build relationships with parents that otherwise you may not see in the

> building. You just have to put yourself out there and be visible for them to see…you've got to put the effort in.

Mindset commitments. In addition to intention and presence, to foster a truly united school culture around engaging families, there has to be consistent buy-in from the staff. At Lake Middle School this comes in the form of what are called "mindset commitments" that are expected to be shared by all staff members. The following commitments are posted in each of the staff workrooms:

- All kids can learn
- Collective ownership
- Problem solving culture
- Embrace data
- Assume positive intent
- Conversation is the relationship
- We believe in every student.

The large majority of teachers and all of the leaders who participated mentioned mindset commitments during their interviews; one teacher affirmed that, while working in such a large and diverse school is far from easy, having a common understanding of expectations is powerful:

> I do think that the mindset of the teachers at Lake Middle School is yes, it's a lot of work, but I'm going to do it because I want the kids to be successful. It always comes down to the kids' success, both personal success and academic success. So, I might do something that is uncomfortable, like calling home if I've never done that. I'm going to do that because I know that it's important, and I also know that it is expected.

A leader elaborated on this "single-minded vision," stating, "I don't know any teacher in that building who doesn't believe kids come first. We're going to bend over backwards to do whatever it takes to get the kid to be successful… it

starts with kids first and everything kind of backs up from there." Another leader explained the power of this type of unified commitment to the school's mission and vision:

> I think every staff member understands who we are as a school and the students that we serve. And as a result of that, they are better able to meet their needs instructionally, academically, socially, emotionally, behaviorally, and also to communicate with their parents. If I was to reflect on it, if a staff doesn't know the students that they serve and value that, I think they're less likely to create that culture that we've been talking about.

Several of Lake Middle School's mindset commitments, when taken together, reinforce a dedication to meeting the needs of their very diverse population and working to understand the different cultures represented in the school community. This unified focus supports the vision statement of the school, which states, "We are a community empowered by diversity, inspired by our success, and committed to lifelong learning" (Newport County Public Schools, 2020a). A leader observed:

> The more I was able to educate myself on different cultures and their customs, what they prioritize or don't prioritize, it helped me be a more culturally sensitive leader. It helped me to stop taking things personally and helped me to feel more comfortable in conversations with parents. It all helps with trust, the more you know about their culture or show that you appreciate their culture, the more willing they are to trust you and be a part of the conversation.

In summary, participants reported that by establishing common mindset commitments, which are then upheld with fidelity by both groups of stakeholders, trust is built between staff members and then extended to students and, finally, to families. They shared that having a consistent and unifying school mission and vision, starting from the top level and working its way down, is essential to making all of this work. In the school's 2019 End of Year Staff Survey,

the importance of this focus was emphasized; when asked about successes during the school year, one teacher wrote, “Our school has a shared vision and goals. We do a great job of reinforcing that consistently and using a shared language to communicate these expectations.” Another teacher agreed, writing, “This was my first year at Lake and throughout the year I've been very impressed by our clear vision/mission as a school.”

Building Block Two: Developing Relationships. A second building block of family engagement, highlighted by both groups of stakeholders, is the building of trusting relationships with families. Participants agreed on trust as being central to nurturing these relationships, with comments ranging from “trust is the core of it all” to “creating a culture of mutual respect is the base of everything.” One teacher explained, “From day one, I understood that it was important to establish a sense of trust before trying to forge any type of positive relationship with students or parents.” A leader summed it up by saying:

> The successful building blocks for community engagement? I would say that it's one hundred percent built on relationships; I think that's number one… like the parent really sees, “Oh, this is a true team. They take time out of their day to help my kid.” I think that is so important to building that trust over time.

In several interviews, the creation of these relationships was presented as a team effort, with collaboration between leaders, teachers, counselors, and school staff centered on “building partnerships with parents to move children forward”; one leader shared that when families see that the school has their child’s best interests at heart, and that the educators at the table truly believe in the potential and promise of their child, trust can start to be built between home and school. She suggested that this type of trust takes the form of “a group of

people working to support that child as they develop into the adult that we hope they will be," with the family at the center of the group, forming "a true, trusting partnership."

Establishing partnerships. The importance of working to move these relationships into partnerships was emphasized by many participants. One teacher explained how she evaluates the success of her outreach to families based on how they respond when something goes wrong:

> I try to measure the success of my parent family engagement with the question, "Do I have a trusting relationship with these families?" If I call them and tell them their child did something crazy, are they going to respond defensively to me or are they going to partner with me to help to fix it? I think that the best measure of success for that is the level of that culture of trust.

How each participant defined partnerships appeared to vary, however. Some embraced the idea of families being part of the "team" that works with each child, while others seemed to view partnership as more synonymous with two-way communication and home-school trust. Without clarifying how, specifically, each leader and teacher understands the concept of partnership, it is difficult to draw conclusions about how often these deeper relationships are actually being realized in the school setting. A teacher explained how she fosters partnerships with her families:

> I think successful family engagement is making sure that the parents are with you as part of your team for the whole time that you're teaching that kid. And even beyond that. I think a lot of times people will reach out when there's a problem and that's definitely necessary. But I also think establishing that trust, that important connection of being like, "We need you. I'm with your kid for a lot of the day, but I need you, because you know them better than me" kind of thing. And it really makes them feel valued when we send that message that "We are partners in this."

In one of the virtual Town Hall meetings, held entirely in Spanish via an online platform due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the current principal of the school sent an important message to parents, stating “The school wants to hear your voice, whether in English or Spanish…we want to be your partners in this work, to work together to help your children.” This simple statement established home-school partnership as an administrative priority, clearly something that the school views as an important component of building relationships with families. After the meeting, another leader reflected on the need for continuing partnerships, built over time:

> I would say I keep going back to the idea of the partnership. Not as just a one and done thing, but rather, “I see you,” multiple times. “I see you reaching out for support. How can I help you? What can I do?” It's ongoing in multiple ways. So, then when kids know that you're aligned with their teacher, and that their parents are aligned with their school, then they know that everyone is working together to help them to succeed. And that is powerful.

Engaging diverse families. Several participants observed that fostering these types of relationships with diverse families can be particularly challenging; one teacher shared:

> We find that for a lot of our parents, building that connection with school is hard for them because they didn't have a positive connection to school themselves. So that's what we're trying to build, by showing them that school can be a positive thing….and I think that showing parents that there is a connection between school and home is what continues to build relationships within school and outside of school.

In order to build the type of capacity needed to engage in true partnerships, several participants noted the need to include families in conversations about what their children are learning in school and, more specifically, how that can connect to home. More than one participant reflected

on the heightened virtual connections during the pandemic as a positive step forward; in many cases parents have seen the inner workings of the school day, over a long period of time, which has given them a unique insight into what and how their child is learning. The benefits and potential promise of this new reality will be discussed in more detail in research question three below.

One leader explained the need to break down traditional hierarchical roles in order to embrace the partnership model with these families:

> I try to always think about it as a partnership. And when you're a partner with someone there's not a hierarchy in that. It's not like you're coming in on my terms. None of the “This is my school. This is my department, my students.” When you are partners, you are partners, you are together, you are working together for the same goal. This is especially important with Latino families; they often feel like they can't be partners because they say things like, "Oh, I stopped going to school when I was in second or third grade." They're humble, trying to be respectful and saying things like, "I'm deferring to you." A lot of the immigrant families, including Latino families, they work long hours. Administrators and teachers can rework our schedules to make sure that we're available for them. It can’t always be the parents bending to our schedules. Because if we are partners, then we are truly partners.

Building Block Three: Fostering Communication. The third building block of family engagement highlighted in the data is the need to foster effective communication between school and home. “Conversation is the relationship” is one of the main mindset commitments at Lake Middle School, repeated by the large majority of the interview participants when discussing the importance of home-school communication. One leader explained what this means in practical terms:

> One of the mindset commitments to which we hold everyone accountable is “conversation is the relationship.” And what we mean by that is, whenever we can, we have a conversation that goes between teacher to teacher, administrator to administrator, administrator to teacher, and all of the above to family members. I know that our central office would love

> to have some perfect formula they could roll out to schools to increase family engagement at the middle school level. But in the end, I think it is really just the conversation is the relationship. Every single time that we can pick up the phone and call a family… it takes one phone call and then you feel connected.

Lake Middle School's former principal elaborated further:

> Conversation is the relationship, period. That's what we talk about all the time. Conversations. It is important between staff members. You come down to the office and you're like, "Ah, I'm so upset that Mr. Smith did blah, blah, blah. How dare he?" I say, "Listen, conversations are the relationship. Let's assume positive intent. Go talk to Mr. Smith. And if they're still some things, then come back, and let me know how I can support you."
>
> It's the same way with parents. What kind of conversations are you having with parents to have a relationship? And I would say, even that newsletter you are sending home is an opportunity to have conversations. It is beginning as a one-way conversation, but you're articulating to your families, this is who we are as a school. This is what I value. Here are some amazing things that are going on. Here's where we need some support. It may be the beginning, but it is the beginning of a conversation.

By making communication a clear administrative priority and expectation for all staff, Lake Middle School leaders are setting the tone; not only do they expect their teachers to have these conversations, but they also trust that they are able to do so effectively. Such a message builds trust between leaders and teachers, but also serves to foster increased trust between teachers and between teachers and families. While "conversation is the relationship" seems like a simple phrase at first, its many layers have impacts that reach far beyond the initial impression.

Aiming for two-way communication. The leader cited above acknowledged that common home-school communication vehicles, such as newsletters, are one-sided in that parents receive information but are not given the opportunity to communicate back in any way. He also noted that such one-

way efforts at encouraging communication with parents are a “beginning,” and it seems that many of the interview participants feel the same way. One teacher shared:

> Because sometimes parents aren't asking questions, it's not because they don't care, it's because they trust us. So, it's our job to constantly be communicating back out to families to just build that trust and to create that partnership that then further builds the trust. Then to keep that communication coming both ways.

Another teacher took this idea a step further, explaining how two-way communication can also help to build capacity:

> Family engagement is more than just like me reaching out. It's a two-way street. I think once those conversations happen, between teachers and parents, and they need to start early on it, it starts to build. But I think it's also giving ownership from the teacher perspective to the parents and having them be involved. And that may mean inviting them into classroom activities or giving them a voice in their student's education. I think for a lot of the families that I've encountered, a lot of them don't have the skills or the knowledge to do that. So, I think it's also about communicating how to go about doing that and sharing resources with them, whether at school or in the community. And listening to them as well.

While fostering two-way communication was viewed as important by many of the participants, it remained unclear how much it was actually happening in the school. Several teachers and leaders mentioned the challenges of translation when working with Spanish-speaking families, expressing their concern that a lack of Spanish-speaking staff members limits the possibilities of consistent and robust communication from both sides. Others noted that a recent boon of communication and translation apps, such as T*alking Points* and *Remind*, have enabled them to improve their communication with parents for whom English is not their native language. It was also clear that some staff members are simply more comfortable with attempting conversations with non-

English speaking parents than others. One teacher expressed her discomfort with these calls when she was a new teacher, sharing that now she feels differently: "My thinking has really evolved with just being okay with the unknown. It's intimidating when you're inviting parents or calling parents, or if you have to call a parent because of a discipline issue, and you don't know how they're going to react." Some of the capacity-building necessary to initiate true two-way communication seems to come with time and experience.

In a virtual Spanish language parent meeting over the summer, Lake Middle School's principal acknowledged the work that her staff was doing to improve in this area, assuring parents, "We are committed to getting better with our communication, and to make sure that all parents feel that they are in the loop," adding, "We really appreciate you voicing your opinions." The use of virtual platforms both during the school year and over the summer served to deliver on this promise, as staff were more easily able to share information in multiple languages, as well as to receive input in multiple languages. As one leader maintained, "Improving communication with our families is one of the silver linings of the COVID-19 pandemic."

Ensuring families feel that their voices are heard and valued. In such a large school with such a diverse population, many participants expressed how important it is to ensure that all parents feel heard and that their opinions and perspectives are valued. While this is easier said than done, it was clear that several of the leaders had given this thought. One leader explained:

> I think it's important to make sure everyone has a voice, right? Like recognizing that not everyone's going to come to a PTA meeting and the squeaky wheel gets the oil, or gets their voice heard. So, if no one's there to

> advocate for something different, then those are the needs that get met. And so, I really try to keep that in perspective and reach out to make sure that different perspectives or voices are heard and valued in whatever we do.

Lake Middle School's acting principal articulated her feelings around this issue in even more depth, sharing:

> We all have the same goals for our kids. But there are different cultural norms that in some countries you don't question the teacher, you just believe, and you trust. In our country you do question the teacher and you do push hard on educators if you feel it is needed. And so, it's building the relationships so you can level the playing field.
>
> Because it's sometimes in the back of my head, sometimes parents aren't advocating for their kids because they don't know that they can. And I need to make sure that I'm that voice for all kids, not just for the parents who know that they can push these buttons; I need to make sure that with every single step I'm taking that if a voice isn't being heard, then I am that voice. I take that perspective into account as I'm making decisions for the whole school. So, it's about balancing the feedback and then listening for the silent feedback, the feedback that might not be there. And then making sure that the silent feedback is heard.

Several leaders also expressed their desire for honest feedback from parents, emphasizing the need to hear from those parents who do not usually share their perspectives. One leader noted that she would like to place comment cards in the main office, similar to those found in businesses, to collect feedback from visitors and parents about what they were doing right and what could use improvement. She stressed the importance of receiving honest feedback:

> We need to know, what are we doing wrong? Because we think we're doing everything right, but we could just be missing a spot. If we keep trying to put a band aid on the wrong wound, it will just not work. Until we address the correct target, it's not going to work. And how are we going to know if we don't ask?

Building Block Four: Continual Reflection. This desire for feedback, and a commitment to making changes and improvements based on the feedback received, leads to the fourth building block identified by participants as critical to

family engagement: an ongoing process of reflection and personal and professional growth.

Acknowledging room for personal growth. All of the participants in the study were asked to reflect on how their view of engaging families has changed over their years as educators, and almost all were able to describe their personal growth in this area. For those participants who had become parents themselves during this time, they tended to grow in their more personal understanding of the challenges faced by families, as expressed by this leader:

> It really makes me appreciate all the things that parents do. For example, I'm more mindful about when I schedule meetings with parents. While face to face for me is always better, if I can get a parent on the phone, then that's a win too because schedules are hard. And in that meeting, we make sure to let the student know, "Your parent has taken time off of work. We're done these things because everyone's here to support you and that's how important it is." I think that makes the parent feel valued and heard and appreciated. I guess as a parent myself, I am more aware of the things that I do and how I share things, especially with my wording when I communicate. I stop and think, "Would I want someone to say that to me or about my child?"

Along these same lines, the former principal reflected on his own growth in this area:

> I think I've grown through this. I think I've gotten better at this. I think I may have in my younger years as an administrator, not completely valued the parent engagement or relationships with our parent community to the same level that I do now. I wasn't dismissive of it, but I think as I've gotten older, as I've become a parent myself, it's not a nice to have, it's essential.

Similarly, a teacher shared that her compassion for parents has grown over her years as an educator:

> I've always been very passionate, but I think my compassion has grown a ton as a teacher; I might still think, "Hey, this might not be the way that I would parent a kid," or "this might not be the way that I would carry this out," but I am growing in my understanding that it doesn't matter what I think. And so just allowing that compassion to grow, and then when I get to know the parents, I never even think like that because I realize, "You

> have so much on your plate right now. I just want to be able to be compassionate towards your situation." I think that's something that grows a ton if you let it as a teacher. You begin to understand that we never know what people are going through. And so that compassion piece I would say has been the thing that grows the most from year to year. And, if that ever stops growing, that will be the time I should get out of teaching.

Another common response was tied to time and experience, demonstrating that engaging with families can be more challenging for newer teachers. One teacher shared her own journey with changing expectations over time:

> Well, I guess at the beginning of teaching actually I was like, "Oh, I'm going to involve families. It's going to be so great… I'm going to change the world." You know that kind of mindset. And then I realized, "Oh my God, no, you can't just go in and automatically think that the parents are going to believe everything you say, or that the parents are going to drop everything to be with you because they have other stuff they have to do." I started to realize that this isn't as happy go lucky as I thought it was. It doesn't mean that it was negative. It's just that you have to work hard to establish those connections and it's worth it because then, after you do the work, it's easy. You call them, you text them, you send them emails, stuff like that. That's the beginning. It takes a lot of work. And I was not aware of that my first year.

While the large majority of interview participants did share positive stories of personal growth and reflection in this area, it is important to note that not everyone at Lake Middle School was able to reflect positively on their evolving attitude towards family engagement. One leader and two teachers admitted to falling a bit short in their reflectiveness on the subject; one teacher shared freely, "This is really an area of growth for me. It's not that I've spent a lot of time or thought figuring out what could really work." A leader shared that his own personal feelings towards how involved parents should, or should not be, involved in their children's education come into play when he reflects on his work in this area. He explained:

> But maybe to my detriment, I'm coming into it with my own personal baggage that parents should not be overly involved or obsessively involved with school or their kids. And I mean, whether what I think is right or not, it's still my sort of mindset and sometimes I have to fight that.

Acknowledging room for growth as an institution. In addition to reflecting on their personal growth, several teachers and leaders reflected on the "growth mindset" of the Lake Middle School Staff in terms of their capacity to effectively engage families. One leader described their schoolwide focus, especially given the demands on teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic, to be more efficient in their work:

> We can always do better. It's hard…most people are just grinding to the bone. When I think about trying to get families involved that's a really difficult task. And it's one that the higher ups in every district have been working through for years, and they're still working on it and it's not going to be perfect. So, when I say we can do better, of course, we can do better. As a public school, and as a system, we can do better. And the more that we can think about getting parents involved using systems and structures that are efficient, it will be better.

Another leader echoed his observations, stressing the value of reflection:

> The question is how do we get better, how do we make it so that we are successful with [family engagement] and ultimately help the kids in the process? So, I'll keep working at it, I just keep looking at different schools and figuring out what works and keep trying to figure out how we can improve it at Lake, though on a bigger scale. It's just constantly going back to the table and being reflective and trying again. This didn't work. Try something else. It's about having those at the table who are committed and willing to put in the work to make it happen.

In addition, the challenges and potential benefits of the pandemic were repeatedly mentioned by teachers and leaders alike when reflecting on Lake Middle School's potential growth in this area. One leader shared:

> Lake has been good at [engaging families], but there's always room to grow. I think that our current situation is forcing us to rethink, how else can we involve families and other stakeholders too, like people in the neighborhood, the community members, community organizations? It is

> definitely forcing schools to take a minute and rethink how they have been doing things, and how they can improve.

An assistant principal with a background of working in elementary schools noted that they tend to be more successful at fostering family engagement; she expressed her hope that lessons learned in the elementary setting can be translated to the middle school environment. She explained:

> I am always thinking about, how can we replicate the connection that elementary kids and families feel? You can't just cut and copy because it's different. But what are some things that we could do? That we could replicate but modify to get that connection. As much as we can replicate that connection, that relational aspect, that's everything. When kids feel connected to teachers, they want to participate. They don't care what the subject is. If they go in and they feel cared for, and they feel connected to that teacher, they're going to work their butt off in the class that they may not have any interest in. And so, we recognize that: let's build these relationships and then hopefully the academics will follow. And the connections with both the kids and the families.

Summary of Research Question Two. In this section, interview data was combined with information from document analysis and virtual observations to answer the question: Do middle school leaders and teachers view trust as one of the critical building blocks of family engagement? In the process of distilling the answers to this question into common themes, four “building blocks” of family engagement emerged from the data, with trust noted as an important element in each one: (a) setting the tone, (b) developing relationships, (c) fostering communication, and (d) continual reflection. Within each block, several patterns emerged: (a) setting the tone: intention, presence, and mindset commitments, (b) developing relationships: establishing partnerships, and engaging diverse families, (c) fostering communication: aiming for two-way communication, and ensuring that families feel that their voices are heard and

valued, and (d) continual reflection: acknowledging room for personal growth, and acknowledging room for growth as an institution. These four building blocks present a snapshot of how family engagement is perceived by the teachers and leaders at Lake Middle School, and also provide structure to this section and the one to follow.

Research Question Three: Policies and Practices?

With a solid grounding in how the teachers and leaders of Lake Middle School both define trust (RQ 1) and understand how it underpins successful family engagement (RQ 2), it is easier to make sense of their responses to the third research question in this study: What policies and practices does a middle school leader use to establish trust with Latino families? While few official policies were identified by interview participants, it was clear that there are a number of practices regularly put into place by school leaders specifically to foster family engagement, particularly of Latino and other minority families. Practices referenced 25 or more times by interview participants were identified, and then mapped to the four building blocks of family engagement detailed above both for ease of organization and to strengthen the claim that these four elements are essential for strong and effective family engagement at the middle school level.

Building Block One: Setting the Tone. As described above, school leaders set the tone for everything that happens within a school building. The former principal at Lake Middle School described this essential role in metaphorical terms, explaining, “We're the thermostat, not the thermometer. We set the tone, we set the temperature in the building. We set the culture of a

school. We model how to interact with students…and parents." Several practices that were mentioned repeatedly in interviews fall within this category.

Intentionality in setting family engagement as an organizational expectation. Leaders and teachers alike agreed that families are more likely to be involved if the direction to involve them is coming from the top. By setting family engagement as part of a larger organizational vision, teachers have a clear understanding of what is expected of them and are more likely to make it happen. Principals need to do the same for their leadership teams, making expectations clear so that everyone is aligned with building priorities. A leader explained how this works in practice:

> I think it goes back to systems too. What is expected of me when I am at school events? That's communicated down from the top. So, we sat down and said, "Listen, if you have administrative coverage at an event, you are to be visible, and use this as an opportunity to sit with parents and talk with them. Not just sit in a corner with your laptop and do other work. Take advantage of just introducing yourself." This is all about building that goodwill with the community and those relationships with your families.

The mindset commitments detailed above serve this same function in that they align staff with the mission and vision of the school. For example, several teachers explained that if they know that the schoolwide expectation is that "the conversation is the relationship," then they are more likely to make a phone call home or schedule a parent-teacher conference at the first sign of an issue with a student, instead of letting a problem fester. Study participants viewed having these commitments, especially in a school the size of Lake Middle School, to be essential to ensuring fidelity to school norms and goals, including the engagement of families.

Several participants emphasized the importance of setting expectations early on, but then being sure to revisit them continually throughout the school year. One leader explained:

> I think we automatically assume that as a school and a staff, that we remember those things, and we don't. So, it is not just at the beginning of the year, but you are constantly coming back to the why and the students that we serve. Every time we meet, we ground ourselves in our vision. Every time we meet, we talk about our pillars of instruction. We talk about meeting the needs of all of our students. And when we say needs, we don't just mean academic, but academic, social, emotional, behavior. We care about the whole child. And that extends to the whole family.

Creating an open and trustworthy school climate. Every interview participant in some way referenced the importance of establishing a school climate where parents feel welcomed and included. Many mentioned how important this is in a school such as Lake Middle School, with a minority majority population who might not be as likely to feel comfortable in a school setting. The former principal asked:

> Are we creating an environment, I am thinking specifically in high poverty schools or schools with majority minority populations, where all parents feel welcomed when they walk in, and believe that their voices will be heard? My role as a principal is setting that tone.

Everyday practices to build this type of environment were shared by a number of teachers and leaders, and many stressed that making the school welcoming for families of varying cultural backgrounds takes an extra level of care and thought, both in preparation and execution. The former principal of the school expressed this in terms of structures, sharing:

> I think from a systems and structure standpoint, I think there is a physical part of a school in which you are creating a welcoming environment. That when people walk in, they see hello in every different language. I think when they walk through the door into the main office, there is someone greeting them in their language. And hopefully it doesn't feel robotic, but it

> is systematic where there's somebody greeting them who is able to speak multiple languages to say, "Hey, how are you? How can I help you? Welcome."

Several teachers tied their focus on communication with families to the type of climate that they want to create within their classrooms. While they shared that their primary focus is on creating a welcoming environment for their students, the trust that is built as a result of the level of comfort and support that is established can then extend to families through open and continual communication. One teacher explained that once you get parents to buy in, the challenge is to then keep them involved throughout the year; she shared that the environment that is shaped by teachers and administrators can make or break the relationship that is formed:

> I think the biggest thing is trying to make it a safe place and then keeping the doors open and making the experience positive for them. It will keep them coming in. Like, “Hey, we do care about you. This is a partnership.” And I feel like when you have that in place, that you have built a relationship that can be sustained.

Paying attention to hiring practices. It became clear through interview responses that a second practice that helps to set the tone of a school is ensuring that school leaders are identifying the best people for the job. Hiring practices were mentioned by many participants, and in several different contexts. To begin, Lake Middle School’s former principal explained this practice in simple terms, stating “When you have opportunities to hire, you knock it out of the park. And that sounds like common sense, but that's not common.” A teacher backed this up, explaining:

> Lake is not a super easy environment to work in. You have to find the right type of people. And one thing that our administrators do a really good job at is identifying people that fit the Lake culture. A large part of our culture

> is that we are working together as a team. You are encouraged to maybe do more than other schools would because our population is, frankly, needier than other schools' populations might be. And so, the administration really tries to find teachers who are ready for that challenge and ready to work together.

Another teacher affirmed this in Lake Middle School's 2019 End of Year Staff Survey, writing, "You continue to hire staff who are committed to teaching our population and more importantly seeing that mission as a collaborative effort."

Several leaders described the teachers at the school as unusually dedicated to their work and their students, sharing that many of their teachers work extended hours that can reach into the community late into the evening. An assistant principal explained:

> We've always had a culture at Lake of teachers that go way above and beyond. I've worked at other schools of course before coming here and seeing the parking lot at 4:30 in the afternoon on any weekday when you let out at 2:15, it's amazing that there's hardly any cars gone. Teachers are super willing to stay and work with kids in our afterschool program. We've got teachers that will go to the community library and set up shop for a night or two a week to help tutor kids. And parents see that level of effort, and it has an impact.

Prioritizing hiring also extends to making the effort to find staff who can connect with Spanish-speaking families in their language; one Spanish-speaking teacher described the cultural gap between the staff at most schools in the Newport County Public Schools system and its student population, and what a difference it can make when there is a better match:

> There's a huge disconnect between what our student population looks like and what our teaching force looks like. I think back to Back-to-School Night, I mean as soon as parents walked in and they saw me, their faces lit up. It was a great feeling because then as soon as they heard me speak in Spanish, they had all of these questions they would ask. I think it's easier for this community, for parents, for families to connect and to trust teachers if it is somebody who looks like them, sounds like them, they know has experienced similar things to them.

> So, for me, one of the biggest components to engaging families is hiring practices. Growing up, nobody told me to be a teacher. And I think kids and families need to see that it's an option. I think by seeing somebody like me who looks like them and sounds like them, as a teacher, as a role model, can help them know that it is an option. And they can then influence future generations of students.

Several other teachers echoed the concern that more Spanish-speaking teachers are needed at Lake Middle School. They felt that traditionally the emphasis had been on hiring student services staff, such as school counselors, that speak Spanish and that it was less common for teachers to be able to communicate directly with parents in their native language. One teacher shared:

> I think building those relationships and making parents feel comfortable and a part of their child's education is really important, and we do that with the staff that we have. It's just that we don't have as much staff to do it. I will say that from the student services perspective, we have a lot of staff in that group that is able to welcome the families and explain the school system and get them connected with the resources they need. So that is huge, and I am very thankful for them, because they really form that foundation of a relationship with the families.

The school's parent liaisons were specifically singled out by a large number of respondents as essential to forming and sustaining home-school relationships. One leader described the work of a parent liaison:

> Our liaisons are really great about helping us make the phone calls. They help us to set up meetings. They even are there to help us translate all of our documents. So, they're the ones that are in the trenches doing some of the hard work for us, and we also pick their brains about knowledge and community resources. They know some smaller resources that maybe they already have ties to, and so we get to tap into those. They're a great resource that the administration always relies on.

While singing their praises, many also lamented the fact that despite a population of almost 2,000 students, Lake Middle School has only two parent liaisons, one who speaks Spanish and one who speaks Arabic. Though her time is clearly spread thin, the Spanish-speaking liaison was referenced time and again in

interviews as a critical piece of the family engagement puzzle. Having worked in the community for more than twenty years, when interviewed she shared that she has worked to foster lasting relationships with both families and local organizations, and that a large part of her role is in connecting the two. An assistant principal described her work with the school's Spanish-speaking families:

> If I leave a meeting with one of my parents, I'll say, our parent liaison's going to call you. She's going to give you a list of counselors, she's going to give you a list where you can get your eyeglasses, she's going to hook you up with a voucher to do this. You need food. Okay, she's going to do this. It helps to make our families feel more connected to the school, just as a community, which is great.
>
> And then in addition she runs different classes throughout the year. So, all the time, we're getting parents into the building for parenting classes, for technology classes, whatever the case may be, but more importantly, she is always a voice for the community. I have a couple of parents who would never just meet with me, they'd say, "Is [the parent liaison] coming? Because I like to speak with her." She knows everybody. I feel like she knows every family in the community, and she knows every resource. And so, while it's not necessarily a structure, but we just have two amazing people who are phenomenal with our communities which definitely helps our efforts at building engagement.

Another assistant principal confirmed the importance of these relationships, sharing "I'm amazed at how many times we'll call in a parent or make a phone call together, and she knows the family, she had worked with maybe an older sibling at the high school level." It is clear that not only are these important relationships valued by both staff and families, but that hiring the right person for the position can have a major impact on the success of a family engagement initiative.

Building Block Two: Developing Relationships. As described above, participants universally cited the importance of building relationships

with families, both to create trust and also to foster more active engagement in their children's learning. Several practices were repeatedly mentioned throughout these conversations regarding how these important relationships are initiated and nurtured.

Building respectful relationships with all stakeholders. Lake Middle School's former principal spoke about the importance of reaching out to all families and attempting to connect with them over time, building trust along the way. He shared:

> I think every conversation we have builds trust, every interaction we have builds trust. Whether it be one phone call, 20 phone calls, I think we believe that the more times that we can reach out and connect with families, we're going to build trust. Even if they don't like what we're saying, we're going to build trust.
>
> It's just this unrelenting effort. We're going to keep calling and we're going to keep contacting and we're not going to give up. And I think that's just that outward message of how you build that trust and how you shape those relationships. It's just all built on relationships.

A teacher shared this view of the importance of relationship building through conversations, starting with positive news, and creating a trusting foundation early on. In her view, a key element to establishing a respectful relationship is making sure that parents feel that their voices are heard. She explained:

> It is our conversations that are opening the door for these relationships, and a lot of it is just in phone calls, informal phone calls, reaching out with positive things. And that's really how we get them to trust us, too. I'm not just calling to tell you that your kid's in trouble. We build on that, and I think as time goes on, they really aren't as wary of school. And so, they do share more. And it becomes more two-way as they feel respected and heard.

Several participants spoke of how critical this piece had been during the COVID-19 crisis, as the school needed to make contact and share essential information with hundreds of families in a very short time; one leader explained that the teamwork among the staff in this situation was especially important, and that Spanish-speaking staff in particular were a key piece of the equation. He shared, “We had to make over 600 phone calls to get computers in kids' hands and I had Spanish teachers, ESOL teachers, and anybody who spoke Spanish was helping.”

While many of these staff members relied on previous relationships with families to get the information across, in addition to existing channels of communication, school leaders had to create new ways to reach parents during this unprecedented crisis. The aforementioned virtual Town Halls and family meetings were one way that information was shared, and relationships were strengthened. By holding each meeting separately in English and Spanish (as well as Arabic), a strong message was sent to all families that they were valued, and their involvement was important. Given the active participation observed in each of the virtual meetings, with many parents sharing questions and comments in writing and many others turning on their microphones to put their voices into the room, organizing the meetings by language was effective. Parents seemed to be comfortable sharing their concerns in an all-Spanish forum. The principal shared that the robust turnout at each of these meetings was encouraging:

> I'm just excited about thinking about what's next and how we can build on what we have done during this time. How we can build on the successes that we've already had and get better? Until now, every year we got a little bit better about providing more support, and more visible support, for

families, and this year is no exception. It is exciting to think about what is yet to come!

Recognizing that the school-home relationship is inherently asymmetrical in terms of vulnerability and power and working to be a responsible steward of that power. Several leaders noted that while building relationships is critical to engaging families, there is an undeniable imbalance in power between home and school that impacts these relationships. They shared that it is incumbent on the school to recognize this fundamental challenge and to work to balance the sides in order to achieve true partnership. A teacher explained:

> It's always better when they come into the school rather than trying to contact them at home. I feel like when we try to do the contact over the phone or over email, it's a little more like us versus them, but when they come in it's more a team working together to try to understand what's going on. I think that whenever possible it's good to bring the families in to build a comfort level and then to go from there.

Another teacher shared that when working with parents who might not have had a positive school experience themselves, the trust piece becomes an especially important element of the power dynamic. She suggested:

> We try to share with parents that we're going to hold your kid accountable and we need your help in doing so. And I think a lot of them at first are very wary. This is what we find about a lot of our parents, that we need to help them build that connection with school. It's hard for them because they didn't have a positive connection. So that's what we're trying to build, by showing them that school can be a positive thing.

Two assistant principals identified the flexible scheduling of parent meetings as a leadership practice meant to correct this imbalance. One shared:

> Lake starts early. Our first bell rings at 7:20 for students to get into the class by 7:45. So I always offer for my meetings to start with families super early, if I really need them to come in. I offer to start at 6:30, and a lot of families can make that work. When we are thinking about a partnership,

> I'm not going to say, "Well, my calendar is open at 10:00 AM, so I need you to get off of work and come at 10."
>
> It can never be perfect. But there are certain things that we can do. And if they can't come in, then I can make sure that we are having a phone conversation, at a convenient time for them, and I will say, "I'll line up a translator. We'll line up the right people to make sure that I can hear your voice." It is a two-way street.

Participant responses revealed that, once a meeting with a family has been scheduled at a mutually convenient time, there are leadership practices that can be put into place to even the balance of power within the meeting. An assistant principal shared his experience with changing his mindset and being more vulnerable in the moment, in the interest of pursuing partnership:

> My thinking has really evolved to where it's actually way okay, and way better, to go into a conversation not feeling so scripted, and as if I know where I want it to go. I'm okay with the uncertainty. It doesn't mean going in unprepared, but don't go in believing that I have the solution. It's pretty ridiculous when you step back and say it that way, if I were to truly believe that I have the solution to every single problem. That is the complete opposite of what we talk about, like building partnerships in schools, and inviting the stakeholders in, and all the buzzwords, which are buzzwords for a reason. We truly do need to let other stakeholders be involved with that, you have to be okay with going into these conversations, not thinking you have the answer right away. That is the only way to be partners.

An added layer to the home-school power imbalance is the nature of the developmental stage of most middle school students; they may be struggling to assert their own power, especially in the family dynamic. Several interview participants referenced to adolescence as a time of great change, which makes it a potentially very challenging time for parents as they try to maintain equilibrium at home. An assistant principal shared how these power struggles can impact the home-school relationship:

> Getting families involved is so hard at the middle school and high school level, regardless of the demographics of the school. The parents are like,

> "They're old. They don't want me around." When I think specifically about the Latino community at Lake, we're fighting it on two fronts. We're fighting it on the level of, these kids want to be independent and autonomous as much as they can because they're in middle school and that's normal. And at the same time, especially when we're dealing with immigrant families, they don't feel like partners because they just feel maybe not as confident in the whole schooling process.

Building Block Three: Fostering Communication. As detailed above, having a robust and consistent communication plan is essential for creating an effective structure for family engagement. The former principal shared that extra attention and responsiveness in communication is especially important when building relationships with families from different cultural backgrounds. He explained:

> I think just recognizing the background of our students, the background of our parents, understanding as best as possible their lifestyle, their day to day is so important. So, the approach is drastically different depending on who the family is. If you're going to make time to come up to school, they are going to be heard. Now, it's probably 50-50, but I will do everything I can for them to talk with me. But in all likelihood, I'm going to say, "Listen, thank you so much for coming up. Your input means a lot to me, and your concerns mean a lot to me. I'm not available at this time. What I would ask of you first is to speak with your student's administrator or counselor," depending on the situation.
>
> So, they come up and they're not just kicked back to the curb, right? They walk in and know, "Hey, it doesn't matter. You go in there, someone's going to talk to you. And someone's going to solve your issue or address your issue." I don't always solve the issues. But someone is going to hear it. And they're going to know what next steps are by the time that they leave. "Thank you so much for coming in. As a next step, I'm going to speak with these students or this teacher. You should hear back to me by the end of the day tomorrow." So, they leave knowing what the action steps are, and when they should hear back from us. And that type of communication goes a long way of building a strong culture where parents feel valued.

Home-school communication can take many forms and is continually evolving, as the COVID-19 pandemic has notably taught us, and participant responses reflected the hope that some of the lessons learned will continue well

after the return to the school buildings is realized. One teacher shared how the way she practices communication with parents has hopefully changed for the better:

> I feel a lot more connected to what's going on in the families' lives right now. Mostly that comes at the cost of not being as connected with the students. But I feel like I'm more knowledgeable of what each family's needs are and what they're going through. And, it's not necessarily all good things, as they're having to be very honest and transparent with us and I'm thankful that they trust us enough to tell us when they need certain things and what's going on with their jobs or their families. If there's a silver lining to all of this, I think that that's been one: getting a little bit more communication with the families than I usually have time for.
>
> I hope that this kind of continues to build on that foundation of trust with the parents so they know they can reach out for things that aren't just school related. I'm hoping that through the relationships we're all developing during this time, the parents will feel comfortable reaching out to me, but I don't want to necessarily put extra pressure on them to feel like they need to do that. Overall, I think we've learned ways to be creative with communication in this time.

Another practice that was shared by several participants was being flexible and responsive in how communication is carried out. In addition to the flexibility in scheduling meetings and conversations described above, one teacher shared that she tries to be flexible in how she reaches out to parents, and that it often depends on what the family needs:

> I think that making myself available in the ways that parents best communicate is important. So, many parents I used to work with texted, they just preferred that, they were at work all the time and I totally get that. I think that was important. Just establishing, "I'm available to you, in whatever way you would like to communicate." And I think that really did open people up. And like I said, they started to trust me more.

In practice, communication can also serve different purposes. Teachers and leaders described their strategies for communication as not only a means for

sharing and receiving information, but also as a vehicle for capacity building along the way.

Building capacity. Several participants shared that the middle school experience can be a bit overwhelming for some of their Latino families, as the majority of Spanish-speaking parents at the school have immigrated with limited school experience in their native countries and without fluent English language skills. They reported that parents themselves have expressed that they can feel intimidated by the workings of the school system and insecure in their own knowledge and understanding of how to help their children. One teacher shared:

> The parents that we work with are busy…and super dedicated to their kids' education but don't necessarily, and it's not their fault or anything, but they don't necessarily know everything about the American public-school system. So, they want to help whatever way they can. But a lot of times they are not sure how. And a lot of our parents actually this year have expressed that, which I think is great and vulnerable to be able to express how they are feeling.

Simultaneously, leaders and teachers alike shared that staff members may not be comfortable with engaging with parents of different cultures and with whom it is difficult to communicate in English. It is clear that building the capacity of both groups is key to building successful home-school partnerships.

Families. One assistant principal shared his thoughts on the perceived gaps between English-speaking parents who are familiar with the American educational system and the parents of many of the students at the school. He explained that one of his goals is to figure out a way to narrow these gaps, sharing:

> I think most of our families don't have a tremendous background in the educational system in this country, just don't even know that if they called and talked to the principal and said, "I'd like a tour of your building," that

> we would do that. So, I've often thought about that, thinking, "How do we bridge that divide? How do we let folks know that we want to see them, we welcome a visit?"

In addition to a gap in understanding of the system in general, there is also a perceived gap in capacity in terms of being prepared to help their children with schoolwork. Several teachers and leaders spoke of this challenge; one teacher explained that every communication she sends home is meant to bridge this knowledge gap in some way:

> I mean anytime that we can involve our parents and discuss what they're learning and how they're learning it, and ways that they can support at home, we're going to try and communicate that. And every time that we have the opportunity to welcome families into the school, we try and take advantage of that, so that they can see and understand what it is that we are doing here.

One silver lining of the COVID-19 pandemic, shared by several participants, has been the shift from parents primarily as observers to parents as necessarily involved in the educational process. Over the many months of virtual schooling, many families felt the need to step up and become more engaged in their children's day to day schooling, which wound up building capacity almost by default. An assistant principal shared:

> At our school, teachers are recording focus lessons and walking the kids through how to complete the tasks. And so, for parents who were initially overwhelmed with the process, you now have someone teaching you too, so you're learning with the kids. And so, before it was like, "Oh, I can't help my child." But now they can. And so, we're building capacity honestly, without even knowing it.

In general, whether the setting is virtual or in-person, most everyone agreed that building parent capacity comes down to creating trusting relationships. An assistant principal reiterated that this needs to begin at the very start of the year, to set the stage for what is to come:

> I think the more that we can teach parents what school looks like for their child, the more engaged we can get them. And what that means is reaching out to them and saying, "Hey, here's your child's schedule. I'm so and so. Let me specifically talk about what your child might need this year..." And if these conversations are happening the first couple of weeks, the first month, then right away, parents are involved. “Let's look at your contact information. Is this all right? Are these the phone numbers we need to be calling, is this the email that we should be using? Which do you prefer that we use?” And then, right from the start, we are building the foundation and their understanding of what school will be like for their child that year.

Teachers/Leaders. Similarly, several interview participants acknowledged the need to build capacity in both teachers and leaders in order to effectively engage with diverse families. Along with a focus on continual reflection on practice, which will be described in more detail below, comes the need for intentional professional development to strengthen both background knowledge and the skills needed for engagement.

Leaders shared that the Newport County school system had prepared a series of district-wide Cultural Proficiency workshops for all schools beginning a few years back and continuing through the current school year. As part of the district’s cultural proficiency initiative, each school is asked to task at least one staff member to be their “equity lead” who, in addition to other duties, facilitates these presentations which typically are held twice a year; as a larger school Lake Middle School has two Equity Leads, both of whom were interviewed as part of this study. Leaders reported that the workshops had served to bolster staff knowledge of the need for cultural sensitivity and helped to develop an understanding of the impact that bias can have on the relationships between teachers and students, and by extension, their families. The school has also brought in a panel of parents from different cultures, organized by the school

system, to speak with staff about the typical norms and customs of each group; several teachers shared the positive impact that this panel had on them when discussing their learning around cultural proficiency.

One issue that was repeated several times was the challenge of communicating with parents who do not speak English. Several teachers mentioned that it is especially difficult for newer teachers to make phone calls home, as phone conversations with parents can be difficult to begin with and may be complicated by the language difference. Part of building capacity for these teachers lies in the aforementioned leadership practice of setting the expectation that "the conversation is the relationship"; an assistant principal explained what that means in this context:

> Our expectation is just try to call once. For admin and teachers, try to have a conversation. If there are barriers, then we can have one of our parent liaisons call. Just being the first voice that they hear, so that the parents know that they're trying to reach out, I think is important. We try to get parents into the building as much as possible to have conversations, whether that's for parent conferences or conferences with the admin, counselor, or counselor-admin pair.

Setting expectations is one thing but taking steps as administrators to support these teachers in actually making this happen is another. Several effective practices that were shared were the provision of translators, assisting teachers with obtaining translation and other multilingual communication apps, and connecting teachers with the Spanish-speaking parent liaison who can assist with phone calls. A leader commented on the power of the new translation technology:

> By using one of these new apps, you're taking the power out of the parent liaison hands and putting it back in yours. Because the effect isn't the same. It's not the same when you have a translator. So, to be able to send

> those messages from the heart, it's different. And it's more effective on every level.

Just as important as the practices enacted by leaders to support this communication is the trust between school leaders and teachers. One teacher commented, "They're always there to back us up in any of our conversations. They make sure that we realize that communicating with families is a school wide priority."

Another assistant principal suggested that some teachers have trouble connecting to the realities that many of the students face at home, as their own backgrounds and experiences may be extremely different from those of their students. He spoke of the impact that home visits can have on building teacher capacity for understanding and compassion, explaining:

> I can't recall any of the visits where I walked away where it wasn't a very positive experience. At times it was a little eye opening just in terms of the number of families that might have to share a very small space, or working with an aunt or a grandmother because the parents are not in the country, and just trying to have some type of empathy for our kids. It's just hard to even comprehend that we wonder, "Why aren't they focused in math and interested in the classroom?" when last night they talked to their mom in Guatemala on the phone for the first time in six months; those lessons learned are just pretty incredible. Kids have to be so resilient to have to deal with things that it would be hard for an adult to deal with, let alone an 11-year-old. There is nothing that can replace seeing it for yourself.

Building Block Four: Continual Reflection. Participant responses highlighted that continually reflecting on what is working and what is not and thinking creatively about ways to strengthen the positives and fix the negatives are essential for creating an effective system of family engagement. One assistant principal noted:

> In terms of getting actual, physical participation, I think it's always thinking through the lens of, "Why aren't parents coming into this

> building? How can we get them to come?" For example, "Why aren't our Hispanic parents coming to Back-to-School Night? Okay. Maybe they don't have transportation. All right, so let's deploy school buses out into the community. Or, if we provide childcare, would a parent be more likely to come if they don't have the distractions of their kid? Maybe bringing their children is a huge barrier because it's just hard to bring kids into a meeting. Or, if we provide food, maybe they'll come just for the meal and then everything else is a bonus. And so, just brainstorming ways of why aren't they coming and how can we fix that problem?

Planning for differentiated engagement. In many ways, Lake Middle School is a school divided. In the 2019-2020 school year, 68% of students received free or reduced lunch and roughly a third of all students (32%) were designated as English learners, but the school also is home to an Advanced Academic Program (AAP) center for students who qualify for enriched and accelerated instruction; 27% of students at Lake Middle School qualified for these "Level IV" services in 2019-2020 (Newport County Public Schools, 2020a). Several leaders and teachers acknowledged the division between center families and neighborhood families, and the challenges inherent in meeting the needs of both simultaneously. PTA meeting minutes reveal that both officers and attendees at meetings appear to be mostly native English-speaking parents, and several interview participants confirmed that the center parents were more likely to be involved in school wide committees and events. One leader shared, "We get a lot of parents who turn out, but it's just not the parents who we need to turn out."

Given this reality, leaders and teachers alike appear to realize that engagement needed to be differentiated for families based on a variety of factors, including their comfort with communicating in English, their knowledge of how school works, and their capacity for helping their children with their studies.

Instead of creating a one size fits all model of family engagement, it was clear that different groups needed different levels and types of supports. An assistant principal suggested, “I think it's such an individual situation, largely based on what the kid and the family actually need that determines how involved or how not involved the parent becomes.” Another assistant principal framed it as an equity issue, noting:

> From our standpoint, it's always about equity. We're always looking at something through an equity lens. And so, whether that's equity as an AAP student or equity as an ESOL newcomer, just making sure that we are removing those barriers to make sure that everyone has access both to a viable curriculum every day and that parents have the same access to us. But making sure that they know how to do that, I think is the key.

A teacher shared that providing a variety of opportunities for parents to engage with the school is essential for ensuring this equity, because each family has their own unique needs and possible obstacles to involvement. She explained:

> I think that an important part too, is making sure that there are ways that these families can connect to school without having to get off of work, or not having to drop off their other kids at daycare. Like they need to be able to participate in ways that are conducive to how they live their life and their jobs and their responsibilities.

Providing supports beyond educational needs. The school’s Spanish-speaking parent liaison shared that, pre-pandemic, she spent a great deal of her time scheduling classes for parents that ranged from technology help to English lessons to parenting support. While the numbers of participants varied and were sometimes low, these classes were targeted to specific interests shared by parents and were designed with the needs of the participants in mind. During the pandemic, as has been shared above, new virtual opportunities were created, and the attendance of Spanish-speaking families increased exponentially from what it

had been at in-person events. While it remains uncertain to what degree this virtual success can be continued into the future, an assistant principal commented:

> With this virtual environment, being able to have virtual parent coffees and town halls is another way that we can tap into parents and get them engaged. We are able to have recorded sessions that they can go back and listen to later because they want to be involved. It's not that they don't want to engage, it's just that when you are a single parent and you have multiple children and you're working, you can't. And sometimes it's misconstrued as not caring. The virtual piece eliminates the obstacles and meets the needs of all families.

A teacher shared this observation, maintaining that if the Spanish-language parent coffees and town halls had been held in person, attendance would not have been as high. She explained, "[The parents] have kids, they have other responsibilities. I hope this can continue. Even when school goes back, thinking 'Oh, maybe we should make this a virtual coffee chat instead of in person coffee chat?' will be important."

In addition to school-based support, Lake Middle School is the only school in the Newport County school system to be selected as a partner school for the organization Communities in Schools (CIS). A non-profit national network "delivering evidence-based integrated student supports to more than 1.5 million students throughout the United States," CIS staffers bring outside resources into the schools where they are "accessible, coordinated, and accountable" (Communities in Schools, n.d.). The school's CIS Site Coordinator has an office within the school building and works with outside community partners to source resources for students and their families.

According to the school's weekly newsletter, this proved to be a particularly fruitful relationship during the pandemic, as the CIS coordinator was able to work with school leaders to create a "Community Closet" where students and families can access clothing and toiletries, as well as gift cards to popular stores, year-round. While resources are available to all families, support is differentiated in that parents can choose to access programs and resources as needed. For one assistant principal, this was a project long imagined and several years in the making. She remarked:

> Having a resource like this is letting families know we're in this together, we can help you. Because if the parents aren't good, the students aren't good at all. It's all together, it's cyclical. This gives us a chance to disrupt the cycle.

Building capacity. While the practices put into place to build the capacity of families have been detailed above, it is also important to note that this capacity building must be differentiated to be effective. For Latino families who might feel overwhelmed in such a large middle school, building community is a part of this work. An assistant principal voiced her continued questions about how to make this a reality:

> How do we get these parents into the building to see what all the kids are doing or all the things that are offered or just to build a sense of community? I think family engagement is just so important, especially in diverse populations like the Latino population…that sense of community is huge for them outside of the school and they don't often feel that inside of the school. So really figuring out how can we make them feel a part of the whole.

Several teachers noted that in many ways the pandemic had brought the need for differentiated capacity building to light. Very quickly they were able to

tell which students had support at home and which did not, and then target the families that needed additional help. She observed:

> This has been eye opening to for us about homework and trying to get them prepared for high school because a lot of these kids, and I guess we didn't realize it as much until we came into this format, they don't have support at home or if they do have support at home, it's not the same kind of support as some of our honors level or AAP kids in the building who have parents who can willingly sit down and work with them or who are capable of sitting down and helping them read through something. So that's been eye opening too.
>
> And that's been some skills that we've made priorities for us going into next year. Whether we're in a format virtually like this or if it's a hybrid or even if we're not, it's building skills for them to be able to do more work independently and providing the support for their families to help them do that, because it's not just the access to technology that is causing the divide. So that's been a big piece for us.

Participants were also reflective about their own capacity and room for personal growth. One teacher shared a bit about her own journey:

> I think as teachers we just constantly have to think, okay, what works well? Obviously building a culture of trust works, that doesn't matter what the background of the kid is. Having kind of these set pieces that really stick with you, things I can take with me no matter what school I'm at, like positive phone calls, establishing trust, ensuring follow-through. And I might adapt or change things, such as I might be able to email more if I'm at a more affluent school. But the foundational things that I'm going to do are the same. And so, I think that has helped me over time. And also, just being willing to let my expectations shift, you know? That has been a key to my growth as an educator.

Summary of Research Question Three. In this section, leadership practices were identified in answer to the question: What policies and practices does a middle school leader use to establish trust with Latino families? These practices, grouped into the following themes: (a) setting the tone: intentionality in setting family engagement as an organizational expectation, creating an open and trustworthy climate, and paying attention to hiring practices, (b) developing

relationships: building respectful relationships with all stakeholders, and recognizing that the school-home relationship is inherently asymmetrical in terms of vulnerability and power and working to be a responsible steward of that power, (c) fostering communication: building capacity in both families and teachers and leaders, and (d) continual reflection: planning for differentiated engagement are organized as building blocks of family engagement. Each practice was highlighted in data collected through semi-structured interviews, document collection, and/or observations.

In the next chapter, an analysis of the findings presented in all three sections above will include a comparison with both the literature and the study's conceptual framework, potential implications for research and practice, and relevant recommendations for moving forward.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND ACTION COMMUNICATIONS

This purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of school leaders and teachers around building trust as a necessary condition for increased engagement of Latino families at the middle school level. Through the process of studying a middle school community with a majority Latino population and culturally responsive school leaders, the study attempted to uncover successful leadership practices that foster meaningful involvement of Latino families, as well as to identify recommendations for improved practice moving forward. The study's conceptual framework emerged from a rich literature base in the areas of family involvement, culturally responsive school leadership, and trust; it hypothesized that a positive relationship exists between instructional leaders who are grounded in culturally responsive school leadership practices, the establishment of trust between these leaders, their staff, and the larger school community, and the engagement of Latino families in their children's learning.

To determine the degree of connection between the elements of the conceptual framework, a qualitative case study was conducted at Lake Middle School with three guiding research questions. The first research question focused on how each group of stakeholders defined trust in the context of school-family relationships, while the second research question asked if they viewed trust, as defined, as a critical building block of family engagement. The third research question then sought examples of policies and practices used by a middle school leader to establish trust with Latino families. Findings emerging from semi-

structured interviews with school leaders and teachers, document analysis, and observations were presented in Chapter Four.

In this chapter, connections are drawn between five major themes from the data, the conceptual framework, and existing research. Recommendations for practice, based on these connections, are then presented. Finally, action communication products are included for both the administration at Lake Middle School and the leadership of the Newport County Public Schools system, to inform their future work towards strengthening the engagement of Latino families at the middle school level.

Discussion of Major Themes

Theme One: **Trust is the foundation of all aspects of family engagement, rather than standing as an independent construct.** Analysis of the data collected in this study revealed that participants did not view trust as a building block of family engagement in and of itself, as originally conceptualized, but instead viewed it as impacting every aspect of working with families. Accordingly, trust cannot be isolated as a singular element, or construct, for successful family engagement, but rather is a thread that runs through each of the elements that foster it. It is also an essential piece of each of the culturally responsive school leadership practices that have been shown to be most effective in encouraging families to become more involved in their children's education.

Tschannen-Moran (2014) states that "trustworthy leaders create a culture of trust within their building; this trust is at the crux of successful schools" (p. 266), and this was borne out by the data collected in this study. It does appear that the culture of trust nurtured at Lake Middle School is what is salient when

discussing both the school's successes and its challenges. Each of the facets of trust as defined by Tschannen-Moran (2014)—benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence—were touched upon by the study participants in some form, by both school leaders and teachers. Document analysis and observation data served to reinforce the importance of this culture within the school community.

As trust is a construct with many dimensions, the findings suggest that each of the building blocks of engagement, as identified in this study, may be connected most directly to different facets of trust. Figure 2 summarizes these connections.

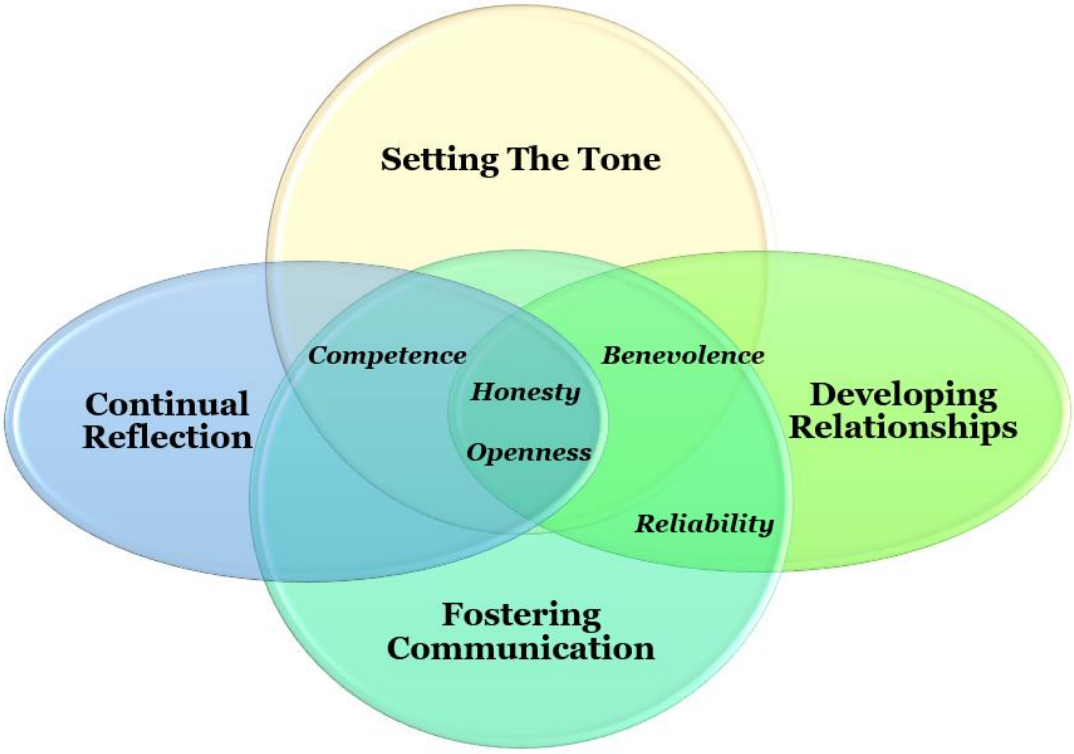


Figure 2. Mapping of the building blocks of family engagement identified in this study to the facets of trust defined by Tschannen-Moran (2014). This Venn

Diagram shows that honesty and openness are the only two facets connected to each of the four building blocks, while benevolence and reliability are essential to three out of four of the identified blocks.

By looking at trust more closely, it is possible to break it down into its facets and better understand how the importance and relevance of each aspect depends on both perspective and priorities. Tschannen-Moran (2014) describes this concept as differentiated trust; she explains that "for trust to form, it may not be necessary to have a high level of confidence in all facets, only in those areas where there is critical interdependence" (p. 39). She adds that as relationships by nature are multifaceted, parties may weigh the importance of each facet of trust differently depending on their perspective and role in the relationship hierarchy. The concept of differentiated trust is highly relevant in a school setting, where leaders, teachers, parents, and students fall into well-defined roles with clear-cut differences in authority and power. Each of these stakeholder groups have different priorities when it comes to the facets of trust, and this was borne out by the findings of this study.

Tschannen-Moran (2014) states "Principals base their trust judgments of teachers more heavily on competence, reliability, and commitment, whereas teachers' views of principals tend to be anchored more in caring, integrity, and openness" (p. 41). She then goes on to suggest that "the degree to which teachers are granted professional discretion has been linked to their level of trust in their principal" (p. 42). All of these priorities can be seen in the interview responses of the participants; as detailed in Chapter Four, many of the teachers spoke of the level of trust placed in them by the administration and how open and willing they

were to help their staff, while several of the leaders spoke highly of the commitment of the teachers to their students and families. By understanding trust in all of its dimensions, leaders are better prepared to foster it both among their staff and with their school community.

Theme Two: Leaders and teachers each contribute to the building of trust but in different, yet equally critical, ways. While the role of the leader in both building trust and fostering the engagement of families is critical as described throughout the literature (Allensworth & Hart, 2018; Grissom, Egalite, & Lindsay, 2021; Handford & Leithwood, 2013; Tschannen-Moran, 2003, 2014), an interesting finding that emerged from the data in this study is that leadership is only half of the equation. Instead, it appears that building trust in a school community starts simultaneously from both the top, in the form of the organizational intentions set by leadership, and from the bottom, in the form of the relationships built and trust nurtured by teachers in the classroom.

Role of the leader. Riehl (2012) describes the role of the leader as either encouraging or discouraging family involvement. She explains, "Leaders establish priorities, set the tone, and provide the means for involving families and communities in education or for keeping them at bay" (p. 10). Multiple researchers have noted that family engagement will not be successful if it is not set as a leadership priority (Allensworth & Hart, 2018; Auerbach, 2009; Brewster & Railsback, 2003b; Oxley, 2013; Quezada, 2016). When offering recommendations based on her wide-ranging study of Latino parental involvement in three major cities, Zarate (2007) described the need to establish

"an organizational focus on creating long-term, sustainable, or innovative parental involvement programs" and that the lack of such a focus was "noticeable" in the schools that she studied (p. 12). Similarly, Pushor and Amendt (2018) suggest that family engagement be moved "from a 'random act' to a systematically embedded philosophy and pedagogy within a school landscape" (p. 217) and so that it does not become another "'nice to do' but not a 'need to do'" (p. 218).

Data collected in this study reveal that school leaders at Lake Middle School not only appear to be committed to the work around building trust and fostering engagement but have also taken on an active role in creating and sustaining the types of institutional supports that will allow both to grow. Tschannen-Moran (2014) explains that these supports can be in the form of both more formal organizational policies and more informal social structures, such as the shared norms and values of the school culture (p. 50). It is in the realm of social structures that Lake Middle School most shines; the mindset commitments detailed in Chapter Four are one example of how a shared culture of expectations has been developed, which allows trust to grow between staff members who are aligned with the same mission and vision in mind. More will be said about the importance of this alignment below.

Role of the teacher. One surprising finding in this study was the unanimity with which teachers responded to the question about how they define trust; every teacher interviewed described trust as first beginning with the relationships they build with their students in the classroom and then extending that trust to families over time. This was not a sentiment shared by school

leaders, perhaps because they have a different role in the power structure of the school and see trust as more of a top-down construct; it was clear, however, that while school leaders are busily crafting plans for establishing trust and engaging families, it is the teacher in his or her classroom who is enacting these plans by nurturing trusting relationships with students and their families.

For trust to be built across all layers within the school community, it is important not to discount the foundational trust being developed at the classroom level. Research has shown that student-teacher trust is at the base of all learning, as "the more students are able to trust their teachers, the more willing they are to open themselves up to the risks involved with learning" (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, p. 161). This trust is then conveyed to parents, who within the trust construct most value benevolence, defined as "an authentic sense of care for the well-being of another," as it is extended to their children by teachers and school leaders (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, p. 190). The vulnerability and perception of risk experienced by a parent sending their child off to school is real, especially when there is a disconnect between home and school in terms of life experience, culture, language, or as is the case with many of the families at Lake Middle School, all three. Tschannen-Moran (2014) explains that benevolence also includes "believing that something that one cherishes will be taken care of by the person in whom trust is placed" (p. 190). Once parents believe that their cherished ones are valued and respected in the classroom and see the trust that has developed between their children and their teachers, the foundation for their own trust in the school can begin to grow. Stories shared by teachers in Chapter Four that showcased involvement in their students' lives

beyond the classroom walls add even more power to this type of transferred trust; by demonstrating their commitment to their students above and beyond expectations they heighten the sense of benevolence being extended, which serves to strengthen the overall trust between school and home.

Synergy between leaders and teachers. There is a rich base of literature on the importance of the relationships between leaders and teachers, and the ways in which the work of each impacts the effectiveness of the other; much of the research around school change centers on the role of the leader in creating a school culture that is supportive of teachers and encouraging of both teacher leadership and learning (Freeman & Fields, 2020; Grissom, Egalite, & Lindsay, 2021; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008; Youngs & King, 2002). The other half of this dynamic is to look at how teachers actually enact, or do not enact, the initiatives and directives put forward by leaders, which in many cases can be tied back to the level of trust established between stakeholder groups. Hoppey and McCloskey (2013) posit "mutual trust is what allows professionals in an organization to collaboratively work through dilemmas and solve problems" (p. 249).

One key to working effectively as an instructional team is to build on this trust to create a more holistic view of the work being done, so that parties are working together towards shared goals instead of staying in their individual silos and working in parallel. Louis (2007) found that in "high-trust" schools there was a greater likelihood that initiatives would be carried out across the staff, which led to demonstrated improvements in student achievement. By working together, with a shared perspective instead of viewing things through the lens of one role or

another, gaps can be addressed, and the work can progress more effectively. Through the delivery of a consistent message from school to home, it is easier for all parties to build both trust and interest in engagement.

The importance of this synergy becomes even more apparent in a crisis situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Research on education during and following crises such as natural disasters shows that teachers are "first responders in tragedy" (O'Toole & Friesen, 2016, p. 1) and that strong, consistent leadership is essential in supporting their work. Similarly, in their study of almost 8,000 teachers across 9 states in the spring of 2020, Kraft, Simon, & Lyon (2020) found that teachers who could "depend on strong communication, fair expectations, and a recognition of effort from the top, along with targeted professional development and facilitated, meaningful collaboration with colleagues" were most likely to be successful and have a stronger sense of efficacy during the COVID-19 pandemic (p. 28). These working conditions clearly needed to have been established prior to the crisis in order to be impactful once disaster struck, again highlighting the critical importance of building trusting teacher-leader relationships.

Theme Three: Successful family engagement requires an aligned and committed staff. Much of the school improvement research centers on the idea that a school leader creates change indirectly, by influencing "school-level variables" such as school climate, teacher capacity, and instructional practice (Youngs & King, 2002, p. 648). Accordingly, a leader can create structures and opportunities for building trust and fostering engagement between home and school, but success will only come with a teaching staff that is

aligned with a singular mission and truly committed to enacting a shared vision. In short, if teachers do not carry out their part, leaders will not achieve their goals. In their study of an urban school system in Pennsylvania, Barnyak and McNelly (2009) found that while "both teachers and administrators have strong beliefs regarding parental involvement in the educational system…their practices do not necessarily match their beliefs" (p. 54). When this mismatch exists, even the best efforts at building trust and family engagement fall short.

In order to build the type of alignment necessary across a staff, leader-teacher trust must be established early on and nurtured often through ongoing efforts from both sides to build productive relationships that embody the five facets of trust. Bryk and Schneider (2002) suggest that consistency in a leader is essential for this trust to develop; a leader who demonstrates consistency between her espoused beliefs, stated goals, and actual behavior engenders a great deal of trust among her staff, especially when this consistency is shown regularly over time. Lake Middle School's administrators appear to be aware of the importance of this type of consistency, as evidenced by their interview responses; many spoke of the challenge of keeping trust once it is developed. Given how highly the teachers spoke of the school leaders across all interviews, it appears that they are doing an effective job of maintaining positive, trusting relationships with their staff.

Additionally, teacher-teacher trust is another critical piece of this dynamic; Tschannen-Moran (2014) suggests that "faculty members' trust in colleagues has also been related to higher trust in students and their parents" (p.123). Again, the data shows that teachers generally think highly of each other

at Lake Middle School. Several of the teachers who were interviewed work as part of a school-within-a-school concept, where a smaller, targeted group of students is shared among a small team of teachers, with a designated administrator and school counselor assigned to the team. These teachers in particular demonstrated a high degree of trust in and respect for their colleagues, with whom they work in tandem to meet the needs of their shared students and families. The teachers also reported a higher degree of family involvement within their program, in part due to the looping aspect of the model which ensures that students will stay within this smaller team of teachers for two years, allowing for more time to develop trusting relationships. The model, fairly unique to the Newport County school system, allows for a cooperative community to grow both within the classrooms and across the teachers participating in the program, and shows great promise for other middle schools looking to create something similar.

Both trust and mistrust are essentially built through day-to-day interactions between teachers, students, and parents. As teachers are the main points of contact between families and the school, it is essential that a unified message, reflecting aligned priorities and goals, is being delivered to the community. One way that Lake Middle School attempts to accomplish this is through the mindset commitments detailed in Chapter Four. Both leaders and teachers in the study pointed proudly to these commitments and spoke highly of how they are reinforced at regular intervals to ensure that all staff members are on board with the thinking that they represent. Another important aspect of the leader-teacher dynamic is the recognition and welcoming of teacher voice in decision making; while some interview participants spoke of the trust that leaders

place in their teachers to make their own decisions within their classrooms, no one raised the issue of teacher voice specifically. This does not mean that teachers are not being included in making decisions at the school, just that it was not a finding that surfaced in the data.

It was somewhat surprising, yet encouraging, that so many of the leader and teacher responses overall were aligned throughout the semi-structured interviews; due to the existing power differential and differing perspectives of each stakeholder group, it was expected that there would be more differences in responses. However, even with this high degree of agreement, there were several places where there were differences in interpretation. One large gap was between the belief on the part of leaders that the staff was wholly on board with asset-based, non-deficit thinking, when contrasted with the experiences shared by teachers which suggested something different. This gap is explored in more detail below in the recommendations section of this chapter.

Theme Four: Building relationships is important but growing those relationships into partnerships is the goal. Tschannen-Moran (2014) describes the interdependence between home and school and explains that it makes "the establishment of trusting relationships with families an essential task for school leaders" (p. 188). Without the building of trusting relationships at all levels (leader-leader, leader-teacher, leader-family, teacher-teacher, teacher-student, student-student, and teacher-family), this web of interdependence will simply not function. Buchanan and Buchanan (2017) examined existing literature around family engagement and found that, while it is well proven that forming relationships with families is essential for encouraging

their involvement, few educators are prepared for the "intentional development" that this takes; the researchers call the building of meaningful relationships with families the "overlooked piece of the puzzle" (p. 237). A quick review of the data in this study, however, shows that the large majority of participants not only recognize the importance of building relationships between home and school, but have experience in making these relationships a reality. The theme of relationship-building was a through line throughout almost all of the interviews conducted, as well as the events observed and most of the documents analyzed. Leaders and teachers alike value relationships, and in many cases, appear to be building them successfully.

There is a definite difference, however, between building relationships and creating partnerships, and two-way, reciprocal partnerships are the ultimate goal of family engagement. Leithwood and Louis (2012) state "School leaders who want to meaningfully engage parents…need to move past simply viewing external stakeholders as "clients" who deserve information…to actually start viewing parents…as vital partners in the learning process" (p. 100). True partnerships are much more difficult to establish, especially when the partners come from different cultural orientations; Buchanan and Buchanan (2017) explain that "mistrust easily transfers to the educational setting" (p. 240). Cultural barriers, misunderstandings, and language differences can make things more difficult, even though trusting relationships matter most in "distressed communities" (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, p. 212).

Research has revealed that it is not enough to want to involve parents as partners, but rather, there is knowledge and skill required to do so; in the

Buchanan and Buchanan (2017) article, six suggestions for moving from relationships to partnerships are outlined, and all of them have been described in Chapter Four as recognized by study participants as critical to this work. The suggestions include: demonstrating a "shared commitment" to student growth, utilizing a strengths-based perspective and acknowledging the funds of knowledge that students and families bring to the table, building trust between parties which they describe as "a foundational component of any relationship," and maintaining strong, two-way communication between parties (pp. 241-243). Again, all of these strategies were noted and discussed in Chapter Four, and several are discussed in more detail in this chapter.

Theme Five: The work involved both in building trust and engaging families requires an ethic of care, a sense of purpose, and a commitment to reflection and growth in order to be successful and sustained over time.

Ethic of care. While many scholars and philosophers have described the importance of care in education, it was Noddings (1984) who first centered caring "at the heart of the educational system" (Owens & Ennis, 2005, p. 393). This concept of "ethic of care" embraces connections and relationships as central to teaching and learning; Gordon, Benner, and Noddings (1996) define caring as occurring within these relationships and encompassing "a set of relational protection, empowerment, and human community, culture, and possibility" (as cited in Owens & Ennis, 2005, p. 393). Teachers and leaders with an ethic of care show strong commitment and a high degree of sensitivity to their students' needs and demonstrate their caring through both their feeling for their students and by

doing things to promote their success (Owens & Ennis, 2005). Marston (2010) studied the most powerful motivators in the decision of teachers to stay in the classroom and found that "it appears that no matter at what level teaching occurs, there is a general care, concern, and enthusiasm around working with students and seeing them learn and grow" (p. 445). It can be argued that, given the acknowledged challenges of working at Lake Middle School, educators require a strong ethic of care in order to choose to teach or lead there for a sustained period of time.

Data collected in this study supports this argument; in interview after interview teachers and leaders alike described the caring relationships they have developed with colleagues, students, and parents. They detailed the extra work and time put in after hours to make and sustain connections with students and their families, including attending out-of-school events such as soccer games and birthday parties, conducting home visits, making phone calls during the evening and on weekends, and coming in early and staying late to accommodate family schedules. At no time did participants complain about this extra work, but rather it seemed both to be an informal institutional norm and to come from a place of genuine affection. Simply put, staff members at Lake Middle School care about their students and their families and are willing to put in the time and effort to show this care through their actions; this was a consistent message across interviews, observations, and documents collected. If anything, the COVID-19 pandemic seemed to heighten this sense of care, as worry and concern about the well-being of their students and families was top of mind for the large majority of participants interviewed.

Sense of purpose. The data collected in this study also showed that teachers and leaders work at Lake Middle School because it is their choice to do so; most of the interview participants have only worked in highly diverse schools with what might be considered challenging populations prior to coming to Lake Middle School, and they indicated that it has been with intention that they have sought out these professional opportunities. As a group they approach their work with a sense of meaning and purpose that allows them to coalesce around a common mission and vision. While there is turnover each year, participants reported that it is most often of newer teachers. In the end this actually seems to strengthen the staff, as it is a self-sorting process; teachers who are not wholly committed to the work being done at Lake Middle School can find positions elsewhere, while those who stay are aligned with the mindset commitments of the school.

There is a large body of research around teacher retention, with many studies confirming why teachers either stay or leave schools. Several of these studies point to an "inner motivation" that enables teachers to remain both in the profession and/or in challenging school settings (Brunetti, 2006; Carillo & Flores, 2018; Day & Guo, 2009; Williams, 2003). This type of motivation was expressed across the board by study participants, all of whom indicated that they were happy where they were and had no plans to leave Lake Middle School to pursue other opportunities in the near future. Williams (2003) described the sense of purpose felt by committed educators as a "'sacred calling'…they believe that they are doing what they are meant to do" (p. 72); Bennett, Brown, Kirby-Smith, and Severson (2013) also found that "the love the teachers felt for their

profession…[coming] from a sense of calling" was a significant factor in teacher satisfaction and retention. This sense of purpose was expressed by the majority of participants in the study and appears to be an important reason why Lake Middle School is able to retain its most effective teachers and leaders from year to year.

Commitment to reflection and growth. Research also reveals that a large part of a teacher's decision to stay at a challenging school is dependent upon effective and supportive school leadership. Greenlee and Brown (2009) found that the number one most important factor influencing teacher retention in "challenging schools" was having leaders who created a positive school culture, where staff felt supported and where they had opportunities to collaborate and work toward "the development and implementation of a shared vision that places student and faculty learning at the center" (p. 105). Based on all of the data collected in this study, this last sentence could be a description of Lake Middle School. The emphasis on faculty learning through continued professional development dovetails with a focus on growth mindset that was evident throughout the interviews conducted. Participants across the board acknowledged both successes and room for growth, and it was clear that this type of thinking is encouraged at the school. A culture that encourages and facilitates reflection among both its teachers and leaders results in stronger personal and institutional growth; this type of reflection was seen throughout the interviews with Lake Middle School staff. Most recently, the changes that have been implemented by leaders and teachers in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic are evidence that a reflective culture enables adaptation and growth when needed.

More specifically, critical self-reflection, as described by Khalifa (2018) is a hallmark of culturally responsive school leadership and instruction. Becoming a critically self-reflective educator allows for the growth of "critical consciousness" of personal "values, beliefs, and/or dispositions" when it comes to working with traditionally marginalized students and families and awareness of how these beliefs may be impacting practice (p. 60). These conversations appear to have begun at Lake Middle School with the implementation of the Cultural Proficiency workshops described in Chapter Four, with definite room for continued work. However, Khalifa suggests that it is not enough for individuals to be critically self-reflective, but rather that "we must also critically examine the role of our school programs, departments, hiring practices, enrichment courses, and other school structures" in order to assess how they may be "reproducing oppressive practices" (p. 60). With an eye on how these structures are impacting families, and their engagement or non-engagement with the school, this type of more systemic critical self-reflection will be key to Lake Middle School's future progress in this area.

Implications for Conceptual Framework and Future Research

Conceptual Framework. As detailed in Chapter Three, this study was predicated on a conceptual framework that suggested a positive relationship between culturally responsive school leadership practices, trust, and the engagement of Latino families. Findings from the study support this framing, by demonstrating how culturally responsive middle school leaders enact practices that foster trust both among their staff and between home and school, and how this trust in turn serves to encourage the engagement of Latino families in their

children's education. In addition, it is possible to view the COVID-19 pandemic as an unexpected force that, when applied to the gears of the conceptual framework, caused them to spin at a faster pace as school leaders, teachers, and parents all scrambled to meet the heightened demands on home-school communication and partnership.

The resulting adaptations and shifts in the educational setting during this time in some ways acted as a lubricant, enabling the gears to move more smoothly as stakeholders worked together to ensure a positive outcome for students during an unprecedented time in our nation's collective history. It is interesting to note that Tschannen-Moran (2014) identifies trust itself as a lubricant, explaining that it acts both as glue "that holds things together," and as a lubricant "that reduces friction and facilitates smooth operations" (p. 44). It might be argued that without the lubricant of trust in place before a crisis such as the pandemic, the gears would not have turned at all, no matter how strong the outside forces.

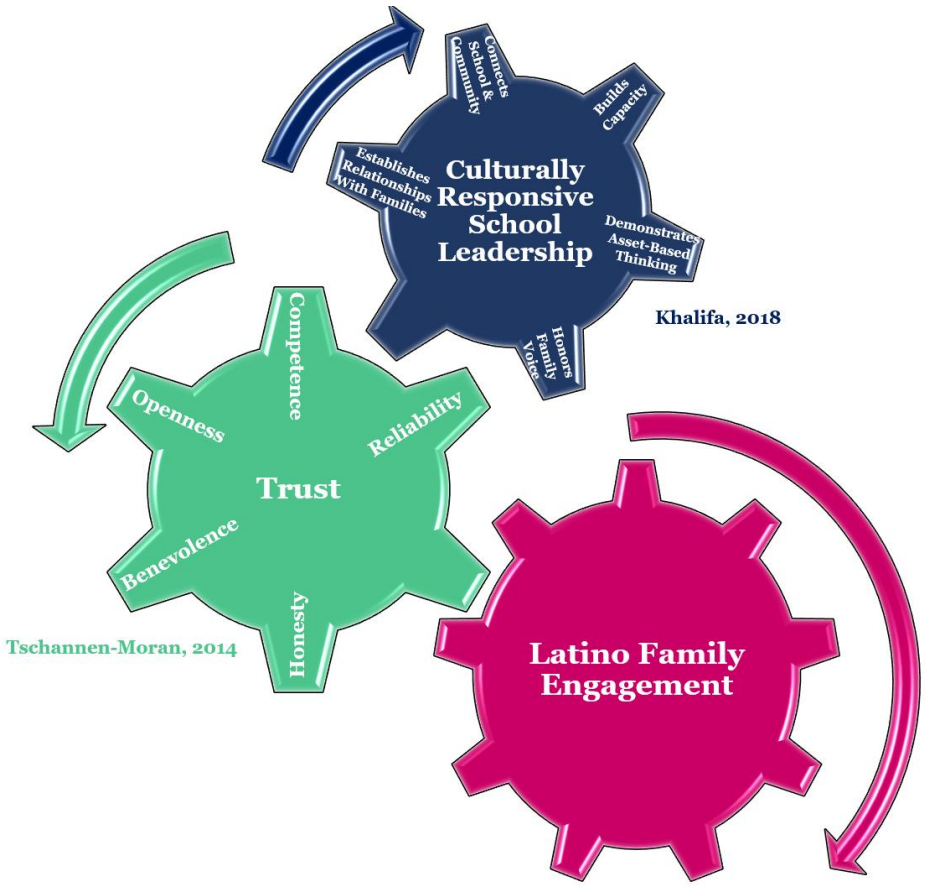


Figure 3. Original conceptual framework as conceptualized at the start of the study. Each spoke on the two main gears in the conceptual framework (culturally responsive leadership practices and trust), represents a different concept or practice; these are summarized in Table 1 in Chapter Three.

Through interview responses, observations, and document analysis, a picture was painted of leaders who enact culturally responsive school leadership through the formation of positive connections with the community, the establishment of respectful relationships with staff, students, and families, the recognition of the need for capacity building, and the welcoming and honoring of family voice in decision making. The building blocks of family engagement, detailed in Chapter Four and extracted from the data collected, map almost

perfectly to the culturally responsive best leadership practices represented on that gear.

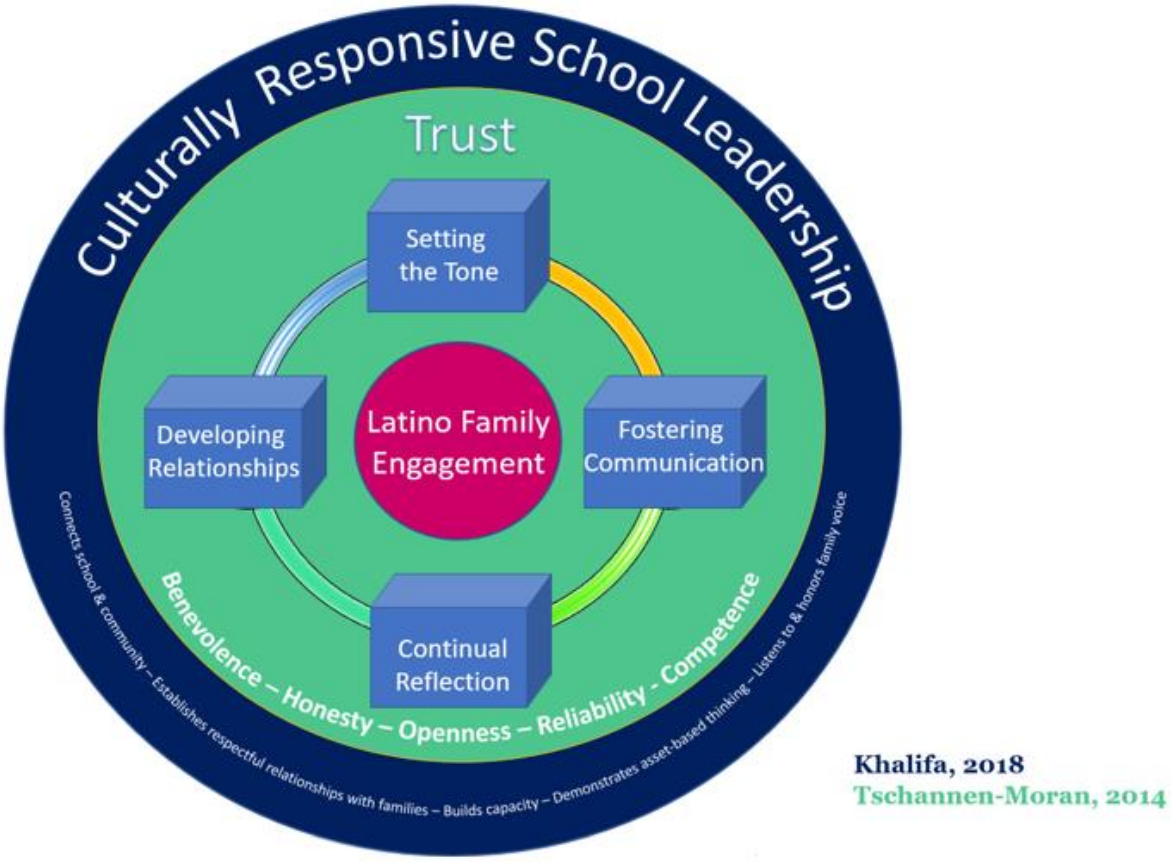


Figure 4. Revised conceptual framework, reconfigured following data collection and analysis. In this revision, instead of being represented as gears, culturally responsive leadership and trust are shown as concentric layers; this emphasizes the importance of cultural responsiveness as a necessary precursor to establishing trust with Latino families, and also underscores the idea of trust as permeating all aspects of engagement. The four identified building blocks of engagement are connected and surrounding the ultimate focus: Latino parent engagement.

In all, data analysis revealed a picture of Lake Middle School as a trusting school community. Tschannen-Moran (2014) suggests that "when a culture of trust prevails within the faculty at a school, students and parents may benefit as the recipients of this trust as well" (p. 123). This underscores the importance of both leader-teacher and teacher-teacher trust in this dynamic. In addition, Tschannen-Moran (2014) posits that widespread trust within a school can lead to a cooperative culture that allows for a strong, effective professional learning community (PLC). This is particularly true at Lake Middle School as during the 2020-2021 school year the school was recognized nationally as a Model PLC School; this is a title that is granted to schools that present evidence of improved student learning along with a minimum of three years of successful PLC implementation (Solution Tree, n.d.).

Overall, the findings and themes which emerged from this study are aligned with both the proposed and revised conceptual frameworks, exemplified by the culturally responsive leadership practices enacted by school leaders, the trust noted by study participants, and the relationships between home and school which were fostered as a result of this trust.

Future Research. It had initially been the goal of the researcher to include parent voice in this study, aiming to create effective ways to "reframe relationships by creating programs, initiatives, and strategies *with* instead of *for* families" (Weiss, Lopez, & Caspe, 2018, p. 13). Unfortunately, the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic did not allow for their inclusion. As one of the three key stakeholder groups in family engagement, family perspectives should be solicited in any future research on this topic, especially since as Musser (2004) describes,

dramatic differences can be seen in the perceptions and attitudes of these different stakeholder groups and "this condition is exacerbated when teachers and family members come from different cultures, races, or class backgrounds" (p. 2). Since family engagement research is traditionally based on the perspectives of educators, it is especially important to solicit the voices and opinions of the parents involved in these potential partnerships.

Ginn (1994) states that families are "somewhat impersonalized; they are 'objectified'; it is difficult to think of parents as living, breathing humans or know what involvement means for them" (p. 39, as cited in Musser, 2004, p. 2). Hearing and validating the voices of parents in a future study is one way to combat this tendency to objectify families rather than to view them as equal partners in the education of their children; asking Latino parents specifically what trust means to them, and how they view the role of the school leader in fostering this trust, would be a step in the direction of open communication and collaboration. developing a richer understanding of the realities of families. With this new understanding, schools would then able to move from "family engagement practices that *educators* think families need and want to ones based on what *families* desire and value" (Weiss et al., 2018, p. 13).

Recommendations for Practice

Five recommendations for practice follow from these findings. They are each grounded in both the data collected and analyzed in this study and the extensive literature base detailed in Chapter Two. Though not exhaustive, they do offer a starting point for the middle school leader eager to foster stronger

engagement among her Latino families, particularly in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era.

Recommendation One: Acknowledge and challenge deficit thinking and embrace an asset-based approach on a schoolwide level. Researchers are unanimous in stressing the importance of asset-based thinking when working with minority students and their families (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Valencia & Black, 2002). In contrast, a deficit perspective "tends to blame the person or group of people from a specific culture for their perceived failure" (Sebolt, 2018). Gonzales and Gabel (2017) suggest that "deficit assumptions" can "[undermine] family strengths while marginalizing the very knowledge constructs that could aid school success" (p. 71). These strengths, or "funds of knowledge," represent cultural knowledge and experiences that students and families bring with them from home to school (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Sebolt, 2018).

Recognizing and welcoming these funds of knowledge becomes especially critical in a minority-majority school like Lake Middle School, where deficit thinking can block everything from successful relationship building between school and home to student achievement (Garcia & Guerra, 2004). Khalifa (2018) uses the term "deficitizing" to describe when community characteristics are described negatively and then used as a source of blame; he suggests that culturally responsive school leaders should instead follow the lead of a teacher he quotes who urged, 'Don't tell me what they *cannot* do based on what happens in the community; tell me what they *can* do based on what happens in the community'" (p. 157).

Leaders and teachers alike largely demonstrated an understanding of the importance of embracing an asset-based perspective through their interview responses. The former principal explained:

> Every teacher at Lake Middle School knows who we are as a school, knows our population, the percentages, breakdowns, all that kind of stuff, knows how we address the academic, social, the emotional, the behavioral aspects of being a middle schooler. And all recognize the role that parents have in this partnership. They value it, and yet at the same time they also recognize the challenges of making it a reality. But you'll never hear a Lake staff member say, “If only the parent, this. If only the student, that.” No, we don't talk like that. You will never hear that. We will find a way, and we don't make excuses for anything that we do when we don't meet our goals.

However, when examined more closely, several leaders and teachers confirmed that things were not quite as clear-cut as the principal had suggested. Instead, teachers and leaders alike consistently shared stories of staff members blaming a student’s behavioral and academic issues on a family’s lack of involvement. An assistant principal observed:

> I've heard it on both ends where teachers want to sort of almost blame the victim to a degree. And when they talk about the kid, of course they're bringing in that, "I can never reach the parent. I've tried to, left messages or whatever, and I never hear back. Or I'll write notes in the student's agenda and I never see something back from it." And just sort of use that as a reason why they can't reach the kid. It's almost an excuse as to why they're unwilling to spend additional time working with the kid.

Numerous teachers shared a similar sentiment, such as the teacher who commented, “There's a lot of misunderstanding about families. I hear a lot of teachers say that their parents don't care or they're not raising them right or that they can't be bothered or something like that.”

In addition to those who seem to be seeking excuses are teachers whose sympathy for their students may be well-intentioned but misplaced. A teacher explained:

> I think some teachers kind of view themselves as like saviors. Like we're helping these poor kids who have such rough lives. Like they assume that they're just all having horrible situations right now, which I'm sure it's true for some of them, but it's like they're not seeing the positive things that their families bring too. So, if it was more two-sided, I feel like we would see the assets that they bring, that our families and our students, like they have a lot of assets.

The literature is clear that when educators perceive that parents "don't care," they tend to lower their expectations of engagement. Lowered expectations can lead to a negative loop of less frequent outreach on the part of the school and diminished response on the part of the family, which serves to reinforce the impression that parents are uninvolved. This belief allows educators to avoid responsibility for changing their practice and instead puts the burden of blame on the parents (Guerra & Nelson, 2013).

While it is critical for school leaders to set the expectation that all students and families should be viewed through an asset-based lens, it is not enough. It is clear that more education around deficit thinking needs to be done schoolwide, to ensure that all staff members not only understand its meaning and importance but are actually able to demonstrate asset-based thinking in practice. In their urban school study referenced earlier, Barnyak and McNelly (2009) found that this disconnect between understanding and enactment was prevalent when it came to engaging families. They suggested, "Although teachers and administrators have strong beliefs about parent involvement and its importance in strengthening student achievement, what they practice in their schools and classrooms is not congruent with these beliefs" (p. 33). Strengthening practice around asset-based thinking and practice is a recommended area of future focus for professional development at Lake Middle School.

Recommendation Two: Reframe engagement by placing importance on both school-based and home-based involvement. As explained in Chapter One, the definition of family engagement is far from absolute. Instead, what engagement is and what it is not can be interpreted in a myriad of ways and understandings are constantly evolving. Furthermore, educators tend to define involvement through the prism of experiences with European American and middle income families, meaning that "our expectation of parental involvement in schooling is framed through a lens tinted by race and social class" (Ceballo, Huerta, & Epstein-Ngo, 2010, p. 297).

Even before the virtual shifts of the COVID-19 pandemic era, it was becoming clear that getting bodies into the school building was not a definitive measure of a successful program; rather, there was an increased focus on relationships and the conversations and work being done at home. An assistant principal shared his own journey with understanding this change, reflecting:

> I would say successful family engagement, I could sum it up in one word and that's just presence. I used to think physical presence was the only thing that mattered. Thinking as a young educator, it was all about "We have to have parents here, we have to be able to interact with them." I still think that interaction is the most important thing. But now I understand that really presence can mean anything, especially given the situation we're in right now. If I can talk to you on the phone, I don't care if I have to use a translator. I don't care if it's at night, or early in the morning. Presence means communication. So, getting parents involved can be online, or on the phone, or actually physically being present. But either way, they are connected and interacting. I think that is the absolute definition in my book of what successful family engagement looks like.

Research backs up this sentiment, showing that most families engage with their children's education through a combination of what Lawson (2003) calls school-centric and community-centric involvement. Simply put, all of the

conversations and activities that happen outside of school between children and their parents that contribute to growth and learning should not be discounted. Shumow and Schmidt (2014) posit that, specifically at the middle school level, engagement includes “any parental behavior that shows adolescents that parents have a vested interest in their education and future” (as cited in Jensen & Minke, 2017, p. 169).

In terms of Latino families more particularly, Hill and Taylor (2004) confirm that parents from ethnic minorities, especially those whose primary language is not English, have the tendency to be more involved at home than at school. Zarate (2007) grouped parent perceptions of engagement into two categories, “academic involvement” and “life participation,” and found that Latino parents mentioned life participation more frequently than academic involvement when asked to define parental involvement in education. Her study confirmed that Latino parents generally seek to balance the academic education that their children receive at school with the moral guidance and social education that they can provide at home.

Unfortunately, school leaders and teachers cannot see inside the homes of their students to observe community-centric involvement or life participation happening on a regular basis, so they may form judgments based on an apparent lack of school-centric or academic involvement. In addition, as it is only possible to measure what can be seen, current measures of engagement do not reflect the variations that can be cultural, developmental, or in the case of middle school Latino families, both cultural and developmental. This disconnect appears to have impacted the perspective of many of this study’s participants.

In this study's semi-structured interviews, it became apparent that the majority of participants view family engagement as something that happens at school. Most of the teachers and several of the school leaders spoke of ways to bring parents into the building when asked to define family involvement, sharing stories of Open Houses, Back to School Nights, schoolwide family events such as International Nights, and parent-teacher conferences. Mentions of home-based engagement largely revolved around classes for parents or other ways to build parental capacity; the danger with this type of thinking and programming is that, over time, diverse parents can get the message that they are "to be taught and fixed rather than understood" (Daniel-White, 2002, p. 40) which does not engender trust between home and school. Helping staff to reframe their understanding of family engagement by widening their lenses to see a more inclusive definition is a second recommendation for future professional development at Lake Middle School.

Recommendation Three: Take care not to mistake deference to authority for trust. Further complicating the trust dynamic for Latino families is the cultural importance of the concept of *respeto*, or respect. Young (1998) contends that the "generalized deference" that can dominate the interactions of Latino parents with teachers and school leaders due to the need to show respect can be misinterpreted as trust (p. 6). This seemingly inherent trust was mentioned in almost all of the interviews conducted as part of this study, but it was not clear if participants recognized the line between deference and trust; in fact, the two seemed to be synonymous for most participants. For example, one teacher observed:

> The message I get from families is, "I'll follow your lead. You're the expert." I think that's one of the things I love about working with these students and their families is that they definitely show teachers a lot of respect and that they trust us completely.

Another teacher had a similar observation, sharing "These parents, whenever I talk to them, they're just like, "You're the expert. You do what's best for my student." They just trust me."

Similarly, an assistant principal shared a more detailed observation on this type of "trust":

> If I'm to make a very blanket statement, trust is very natural for the Latino community. They trust schools, if we're talking just very, very big picture. My view of it is not necessarily trying to build the trust, but it's not to lose the trust. And so, I know that 99% of the time for the family that I've never met, they're going to come in and they're going to trust the school. And they're going to trust the expertise, and the people at the school as professionals. And so, I better not misuse that trust. I'm assuming I already have that trust. And now it's just about really turning that trust into a partnership, which is a difficult thing to do.

Miller, Lewis, Valentine, Fish, and Robinson (2016) studied teacher and parent perceptions of their relationships to each other and found that, compared with non-Latino whites, Latino parents were actually less likely to perceive their children's teachers positively. The teachers in the study, however, overwhelmingly gave the Spanish-speaking parents the highest ratings on the scale; the researchers posit that these results "may thus be driven in part by teachers' perceptions that these parents respect them, support their work as professionals, and do not have complaints about their children's education" (p. 57). This lack of alignment between perceptions might be due to a misunderstanding around the differences between deference, respect, and trust. Young (1998) explains "many school personnel may mistakenly believe that they

have developed parental trust when in actuality, what they are experiencing is parental deference to authority" (p. 8). While a seemingly subtle difference, Young suggests that more awareness and understanding of cultural factors by school personnel can help to prevent this type of misunderstanding, so that true trust can be recognized and nurtured. This is recommended as an additional area of growth for staff.

Recommendation Four: Acknowledge that newer teachers need more support with this work and find ways to provide this support. Perhaps in part due to the many challenges of working at such a large and diverse school, Lake Middle School tends to experience high teacher turnover with many young and less experienced teachers joining the faculty each year. This in and of itself does not appear to be a problem, especially in light of this comment from a new teacher on the 2019 End of Year Staff Survey:

> Handling new staff is definitely a strong suit at Lake. Links were shared over the summer (and remained active to remind myself when I forgot something mid-year), mentors were available to answer questions, staff is friendly and welcoming.

However, with the positive comes the negative; on the same survey, a more experienced staff member wrote, "Why is there such a high turnover of teachers. Can we do better to nurture new teachers to ensure that they stay?" It is quite possible that the challenges of working with diverse families can be added to the list of factors that might be driving away new hires despite the administration's best efforts. These teachers, though possibly fresh from their coursework and knowledgeable about best practices, may be more uncertain about working with parents and might need additional support to be successful. One teacher shared:

> I do think that there are a lot of young teachers at Lake and I mean, I was this way once too, when I was in my first year. It's kind of daunting to be like, "Oh my God, I have to make a phone call home." It's scary and there's no reason to be scared, but it's scary. And Lake does have a lot of young teachers, like a lot of first and second years, which is great. And it is a big part of the reason why our school is always growing and learning. But I do think that there is sometimes a little bit of hesitation [when contacting parents]. It sounds easy, but it's not when you are a young teacher.

While many of these teachers are recent graduates of teacher preparation programs, the reality is that most have not been prepared to engage culturally diverse families. In the 2005 *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher*, new teachers ranked engaging families as both their greatest challenge and the area for which they were least prepared in their first year, ranking it higher than classroom management; 31% of all new teachers ranked it as their area of highest need, as did 40% of new teachers placed in urban schools (Markow, Martin, & Hirsch, 2005, p. 5). More recent studies have confirmed this lack of teacher confidence and dissatisfaction (Bartels & Eskow, 2010; Caspe, Lopez, Chu, & Weiss, 2011; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Levine, 2006). This is in spite of the inclusion of family engagement in the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) standards (2008): through their pre-service coursework, teacher candidates are expected to "consider the school, family, and community contexts" (p. 18) and be able to "foster relationships with school colleagues, parents and families, and agencies in the larger community to support students' learning and well-being" (p. 22).

While the intent to teach this content is there, "teacher preparation programs have not been able to incorporate more than minimal attention to this critical area into an already ambitious curricula" (Bartels & Eskow, 2010, p. 46),

and when they do include the information it is usually incorporated into a pre-existing course without opportunities for real-life practice. Without the opportunity to apply these skills in authentic situations, candidates graduate feeling unprepared and intimidated to engage with families in any meaningful way.

While it can be inferred from the staff feedback above that the school has a new teacher induction program in place, it is recommended that the administration pay particular attention moving forward to preparing new teachers to engage with families. Pushor and Amendt (2018) discuss how important it is to teach these skills to teachers explicitly, but also stress the importance of "scaffolding authentic experiences for teachers that occur with parents and in community contexts which are unfamiliar or unlike their own lived experience" and then exploring those experiences through readings and collaboration with colleagues (p. 208). By recognizing that many of the expectations of parents held by schools today are "reflective of both the teachers' 'whiteness' and their 'middle-classness'" (p. 206), through authentic practice teachers can begin to "cultivate and grow dispositions of openness and positive recognition of the other" (Reay, 2008, p. 1005 as cited in Pushor & Amendt, 2018, p. 207). Such a shift in thinking would be beneficial for all staff, but it is particularly critical for newer teachers.

Recommendation Five: Embrace the silver linings of the COVID-19 pandemic and work to apply the lessons learned moving forward. With the end of the pandemic will come a chance to reset and "reimagine" school on many levels, including the future of family engagement

(Shaikh, 2021). As the top priority for many educational leaders will be mitigating any learning gaps that were exacerbated during this time, families will no doubt be asked to take a role in helping their children at home. By utilizing and expanding successful programs and strategies that were created out of necessity during the pandemic, family engagement efforts will hopefully prove to be a key element of a return to normalcy, whatever form that may take. As Shaikh (2021) states, "Since this is the first time many parents are seeing up close what and how their children are learning, a new space has been created which has brought schools and families closer than ever before." The question facing school leaders at Lake Middle School and beyond will be how to best utilize that space moving forward. To return to business as usual would surely be a waste of this opportunity to create something new; instead the next era in education will be more about "learning realignment," as schools strive to "readjust, rethink, and repurpose" their educational goals (Hooker, 2021). It is recommended that school leaders include family engagement in this process of realignment.

Hattie (2021) and Jensen (2020) are among the many researchers pondering what the possibilities this shift in priorities might hold. Instead of returning to old roles and modes of communication, the newest research suggests that "enhanced parent engagement with curriculum, collaboration with learning, and transparent information exchanges" might be more effective (Jensen, 2021, p. 43). Hill and Gayle (2020) offer practical strategies to consider, including being intentional in the type of engagement expected of families in the immediate aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead of asking parents to supplement instruction or introduce new content or academic work at home, they posit that

"schools will be more successful…when the asks focus on helping students establish good work habits and time management" (p. 4). They also highlight the critical importance of fostering effective and authentic communication between home and school in order to build trust and buy-in, as well as ensuring that diverse perspectives are invited into the conversation around future plans and priorities.

Additionally, and within the realm of reevaluating and reprioritizing all of the competing demands within a school community in this new light, it is recommended that family engagement be embedded more formally within the core structures of the school as suggested by Pushor and Amendt (2018) and described above. This may include situating the goal of successful family engagement more prominently in documents such as the SIIP, on the agendas of collaborative teams and schoolwide staff meetings, and as an ongoing focus in schoolwide professional development efforts. It is essential for school leaders to "foreground parent engagement as a conscious and ongoing priority for the school" (Pushor & Amendt, 2018) in order to move this work forward.

Summary

In this chapter, connections were drawn between the findings of the study and the conceptual framework which informed its design. Through the description of themes that emerged from the data, and their connection to the strong research base detailed in Chapter Two, recommendations for strengthening and improving practice were offered. It is the hope of the researcher that these findings and recommendations will lead to increased

engagement of Latino families not only at Lake Middle School, but at middle schools throughout the Newport County Public Schools system.

Action Communication Products

In order to ensure that the findings and recommendations of this study are shared both with the leadership of Lake Middle School and central office leadership in the Newport County Public Schools system, three action communication products were created. First is a briefing memo for the principal of Lake Middle School to share the major results of the study as well as suggestions for next steps in strengthening the engagement of Latino families at the school level. Next, this briefing memo was adapted to be shared with Dr. Preston, the NCPS sponsor of this research study, who serves as the Executive Principal for School Improvement for the region in which Lake Middle School is located. This memo is designed to thank him for his sponsorship, apprise him of the study's findings, and initiate a conversation about how the lessons learned from the study can best be shared with middle school leadership throughout the school system. Finally, a PowerPoint presentation was created in order to share the salient points of the data collected and suggestions for future practice by school leaders and teachers; these slides will be attached to both memos, with the clarification that the researcher is available to present the findings if there is interest.

Action Communication 1: School Leader Briefing Memo

MEMORANDUM

To: Principal Thompson, Lake Middle School

From: Rachel Sweeney, Ed.D., University of Virginia

Subject: Creating a Culture of Trust with Latino Families: A Review of Major Findings and Recommendations

Dear Principal Thompson,

Welcome to Newport County Public Schools (NCPS) and to Lake Middle School (LMS). I understand that you are coming to your new position with a focus on creating a positive and inclusive environment for all students, with a specific emphasis on outreach to families. I am hopeful that my recently completed research study on the intersection of trust and the engagement of Latino families at LMS will aid you in your efforts. In this memorandum I highlight a summary of the themes and recommendations from my study, with an attached PowerPoint presentation that can be shared with your leadership team at your discretion; I am also available to present to your staff if you feel that it would be helpful. My contact information is included, and I would love to begin a dialogue on ways to foster increased engagement at LMS as we move forward into a post-COVID-19 environment.

As a teacher in the NCPS system for more than twenty years, with most of that time spent in Latino-majority schools and classrooms, I have long been interested in the power of engaging Latino families in their children's learning. As a student in the University of Virginia's administration and supervision doctoral program, I was fortunate to be given the opportunity to investigate this interest in depth through the development of a capstone research study which looked at the importance of trust in the home-school dynamic, and which was based on three main research questions: the first sought to understand how both middle school leaders and teachers define trust in the context of school-family relationships, while the second question asked if these same stakeholders viewed trust as a critical building block of family engagement. Finally, the third question examined the policies and practices enacted by a middle school leader to establish a trusting community.

To answer these questions, I conducted an in-depth, qualitative case study of leaders and teachers at LMS from February through September of 2020. LMS was selected as an exemplar middle school in the NCPS system, with a Latino-majority student population, a history of strong leadership, and a commitment to engaging families. Through semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis I explored how middle school leaders create a culture of trust

between leaders, teachers, students, and parents that fosters the engagement of Latino families.

Data analysis revealed the following major themes:

1. Trust is the foundation of all aspects of family engagement, rather than standing as an independent construct.

2. Leaders and teachers each contribute to the building of trust but in different, yet equally critical, ways.

3. Successful family engagement requires an aligned and committed staff.

4. Building relationships is important but growing those relationships into partnerships is the goal.

5. The work involved both in building trust and engaging families requires an ethic of care, a sense of purpose, and a commitment to reflection and growth in order to be successful and sustained over time.

While this was a small-scale study whose results are not necessarily generalizable to a broader population, its findings nevertheless both validate the hard work that the leaders and teachers at LMS are already doing and identify potential areas for growth. Analysis of the data collected suggests recommendations that might positively impact both your school and other similar middle schools in the Newport County Public Schools system. These recommendations include:

1. Acknowledge and challenge deficit thinking and embrace an asset-based approach on a schoolwide level.

2. Reframe engagement by placing importance on both school-based and home-based involvement.

3. Take care not to mistake deference to authority for trust.

4. Acknowledge that newer teachers need more support with this work and find ways to provide this support.

5. Embrace the silver linings of the COVID-19 pandemic and work to apply the lessons learned moving forward.

At your convenience, I would welcome an opportunity to discuss these themes and recommendations in more depth and answer any questions that you might have. I look forward to speaking with you regarding how, moving forward, the findings of this study might be leveraged in order to build upon the sturdy foundation of trust and engagement already created at Lake Middle School. Please feel free to contact me at any time at rws7f@virginia.edu or 555-555-5555.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Action Communication 2: Central Office Briefing Memo

MEMORANDUM

To: Dr. Preston, Executive Principal for School Improvement, Newport County Public Schools

From: Rachel Sweeney, Ed.D., University of Virginia

Subject: Creating a Culture of Trust with Latino Families: A Review of Major Findings and Recommendations

Dear Dr. Preston,

Thank you once again for sponsoring my research study, *Creando Confianza*: How Middle School Leaders Creature Cultures of Trust to Foster the Engagement of Latino Families. I am so pleased to share this memorandum with you, in which I highlight a summary of the study's themes and recommendations, with an attached PowerPoint presentation that can be shared at your discretion; I am also available to present to interested individuals or teams if you feel that it would be helpful. I would love to continue our dialogue on ways to foster increased engagement at the middle school level, especially as we move forward into a post-COVID-19 environment.

As a teacher in the NCPS system for more than twenty years, with most of that time spent in Latino-majority schools and classrooms, I have long been interested in the power of engaging Latino families in their children's learning. As a student in the University of Virginia's administration and supervision doctoral program, I was fortunate to be given the opportunity to investigate this interest in depth through the development of a capstone research study, which was based on three main research questions: the first sought to understand how both middle school leaders and teachers define trust in the context of school-family relationships, while the second question asked if these same stakeholders viewed trust as a critical building block of family engagement. Finally, the third question examined the policies and practices enacted by a middle school leader to establish a trusting community.

To answer these questions, I conducted an in-depth, qualitative case study of leaders and teachers at Lake Middle School (LMS) from February through September of 2020. With your guidance I selected LMS as an exemplar middle school in the NCPS system, with a Latino-majority student population, a history of strong leadership, and a commitment to engaging families. Through semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis I explored how middle school leaders create a culture of trust between leaders, teachers, students, and parents that fosters the engagement of Latino families.

Data analysis revealed the following major themes:

1. Trust is the foundation of all aspects of family engagement, rather than standing as an independent construct.

2. Leaders and teachers each contribute to the building of trust but in different, yet equally critical, ways.

3. Successful family engagement requires an aligned and committed staff.

4. Building relationships is important but growing those relationships into partnerships is the goal.

5. The work involved both in building trust and engaging families requires an ethic of care, a sense of purpose, and a commitment to reflection and growth in order to be successful and sustained over time.

While this was a small-scale study whose results are not necessarily generalizable to a broader population, its findings nevertheless both validate the hard work that the leaders and teachers at LMS are already doing and identify potential areas for growth. Analysis of the data collected suggests recommendations that might positively impact both LMS and other similar middle schools in the Newport County Public Schools system. These recommendations include:

1. Acknowledge and challenge deficit thinking and embrace an asset-based approach on a schoolwide level.

2. Reframe engagement by placing importance on both school-based and home-based involvement.

3. Take care not to mistake deference to authority for trust.

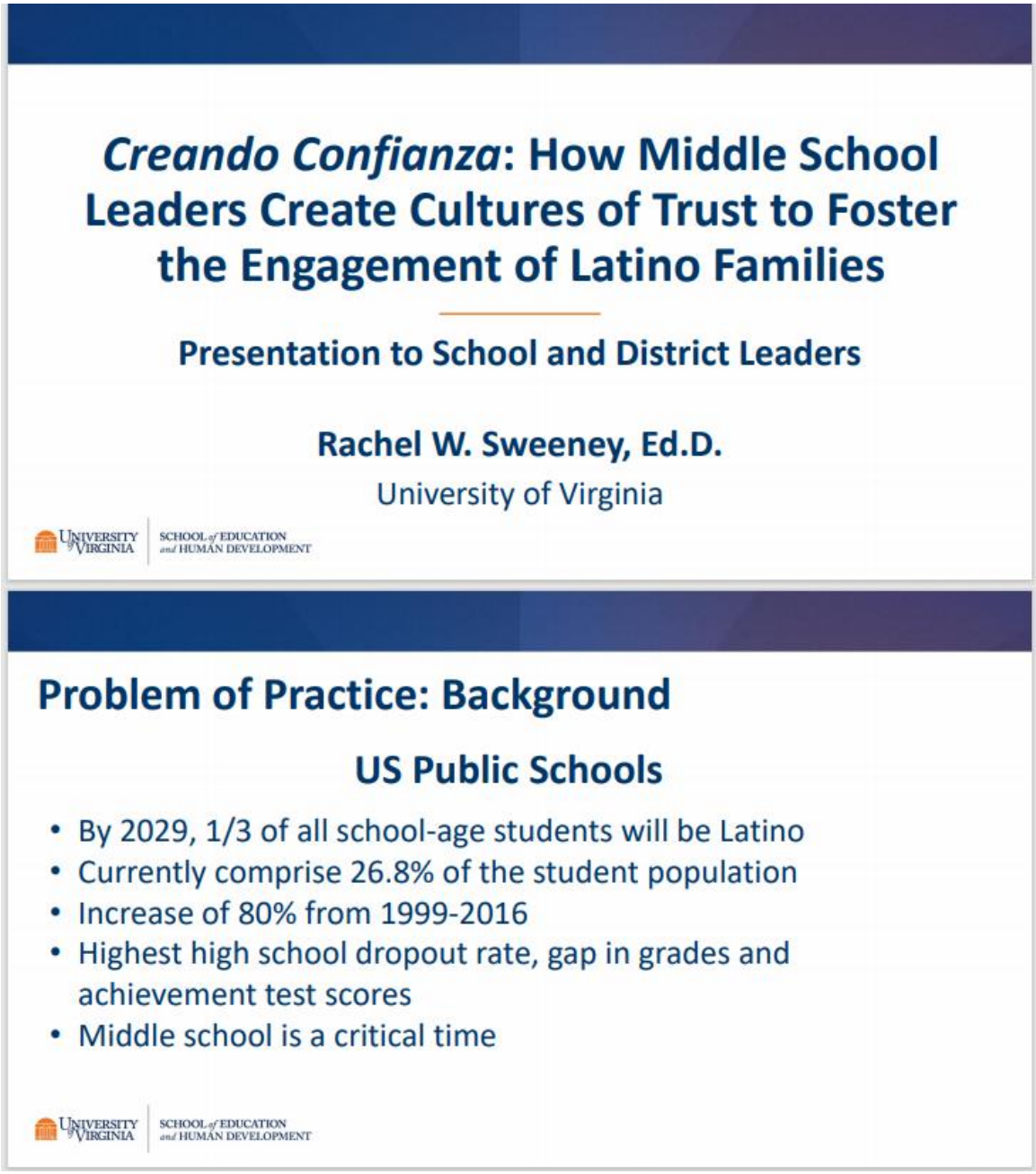
4. Acknowledge that newer teachers need more support with this work and find ways to provide this support.

5. Embrace the silver linings of the COVID-19 pandemic and work to apply the lessons learned moving forward.

At your convenience, I would welcome an opportunity to discuss these themes and recommendations in more depth and answer any questions that you might have. I look forward to speaking with you regarding how, moving forward, the findings of this study might be leveraged to assist other middle school leaders in our system who might be searching for ways to foster family engagement. Please feel free to contact me at any time at rws7f@virginia.edu or 555-555-5555.

Once again, thank you for your support of this study. I greatly appreciate your time and attention.

Action Communication 3: Presentation to School and District Teams



Problem of Practice: Background

Newport County Public Schools

- Large, suburban east coast school district; more than 180,000 students
- More than 29 percent of students are English Language Learners, speaking more than 200 different languages
- 26.8% of the student population is Latino
- Persistent achievement gap between Latino students and students from other groups

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Problem of Practice:

Family engagement can be utilized as a lever for creating more equitable opportunities for our Latino students.

How can middle school leaders build trust with these families in order to facilitate their engagement?

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Purpose of the Study

- Explore the perceptions of leaders & teachers about the building of trust between home and school.
- Understand the intersection of trust and family engagement at the middle school level.
- Assist leaders in identifying effective ways to build trust with Latino families in order to…

Foster engagement among Latino families at the middle school level.

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Research Questions

Primary research question:
How does a middle school leader create a culture of trust (between leaders, teachers, and parents) that fosters the engagement of Latino families?

Sub-question 1: How do middle school leaders and teachers define trust in the context of school-family relationships?

Sub-question 2: Do middle school leaders and teachers view trust as one of the critical building blocks of family engagement?

Sub-question 3: What policies and practices does a middle school leader use to establish trust with Latino families?

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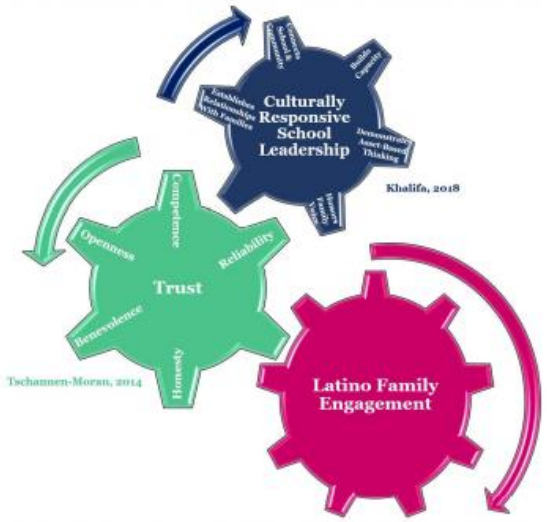
Conceptual Framework



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Study Design: Setting

Qualitative Case Study at Lake Middle School

- Large, suburban public middle school; Grades 6, 7, & 8
- Diverse school: students from more than 60 countries, speak 24+ languages
- Latino-majority population (+51%)
- Leadership identified as culturally responsive/equity-minded

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Study Design: Data Collection (February-September 2020)

13 semi-structured interviews
- 2 principals (1 former, 1 acting)
- 4 assistant principals
- 7 teacher leaders, including:
  - 2 Equity Lead teachers
  - 2 Department Chairs
  - 1 Parent Liaison

More than 50 documents collected & analyzed

Including:
- Weekly home-school electronic newsletters
- School Innovation & Improvement Plans (SIIPs)
- End of Year Staff Survey
- PTA minutes
- Documents related to district & state-wide policies & initiatives

8 virtual events observed
- 3 school-sponsored parent events (town halls & family information sessions)
- 2 region-wide parent town halls
- 3 PTA meetings (parent-run)

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Study Design: Data Analysis

Data analysis included six cycles of memoing, coding, and synthesis.

Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Cycle 1 – Initial read-through of interview transcripts; primarily listening and memoing

Cycle 2 – Clean-up of interview transcripts, marking of notable passages and quotes; more detailed memoing

Cycle 3 – Deductive coding from initial codebook and identification of new inductive codes (using NVivo software)

Cycle 4 – Naming of categories emerging from patterns and trends in the data (selective coding); identification of themes (theoretical coding)

Cycle 5 – Analysis of documents and observation protocols; memoing, analysis by code, identification of patterns (Part 1)

Cycle 6 – Analysis of documents and observation protocols; mapping of patterns to already identified themes (Part 2)

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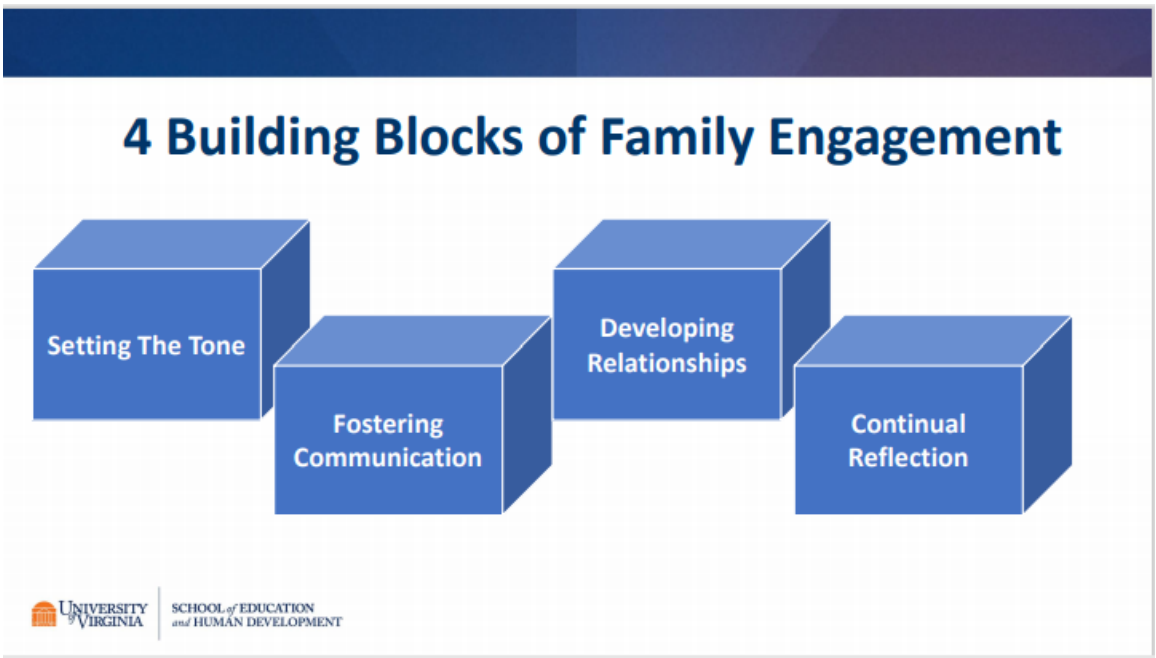
4 Building Blocks of Family Engagement
Setting The Tone
Fostering Communication
Developing Relationships
Continual Reflection
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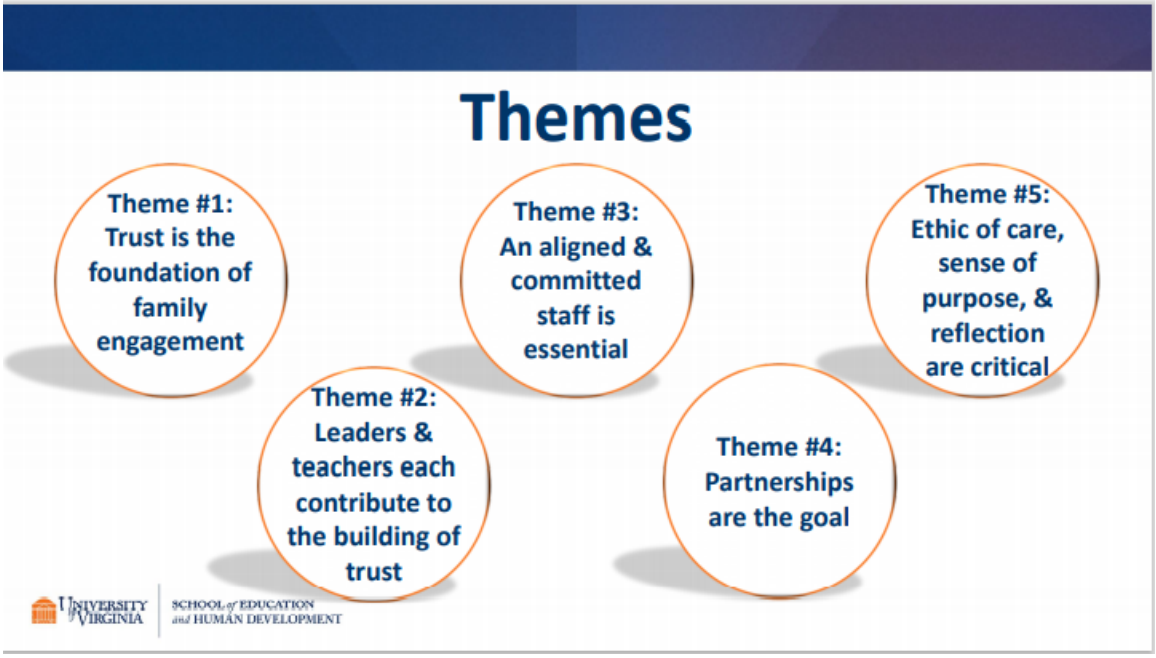
Themes
Theme #1: Trust is the foundation of family engagement
Theme #2: Leaders & teachers each contribute to the building of trust
Theme #3: An aligned & committed staff is essential
Theme #4: Partnerships are the goal
Theme #5: Ethic of care, sense of purpose, & reflection are critical
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Theme #1: Trust is the foundation of family engagement

Theme 1:
Trust is the foundation of all aspects of family engagement, rather than standing as an independent construct.

Participants did not view trust as a building block of family engagement, as originally conceptualized; instead, they saw it as a thread that runs through each of the elements that foster it.

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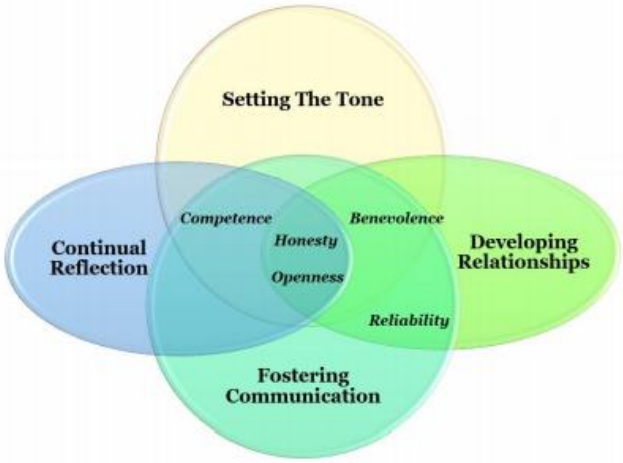

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Theme #2: Leaders & teachers each contribute to the building of trust

Theme 2:
Leaders and teacher each contribute to the building of trust but in different, yet equally critical, ways.

Building trust in a school community starts simultaneously from both the top, in the form of the organizational intentions set by leadership, and from the bottom, in the form of the relationships built and trust nurtured by teachers in the classroom.

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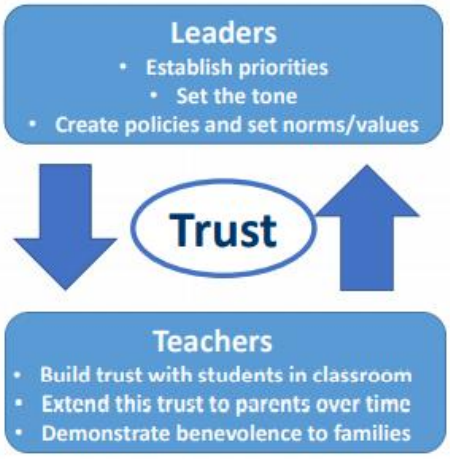

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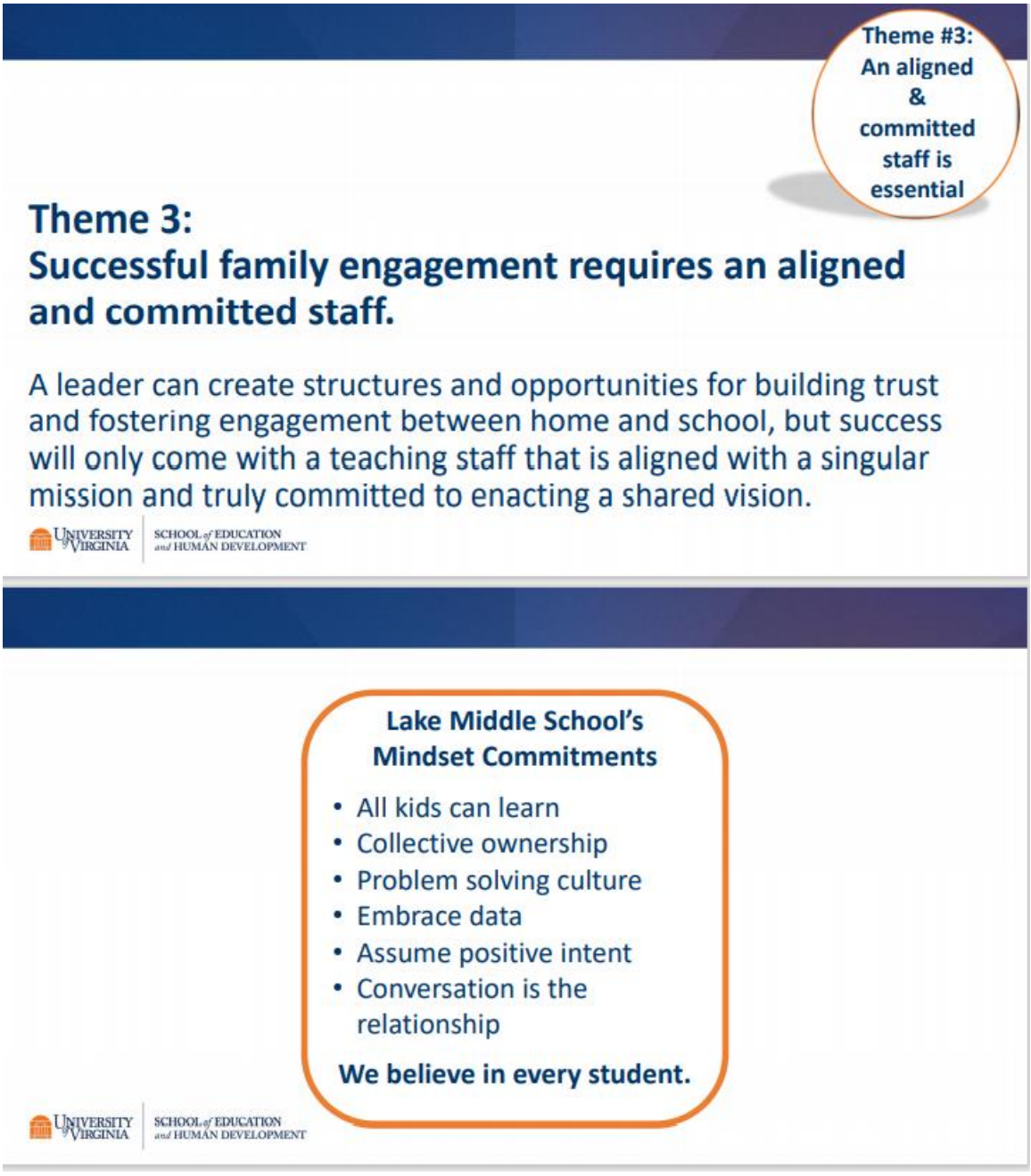
Theme #3: An aligned & committed staff is essential
Theme 3:
Successful family engagement requires an aligned and committed staff.
A leader can create structures and opportunities for building trust and fostering engagement between home and school, but success will only come with a teaching staff that is aligned with a singular mission and truly committed to enacting a shared vision.
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Lake Middle School's Mindset Commitments
• All kids can learn
• Collective ownership
• Problem solving culture
• Embrace data
• Assume positive intent
• Conversation is the relationship
We believe in every student.
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Theme #4: Partnerships are the goal

Theme 4:
Building relationships is important but growing those relationships into partnerships is the goal.

Obstacles to partnership include cultural barriers, language differences, and the mistrust that can result from cultural misunderstandings.

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Theme #5: Ethic of care, sense of purpose, & reflection are critical

Theme 5:

The work involved both in building trust & engaging families requires an ethic of care, a sense of purpose, & a commitment to reflection and growth in order to be successful and sustained over time.

A culture that encourages and facilitates reflection among both its teachers and leaders results in stronger personal and institutional growth.

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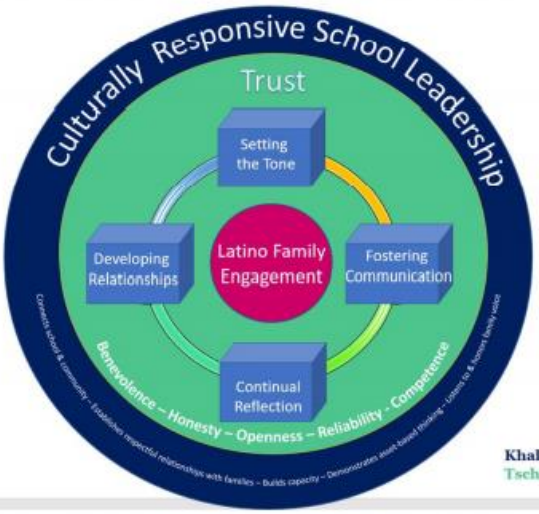
Revised Conceptual Framework



Khalifa, 2018
Tschannen-Moran, 2014

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Recommendations

#1: Challenge deficit-based thinking & focus on asset-based thinking

#2: Reframe engagement: validate both home-based & school-based

#3: Take care not to mistake deference for trust

#4: Support newer teachers in this work

#5: Embrace the silver linings of the COVID-19 pandemic

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Recommendations
#1:
Acknowledge and challenge deficit thinking and embrace an asset-based approach on a schoolwide level.
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Recommendations
#1:
Acknowledge and challenge deficit thinking and embrace an asset-based approach on a schoolwide level.
#2:
Reframe engagement by placing importance on both school-based and home-based involvement.
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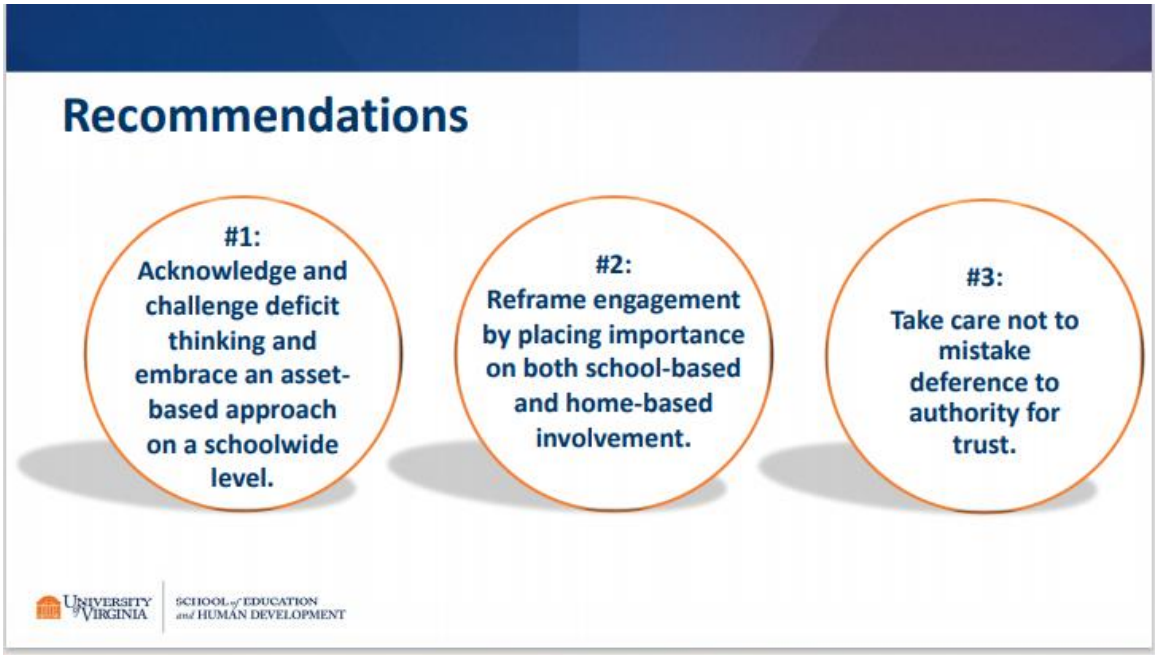
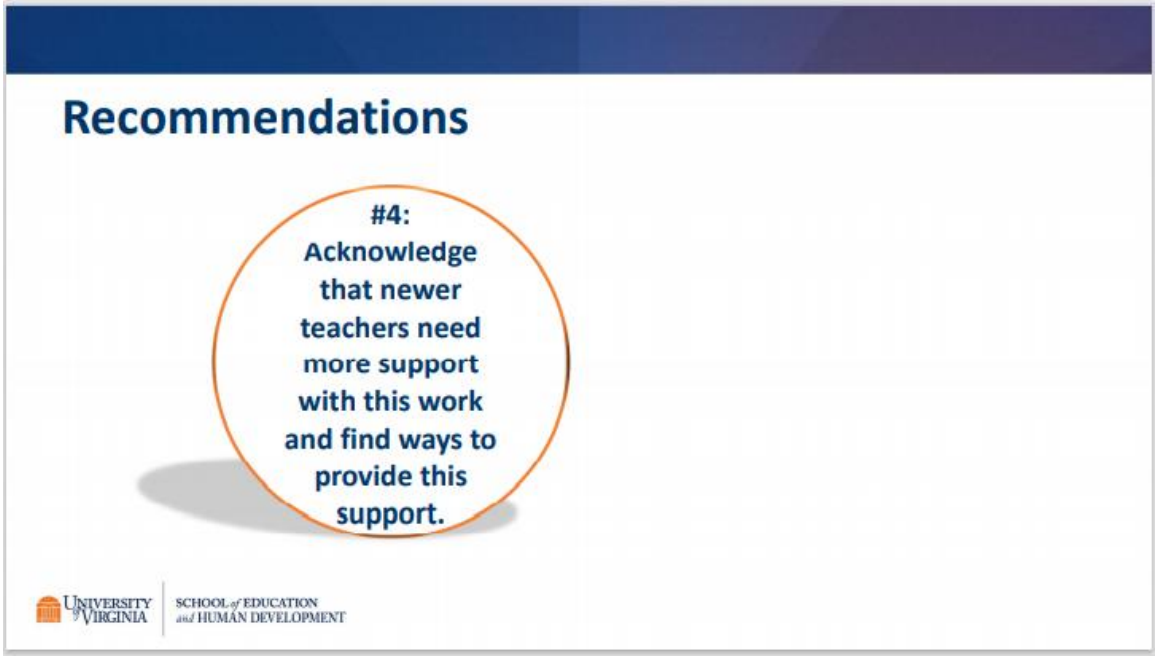
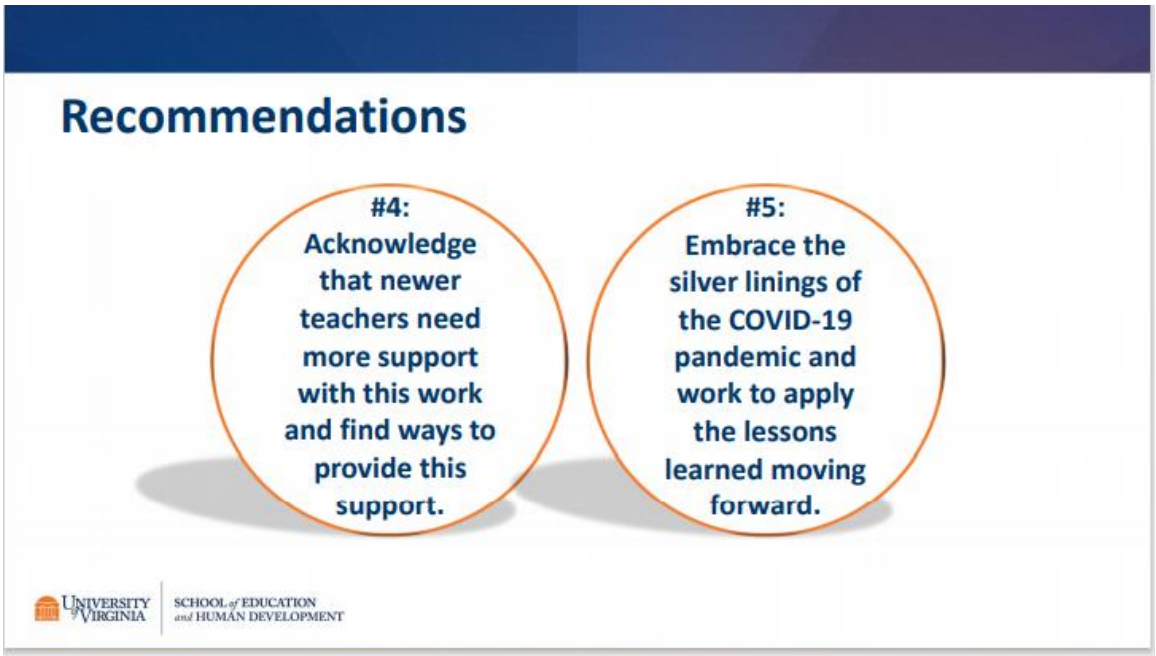

Recommendations
#1:
Acknowledge and challenge deficit thinking and embrace an asset-based approach on a schoolwide level.
#2:
Reframe engagement by placing importance on both school-based and home-based involvement.
#3:
Take care not to mistake deference to authority for trust.
University of Virginia
School of Education and Human Development


Recommendations
#4:
Acknowledge that newer teachers need more support with this work and find ways to provide this support.
University of Virginia
School of Education and Human Development


Recommendations
#4:
Acknowledge that newer teachers need more support with this work and find ways to provide this support.
#5:
Embrace the silver linings of the COVID-19 pandemic and work to apply the lessons learned moving forward.
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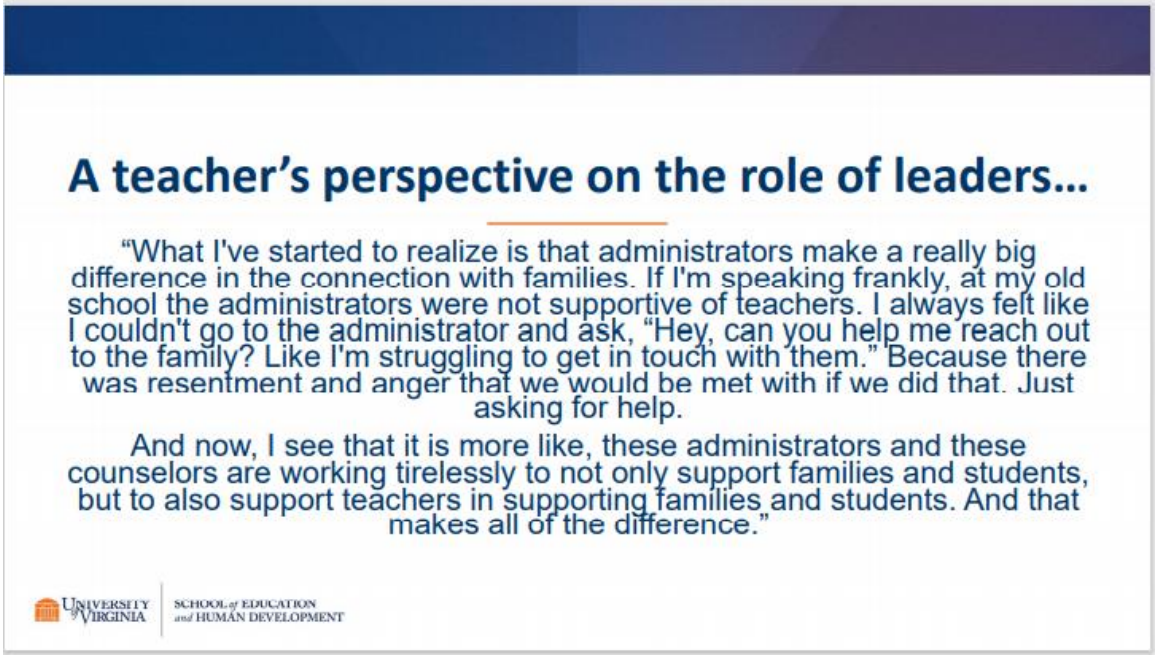
A teacher's perspective on the role of leaders...
"What I've started to realize is that administrators make a really big difference in the connection with families. If I'm speaking frankly, at my old school the administrators were not supportive of teachers. I always felt like I couldn't go to the administrator and ask, "Hey, can you help me reach out to the family? Like I'm struggling to get in touch with them." Because there was resentment and anger that we would be met with if we did that. Just asking for help.
And now, I see that it is more like, these administrators and these counselors are working tirelessly to not only support families and students, but to also support teachers in supporting families and students. And that makes all of the difference."
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Questions and Feedback

Thank you!

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Appendix A: Email Correspondence for Interviews: Leaders

Initial Email to Leaders

Dear _____,

My name is Rachel Sweeney, and I am an NCPS teacher and a doctoral candidate at the University of Virginia School of Education and Human Development. I am conducting a research study titled *Creando Confianza*: How Middle School Leaders Create Cultures of Trust to Foster the Engagement of Latino Families, focused on the perceptions of school leaders and teachers. As part of this study, I am looking forward to interviewing several leaders at your school to learn more about your perspectives on family engagement and on the building of trust, particularly with your Latino families.

You have been identified as a leader who might be interested in participating in this research study, and I am hoping that you agree! The interviews should take about 30 minutes for each participant, and all information that you provide will be anonymized and your identity protected. Given the current craziness of the world around us, the interviews will take place via Zoom (a tool approved by UVA). I am setting up a schedule for next week and I hope that you can find some time to meet with me virtually.

I would appreciate it if you could let me know which of the following days and times you prefer, and I will schedule your interview accordingly:

Dates: _____

Please indicate the time period that works best: morning (between 9 and 11 AM), afternoon (between 2 and 4 PM), or evening (between 7 and 9 PM)

Once I hear back from you, I will confirm our appointment time, send you a meeting link, and forward you an Informed Consent Agreement for you to review and sign prior to the interview.

Please let me know if you have any questions. I greatly appreciate your time and attention and look forward to speaking with you next week!

Yours truly,

Rachel Sweeney

Appendix B: Email Correspondence for Interviews: Teachers

Initial Email to Teachers

Dear _____,

My name is Rachel Sweeney, and I am an NCPS middle school teacher and a doctoral candidate at the University of Virginia School of Education and Human Development. I am conducting a research study titled *Creando Confianza*: How Middle School Leaders Create Cultures of Trust to Foster the Engagement of Latino Families, focused on the perceptions of school leaders and teachers. As part of this study, I am looking forward to interviewing several teachers at your school to learn more about your perspectives on family engagement and on the building of trust, particularly with your Latino families.

You have been identified by your administrators as a teacher who might be interested in participating in this research study, and I am hoping that you agree! The interviews should take about 30 minutes for each participant, and all information that you provide will be anonymized and your identity protected. The interviews will take place via Zoom (a tool approved by UVA). I hope that you can find some time to meet with me virtually next week.

I would appreciate it if you could let me know which of the following days you prefer, and a time within one of the ranges listed, and I will schedule your interview accordingly. If it works better for you to meet during the late afternoon or evening, please indicate that in your email—whatever works for you will work for me!

Monday, _____: between 10:00 and 12:00 or any time after 2:00

Tuesday, _____: between 9:00 and 12:00 or any time after 4:00

Thursday, _____: between 9:00 and 12:00 or any time after 2:00

If there is a day or time that works better for you that is not listed, please let me know and I will do my best to fit your schedule. Once I hear back from you, I will confirm our appointment time, send you a meeting link and a calendar invite, and forward you an Informed Consent Agreement for you to review and sign prior to the interview.

Please let me know if you have any questions. I greatly appreciate your time and attention and look forward to speaking with you soon!

Yours truly,

Rachel Sweeney

Appendix C: Informed Consent Agreement

Protocol 2891: *Creando Confianza*: How Middle School Leaders Create Cultures of Trust to Foster the Engagement of Latino Families

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Informed Consent Agreement

Please read this consent agreement carefully before you decide to participate in the study.

Purpose of the research study: The purpose of this study is to investigate the ways in which school leaders build trust between home and school at the middle school level, from the viewpoints of two groups of stakeholders: middle school leaders and teachers. The lessons learned from this study will be shared broadly, both within and outside of the school division.

What you will do in the study: This study will include interviews of representatives from each of the two stakeholder groups. You were selected as a possible participant in the interview phase of the study. I would like to record this interview so that I can use it for reference moving forward. I will not record the interview without your permission. If you do grant permission for this conversation to be recorded, you have the right to revoke your permission and/or end the interview at any time. You also have the right not to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable.

In addition, you will be asked to collect and share any documents you may have that are connected with building trust and/or engaging families. This may include emails, newsletters, or other correspondence that you feel comfortable sharing. All of these documents will be treated with confidentiality, as described below.

Time required: The study will require about 1 hour of your time. I expect that the interview should take between 30 and 45 minutes, with an additional 15 to 30 minutes spent collecting and forwarding relevant documents related to the study.

Risks: There are no anticipated risks in this study.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research study. The study may help us understand effective ways in which middle school leaders can build trust with Latino parents, fostering increased family engagement. The lessons learned may benefit school leaders, teachers, students, and families both within and outside of the school division.

Confidentiality: The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your information will be assigned a code number. The list connecting your name to this code will be kept in a locked file. When the study is

completed and the data have been analyzed, this list will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in any report. All interview recordings and collected documents will be stored in a secure workplace and destroyed one year after the study is completed.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary.

Right to withdraw from the study: You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you decide to withdraw, the recording of your interview and any documents shared will be destroyed.

How to withdraw from the study: If you want to withdraw from the study, please tell the interviewer to stop the interview. Again, there is no penalty for withdrawing.

Payment: You will receive no payment for participating in the study.

Using data beyond this study: The data you provide will be not be used beyond this study. It will be retained in a secure manner by the researcher for 1 year after the study is completed and then destroyed.

If you have questions about the study, contact:
Rachel Sweeney
Doctoral Candidate, Educational Leadership, University of Virginia
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
Telephone: XXX-XXX-XXXX
Email address: rws7f@virginia.edu

Sara Dexter, Ed. D.
Associate Professor, Department of Leadership, Foundations and Policy
P.O. Box 400265, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22904
Telephone: XXX-XXX-XXXX
Email address: sdexter@virginia.edu

To obtain more information about the study, ask questions about the research procedures, express concerns about your participation, or report illness, injury or other problems, please contact:
Tonya R. Moon, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Social and Behavioral Sciences
One Morton Dr Suite 500
University of Virginia, P.O. Box 800392
Charlottesville, VA 22908-0392
Telephone: (434) 924-5999

Protocol 2891: *Creando Confianza*: How Middle School Leaders Create Cultures of Trust to Foster the Engagement of Latino Families

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Email: irbsbshelp@virginia.edu
Website: www.virginia.edu/vpr/irb/sbs
Website for Research Participants: http://www.virginia.edu/vpr/participants/

Agreement:
I agree to participate in the research study described above.

Signature: _____Date: _____

You will receive a copy of this form for your records.

Appendix D: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol: Leaders

Leader Interview Protocol

Date of Interview:	Start Time:
Role:	End Time:
Interviewed by: Rachel Sweeney	Duration:
Place:	Special Notes (Logistics):

Purpose--The Study: The purpose of this study is to investigate the ways in which school leaders build trust between home and school at the middle school level, from the viewpoints of two groups of stakeholders: middle school leaders and teachers. The study will specifically examine trust built between school and home that fosters the engagement of Latino parents in their children's education.

Purpose--This Interview: This interview is designed to learn more about your perceptions as a middle school leader. Through this interview I hope to begin to answer the main research question that undergirds this study: How does a middle school leader create a culture of trust (between leaders, teachers, and parents) that fosters the engagement of Latino families? I am hoping to learn through your experiences with family engagement and your understanding of the role of trust in facilitating this engagement among Latino families.

Logistics: I'd like to record this interview because it's important for me to get your words and ideas directly. Using the recorder will help me do this, and I will be the only one listening to the audio. I'd also like to take notes during the interview, if it is OK with you. These will help me keep track of the interview as it goes along.

____ Recording OK? (Y= yes, N= no)

____ Note taking OK? (Y= yes, N= no)

Confidentiality: Unless you give me permission to use your name and title, and/or quote you in any publications that may result from this research, the information you tell me will be confidential. Nothing you say will ever be identified with you personally. Pseudonyms will be used in the research paper.

Consent Reminder: I just want to remind you that you can withdraw your consent at any time. You have the right not to answer any question, and to stop the interview at any time or for any reason. Thank you again for your participation.
Turn on the recorder and test it together.

Primary Question: How does a middle school leader create a culture of trust (between leaders, teachers, and parents) that fosters the engagement of Latino families?

Research Questions:
Research Question 1: How do middle school leaders and teachers define trust in the context of school-family relationships?
Research Question 2: Do middle school leaders and teachers view trust as one of the critical building blocks of family engagement?
Research Question 3: What policies and practices does a middle school leader use to establish trust with Latino families?

Interview Questions:

1. I am looking forward to getting to know you better through this conversation. To start, please tell me a bit about your background; how long have you been working in education/NCPS/how long have you been at this school/working with this population?

2. Please tell me more about your current role as a middle school leader. How do you feel that you impact the climate of this school, specifically regarding interaction with families?

3. How do you define successful family engagement? From your perspective, what do you think are the most important building blocks of successful family engagement?

4. Please tell me about your understanding of trust, especially between home and school. How would you define trust in this setting?

5. How do you see trust as impacting family engagement in this school, specifically with your Latino families?

6. How do you facilitate the creation of trust between home and school? Is there anything special that you do to create trust with your Latino families?

7. How has your understanding of trust and family engagement changed during your years in education and what has stayed the same?

8. Is there anything that you think is important for me to understand about trust and/or family engagement in this school that we have not yet had a chance to discuss?

9. Is there anything that you would like to ask me?

Thank you for your time and attention.

Probes: "Tell me more about how you do that"; "What tools/strategies do you use to do that?"; "Are there processes in place to ensure that that happens?"

Appendix E: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol: Teacher

Teacher Interview Protocol

Date of Interview:	Start Time:
Role:	End Time:
Interviewed by: Rachel Sweeney	Duration:
Place:	Special Notes (Logistics):

Purpose--The Study: The purpose of this study is to investigate the ways in which school leaders build trust between home and school at the middle school level, from the viewpoints of two groups of stakeholders: middle school leaders and teachers. The study will specifically examine trust built between school and home that fosters the engagement of Latino parents in their children's education.

Purpose--This Interview: This interview is designed to learn more about your perceptions as a middle school teacher. Through this interview I hope to begin to answer the main research question that undergirds this study: How does a middle school leader create a culture of trust (between leaders, teachers, and parents) that fosters the engagement of Latino families? I am hoping to learn through your experiences with family engagement and your understanding of the role of trust in facilitating this engagement among Latino families.

Logistics: I'd like to record this interview because it's important for me to get your words and ideas directly. Using the recorder will help me do this, and I will be the only one listening to the audio. I'd also like to take notes during the interview, if it is OK with you. These will help me keep track of the interview as it goes along.

____ Recording OK? (Y= yes, N= no)
____ Note taking OK? (Y= yes, N= no)

Confidentiality: Unless you give me permission to use your name and title, and/or quote you in any publications that may result from this research, the information you tell me will be confidential. Nothing you say will ever be identified with you personally. Pseudonyms will be used in the research paper.

Consent Reminder: I just want to remind you that you can withdraw your consent at any time. You have the right not to answer any question, and to stop the interview at any time or for any reason. Thank you again for your participation.

Turn on the recorder and test it together.

Primary Question: How does a middle school leader create a culture of trust (between leaders, teachers, and parents) that fosters the engagement of Latino families?

Research Questions:
Research Question 1: How do middle school leaders and teachers define trust in the context of school-family relationships?
Research Question 2: Do middle school leaders and teachers view trust as one of the critical building blocks of family engagement?
Research Question 3: What policies and practices does a middle school leader use to establish trust with Latino families?

Interview Questions:
1. I am looking forward to getting to know you better through this conversation. To start, please tell me a bit about your background; how long have you been working in education/NCPS/how long have you been at this school/working with this population?

2. From your current perspective as a middle school teacher, how do you feel that you impact the climate of this school, specifically regarding interaction with families?

3. How do you define successful family engagement? From your perspective, what do you think are the most important building blocks of successful family engagement?

4. Please tell me about your understanding of trust, especially between home and school. How would you define trust in this setting?

5. How do you see trust as impacting family engagement in this school, specifically with your Latino families?

6. How do you facilitate the creation of trust between home and school? Is there anything special that you do to create trust with your Latino families?

7. How has your understanding of trust and family engagement changed during your years in education and what has stayed the same?

8. Is there anything that you think is important for me to understand about trust and/or family engagement in this school that we have not yet had a chance to discuss?

9. Is there anything that you would like to ask me?

Thank you for your time and attention.

Probes: "Tell me more about how you do that"; "What tools/strategies do you use to do that?"; "Are there processes in place to ensure that that happens?"

Appendix F: Observation Protocol

Observer: Rachel Sweeney	Date of Observation:
Time Observed:	Duration of Observation:
Setting/Event:	Numbers of Leaders present:
Number of Teachers present:	Number of Parents present:
Context of Observation	
1. **Setting Context**: (what is the event, where held, who organized it, general attendance)	
2. **Event Context**: (objectives for the event as described by the organizer, activities planned & enacted)	

3. **Climate Context** (overall mood of event, degree of interaction between home-school)

Evidence of Family Engagement

Look Fors:

- Purposefully planned opportunities for family-staff interactions
- Organic/authentic family-staff interactions
- Family participation in planning/leading event
- Families involved in volunteer roles that seem to match interests/skills (funds of knowledge recognized)
- Family input was used to inform event planning
- Opportunity for family feedback at end of, or following, the event

Notes:

Evidence of Trust
Look fors: □ Positive communication between families and staff □ Welcoming atmosphere created by staff; diversity is clearly embraced (e.g., translators present if needed, information provided in Spanish) □ Caring culture noted through staff responses to families (i.e., respectful, positive) □ Collaboration by staff and families on event (planning and/or implementation) □ Families appear to be comfortable with their roles (volunteer or participant); funds of knowledge appear to be recognized (i.e., strengths/skills utilized) **Notes:**

Appendix G: Document Analysis Matrix

Document	Building Block #1: Setting the Tone	Building Block #2: Developing Relationships	Building Block #3: Fostering Communication	Building Block #4: Continual Reflection	Notes
School Improvement & Innovation Plan	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	
School Website	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	
School Mission Statement	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	
School Vision Statement	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	
District Family Engagement Survey (Spring 2019)	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	
Professional Development Related to Family Engagement	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	
Regular Communication with Families and Community Organizations	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	
Data from Equity Profile	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	Confirmed Disconfirmed No Evidence	

Appendix H: Codebook

Code Identification (Inductive)	Code Abbreviation	Code Description
Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) Practices (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016)		
Positive Connections: School-Community	CRSL: PC-SC	May include cultivating relationships with community members (businesses, mentoring relationships, intergenerational programming); understanding, addressing, and advocating for community-based issues
Positive Connections: School-Family	CRSL: PC-SF	May be informal or formal (planned meetings, workshops, activities); can include conversations, emails, newsletters, conferences; effort made to support authentic and responsive interactions
Respectful & Meaningful Relationships: Leader-Family	CRSL: RMR-LF	May involve the leader's creation of authentic overlapping school-community spaces (caring communities); validation of home cultures and languages; intentional planning to support cultural responsiveness; involvement of families in planning and decision-making; ethic of care and hope central to all actions
Respectful & Meaningful Relationships: Teacher-Family	CRSL: RMR-TF	May involve the teacher's validation of home cultures and languages; intentional planning to support cultural responsiveness in instruction and communication; involvement of families in planning and decision-making; ethic of care and hope central to all actions
Capacity Building: Teachers	CRSL: CB-T	May be informal or formal (PD, staff meetings, committee meetings); can include mentoring, modeling, participating in courageous conversations, and/or fostering self-reflection
Capacity Building: Families	CRSL: CB-F	May be informal or formal (planned meetings, workshops, PTA events); can include conversations, emails, newsletters, conferences, social networking (between families),

		connecting families to larger community networks
Resistant to Deficit Thinking/Demonstrates Asset-Based Thinking-Leader	CRSL: ABT-L	May include the leader's use of an equity audit or similar structure; demonstration and/or fostering of growth mindset while recognizing current inequities (critical consciousness); intentional thought given to existing funds of knowledge when planning
Resistant to Deficit Thinking/Demonstrates Asset-Based Thinking-Teacher	CRSL: ABT-T	May include the teacher's demonstration and/or fostering of growth mindset while recognizing current inequities (critical consciousness); intentional thought given to existing funds of knowledge when planning
Listens to/Honors Family Voice-Leader	CRSL: FV-L	May include the leader's inclusion of family voice in decision making (inviting participation and then acting on suggestions); soliciting information from families about cultural differences/obstacles to engagement and then making changes to adapt to these differences; recognizing and meeting the economic, social, and physical needs of families as well as the academic needs
Listens to/Honors Family Voice-Teacher	CRSL: FV-T	May include the teacher's inclusion of family voice in decision making (inviting participation and then acting on suggestions); soliciting information from families about cultural differences/obstacles to engagement and then making changes to adapt to these differences; recognizing and meeting the economic, social, and physical needs of families as well as the academic needs
Functions of Instructional Leaders (Tschannen-Moran, 2014)		
Visioning	FIL: V	Defined as creating a vision of what a school can be and what it can accomplish; best when participative, collective and strengths-based; can be based on data and building on areas of strength while acknowledging struggles and weaknesses
Modeling	FIL: MOD	Defined as both talking the talk and walking the walk; demonstrating

		continuity between words and actions; combining humility (restraint and modesty) with tenacity and determination; maintaining constant self-reflection
Coaching	FIL: C	Defined as assisting people in reaching their goals through conversation, strategy, practice, and genuine concern; goals are to generate professional growth, support self-efficacy, and fuel enthusiasm; positions supervisors as active and constructive partners in improvement
Managing	FIL: MAN	Defined as running the day-to-day operations of a school, including: cultivating an effective culture of discipline, with a balance in the handling of policies, rules, and procedures, demonstrating flexibility, and maintaining a focus on possibilities/solutions rather than on control
Mediating	FIL: MED	Defined as dealing with conflict/utilizing conflict management strategies; believing in the possibility of, and know how to, repair trust; playing the role of mediator when trust does break down; putting in place norms and processes that allow all sides to negotiate solutions that meet the needs of all parties; and not only creating these structures, but also training others to be able to implement them as well
Facets of Trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2014)		
Benevolence	FOT: B	Defined as a leader who: is caring and sensitive, extends goodwill, demonstrates positive intentions, supports teachers, expresses appreciation for faculty and staff efforts, is fair, and guards confidential information; confidence that one's well-being or something one cares about will be protected and not harmed by the person in whom one has placed one's trust

Openness	FOT:O	Defined as a leader who: maintains open communication, shares important information, delegates, shares decision making, shares power, is able to be vulnerable (in the context of good judgment)
Competence	FOT: C	Defined as a leader who: buffers teachers from outside disruptions, handles difficult situations, sets standards, presses for results, works hard, sets an example, solves problems, resolves conflict, and is flexible
Reliability	FOT: R	Defined as a leader who: is consistent, is dependable, shows commitment, expresses dedication, and exercises diligence; combines a sense of predictability with caring and competence; demonstrates consistency between espoused beliefs, school goals, and actual behavior
Honesty	FOT: H	Defined as a leader who: shows integrity (match between values and actions), tells the truth, keeps promises, honors agreements, is authentic, accepts responsibility instead of distorting the truth or shifting blame, avoids manipulation, is real rather than appearing to play a role, and is true to oneself

Code Identification (Deductive/Data-Driven)	**Code Abbreviation**
Demonstrated Understandings	
Commitment to working with diverse populations	DU: DIV-POP
Family engagement	DU: FE
Latino culture	DU: LC
MS developmental level	DU: MS
Recognizing personal growth	DU: PG

Recognizing room for growth	DU: RG
Recognizing the need for differentiation	DU: DIFF
Social-educational capacity of parents	DU: SE-CAP
Leadership Practices (LPR)	
Building relationships	LPR: BREL
Building systems/structures	LPR: BSS
Communication	LPR: COMM
Creative uses of funding	LPR: FUND
Demonstrating trust in teachers, teacher voice, professionalism, & knowledge	LPR: T-TS
Establishing mindset commitments	LPR: MC
Establishing partnerships	LPR: P
Follow-through on commitments/promises	LPR: FT
Hiring practices: Spanish-speaking staff	LPR: HP
Home visits	LPR: HV
Making families feel that their voices are heard & valued	LPR: VOI
Presence	LPR: PRS
Providing transportation/ food/childcare for school events	LPR: SE
Setting the tone (leaders and teachers)	LPR: TON
Leadership Policies (LPO)	
Prioritizing flexible hours/ availability to talk with parents	LPO: TIM
School within a school model: The Team	LPO: TEAM

Spanish-speaking parent liaison	LPO: PL
Building in supports beyond educational needs (food, clothing, etc.)	LPO: SUP
Intentional programming around the transition from ES to MS	LPO: TRANS
PLC support and facilitation	LPO: PLC
Emergent Themes	
Appreciate, respect, understand Latino cultural orientation without stereotypes	ET: LAT
Avoid deficit-thinking, embrace asset-based thinking	ET: ABTHINK
Be intentional in setting family engagement as an organizational expectation	ET: ORGEX
Build capacity (self, staff, community)	ET: CAP
Build relationships (staff, community)	ET: REL
Build trust first with students, extends to parents	ET: TRST
Build trust over time	ET: TIM
Intentionally create an open and trustworthy school climate	ET: CLIM
Plan for differentiated engagement	ET: DIFF
Recognize middle school as a critical time for Latino students	ET: MS
Recognize the inherent asymmetrical nature of the home-school engagement	ET: ASYMM
Reframe engagement (what it is, what it is not)	ET: REFRM
View role in community leadership, not limited to school building	ET: COMMUN
Work to keep inherent trust	ET: INHTRST