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GETTING BEYOND WHAT EDUCATORS SEE AS WRONG: HOW UNDERSTANDING THE STRENGTHS OF LOW-INCOME PUERTO RICAN FAMILIES CAN HELP URBAN SCHOOLS IMPROVE

A Dissertation Presented

by

PAUL HYRY-DERMITH

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

May 2012

School of Education
Department of Educational Policy, Research, and Administration (EPRA)
Concentration in Educational Policy and Leadership

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GETTING BEYOND WHAT EDUCATORS SEE AS WRONG:
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Approved as to style and content by:

_____
Jeffrey W. Eiseman, Chair

_____
Claire E. Hamilton, Member

_____
David R. Buchanan, Member

_____
Gretchen B. Rossman, Department Chair
Department of Educational Policy, Research, and Administration

DEDICATION

To the students, families, and staff of the Peck Full Service Community School.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was built on, and supported by, the contributions of many amazing people. I cannot name the parents we interviewed, but wish to thank them from the bottom of my heart for their cooperation, good will, and depth of insight.

I would like to thank the members of the team who carried out the family strengths interviews: Maria Luisa Arroyo, Cathy Foley, Monica Garcia, Megan Harding, Trish Marquis, Kate Martel, Lillian Norwood, Lauren Paret, and Amy Sturmer. Kate is especially to be appreciated for the volume of work she did over several years. Maria Luisa needs special appreciation for her insights, and for the model she has set for all of us as Peck's Family Access and Engagement Coordinator. Megan was critical not just to the work but also to my ability to do it in more ways than I could mention here. Julieann Rapoport also needs mention for her steadfast support for, and engagement with, my thinking about this work throughout the entire process.

Patti Jennings has "run the floor" of the Peck School with incredible commitment and skill through all of the time that we have built the FSCS work, and has been unflaggingly supportive of this and every project we do at Peck. Dozens of other faculty and staff members at Peck also deserve recognition for the work they have done to support various elements of the school's development.

I also want to thank Claire Hamilton and David Buchanan for their support and feedback along the way.

Finally, I just couldn't have done this work if it weren't for Jeff Eiseman, my parents (Bill and Caryl Hyry), and my most wonderful, incredible wife Dalila. Each of them knows that this is true, and why. I will be forever grateful.

ABSTRACT

GETTING BEYOND WHAT EDUCATORS SEE AS WRONG:
HOW UNDERSTANDING THE STRENGTHS OF LOW-INCOME PUERTO RICAN FAMILIES CAN HELP URBAN SCHOOLS IMPROVE

MAY 2012

PAUL HYRY-DERMITH, B.A., CARLETON COLLEGE

M.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Ed.D., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Jeffrey W. Eiseman

Parent involvement is one of the factors to which student achievement is consistently and strongly linked in educational research, and is perceived by teachers as a core factor affecting student achievement. Therefore more and higher-quality engagement with students' families has the potential to make a positive difference in urban schools. However, a tendency among educators to focus on perceived family deficits, without a clear understanding of students' families' strengths, may limit urban schools' ability to develop effective family engagement programming. This study involved faculty and staff members at an urban K-8 school in systematically identifying *strengths* of the low-income Puerto Rican families whose children made up the vast majority of the student body, as a critical point of reference for working with families toward stronger student outcomes.

The study was grounded in the principles of Action Research and utilized methods associated with Appreciative Inquiry to involve school faculty and staff members in carrying out, then collectively analyzing the results from, structured interviews with parents of low-income Puerto Rican students at the school. Along with establishing a family strengths inventory for use in ongoing planning for enhancement of family engagement programming at the school, the study included an assessment of the impact of the research process on the perceptions and intended actions of both participating faculty and staff members and those who elected not to participate. The dissertation concludes with a discussion of implications and recommendations related to theory, practice, policy, and research associated with the efforts of schools serving low-income Puerto Rican (and other) communities to strengthen their engagement with students' families.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION, PROBLEM STATEMENT, AND PROJECT OVERVIEW

Introduction

This dissertation will focus on several issues relating to the involvement of parents and other family members in the education of primarily low-income children of Puerto Rican descent at a public school in Holyoke, Massachusetts. The dissertation is grounded in an understanding that in the current educational environment both in Massachusetts and across the United States, all public schools are accountable for improved student achievement as measured primarily (if not entirely) by a set of formulae related to student performance on state-adopted achievement tests. In the case of Massachusetts, the relevant laws are the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 (MERA) and the Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, reauthorized in 2001 as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB); the key achievement test is the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). These education reform laws have made improved student achievement—progress toward 100% proficiency on the MCAS—a primary goal of virtually every public school in Massachusetts.

It may be useful to immediately note two terminological conventions important to the conceptualization and contextualization of the research project associated with this dissertation. First, and in keeping with recent practice, the term "*family* involvement" rather than "parent involvement" is used here in recognition that in many families it is adults other than "parents" (traditionally conceived) whose involvement with school children's education is most important. As Reglin (1993) notes, "A significant family

member could be any family member with strong ties to the child. . . grandparents, stepparents, foster parents, older brothers and sisters, or uncles and aunts" (p. 3) Second, and importantly, family *involvement* will refer to what (parents and other) family members do in terms of participation with their children's schooling, while family *engagement* will refer to what *schools* do (or might do) to support and/or increase family involvement. Thus a school might have, for example, a family engagement plan—which might, in turn, be aimed at increasing or strengthening one or more forms of family involvement.

Student achievement is, of course, affected by a multitude of factors: individual student characteristics and abilities; learning before entering a given school (the knowledge and skills with which students enter that school); the culture and climate of a school; and the organization and quality of instruction, to name just a few. Another factor often identified by educators and policy makers alike as of particular concern is that of *family involvement*: the ways and degrees to which parents and other family members participate in their children's schooling. This concern appears justified in light of a diverse body of evidence supporting the connection between family involvement and student achievement.

For example, in their highly-respected 2002 synthesis of research on family involvement in children's education, Henderson & Mapp are unequivocal: "The evidence is consistent, positive, and convincing: families have a major influence on their children's achievement in school and throughout life" (p. 1). They continue on to state that the research shows that *at all levels of family incomes and all types of family background,* there is a positive relationship between family involvement and students'

getting better grades and test scores, passing classes and being promoted, attending school regularly, having better social skills, and graduating and going on to post-secondary education (Henderson & Mapp, 7). Tinkler (2002) arrives at a similar conclusion in a literature review focused specifically on Latino families: "research has shown . . . a link between parent involvement and academic achievement" (Tinkler, 3-4). Results published by Reynolds and Clements (2005) of a longitudinal study involving over 1,200 Chicago schoolchildren showed a direct and dramatic correlation between years of positive parental involvement (as rated by teachers) and children's educational outcomes (8.7% juvenile delinquency and 82.6% high school completion among children whose parents were identified as positively involved every year their children were in grades one through six, compared to 22.6% juvenile delinquency and 37.3% high school completion among children whose parents were never identified as positively involved during the same grade span). In other words, there is now broad consensus among researchers about a strong link between family involvement and student achievement; in general, this link is understood such that family involvement in children's education serves as what Farrell (1999) refers to as an "input" that clearly contributes to the desired "output" of improved student achievement (cf. Farrell, 164-65).

Along with researchers, policy makers, education reformers, and school leaders consistently acknowledge the importance of family involvement in promoting student achievement. At the federal policy level, the Title I section of NCLB includes extensive language about both parent involvement policy requirements (cf. the National Coalition for Parental Involvement in Education website for an overview) and parental choice in relation to both the schools their children attend and supplementary educational services

for children who attend schools that are not progressing satisfactorily according to NCLB (cf. the "Choices for Parents" sections of the US Department of Education's No Child Left Behind website). In Massachusetts, MERA mandates the establishment of a School Council for each school in the state within which parent must have equal representation with school personnel, in order to assure a strong parent voice in school governance; in addition, acting within its role as Federal Title I steward, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE, formerly known as the Massachusetts Department of Education, or MDOE) has organized a wide variety of parent/family engagement initiatives over the past decade (cf. the "School Councils" and "Parent and Community Education and Involvement Advisory Council to the Massachusetts Board of Education" sections of the ESE website). And as Nakagawa (2000) notes, policy makers in many other states have established a variety of approaches to encouraging, and in some cases mandating, family engagement as a strategy for improving student academic performance—particularly the performance of low-income students of color.

At the school reform level, in a landmark study of the impact of Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) initiatives, RAND Corporation researchers (2006) noted that all of the most broadly-adopted CSR models (and the vast majority of lesser-known models as well) include, in their descriptions (if not in their implementation), family engagement as a key component. Among educators, a belief in the importance of family involvement is evident through new teachers' identifying, in a national survey (MetLife, 2005), communicating and engaging with parents as their most significant challenge, as well as through teachers' consistent perceptions that parent involvement in their schools is low/poor or fair (DePlanty, Counter-Kern, & Duchane, 2007; Public Agenda 1999) and

that poor academic performance among low income students is due to the home environment and the parents' lack of value toward education (DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2005).

Despite this apparently widespread agreement about its importance, however, family engagement has not been a primary focus in school improvement and reform efforts in Massachusetts or nationally. Rather, school improvement and reform efforts tend to focus primarily on changing factors that we might call "internal" to the school—those associated with curriculum, instruction, and personnel—as opposed to "externally" oriented elements such as relationships between school and family. This is due in part to the reality that while federal and state laws and regulations mandate the family engagement initiatives and opportunities identified above, these laws and regulations earmark only an extremely limited amount of funding for family engagement (just 1% of a district's total Title I allocation). Further, these laws and regulations contain no enforcement provisions in relation to family engagement mandates, and there have tended to be few or no consequences for schools or districts that fail to follow these mandates (National Center for Parent Involvement in Education, 2004).

Unfortunately, there is little evidence that school reform efforts focused primarily on "internal" improvements are resulting in significant achievement gains (cf. RAND study). This could of course be due to failures in how well the reform efforts are being implemented, and/or in the match between a given reform effort and a given school. However, the evidence is also quite limited that student achievement is improving in schools with substantial numbers of low-income Latino children, especially at the secondary levels. As noted in the ESE's website posting about the results of the 2007

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results—titled "MA Outscores Every Other State on NAEP Exams Again"—"[d]espite the overall gains, an achievement gap was still evident in the state's results, meaning that not all student subgroups made significant gains between 2005 and 2007. Hispanic students made some gains in grade 4, but showed flat results in grade 8. . ."[1] Similarly, 2009 results on the NAEP were essentially the same as those of 2007 ("Massachusetts 4th and 8th Graders Rank First in Reading on 2009 NAEP Exam;" "For 3rd Consecutive Time, Massachusetts Students Top Nation on NAEP Math"). Further, as reported by the ESE in its "Spring 2010 MCAS Tests: Summary of State Results," while 2010 MCAS results demonstrated significant growth among Latino students in grade 3, the achievement gap was diminished only slightly and overall growth among Latino students was quite small.

In other words, it could also be that, despite serious efforts at "internal" improvements in schools with high percentages of low-income Latino students, such efforts are incapable, by themselves, of resulting in substantial and consistent increases in student achievement. Perhaps sustained improvement depends on schools' also focusing on "externally" oriented improvement/reform efforts—finding ways to work with families to enhance their involvement in a way that improves their children's student achievement. There is of course no evidence to suggest that such efforts would provide a "magic bullet" to immediately and dramatically transform student achievement in historically low-performing schools. However, such efforts could help educators and policy makers to rethink (or perhaps expand) current priorities in effecting school

[1] See also "Stalled in Secondary", The Education Trust's 2005 report on student achievement since NCLB was passed.

improvement. It might also help parents/guardians to better understand how to support their children in school.

However, if family engagement is to become more central to school improvement efforts, very significant questions need to be considered. To begin, the term "family involvement" is deceptively simple, perhaps too simple, in that once one goes beyond the (at-least-apparently) agreed-upon statement that "family involvement improves student achievement" to address more specific questions, it quickly becomes clear that "family involvement" is a broad reference term for a complex set of behaviors and activities that are understood and defined differently by different observers. Thus Joyce Epstein, perhaps the most prolific and influential researcher on family involvement in the United States over the past three decades, and her colleagues have developed a family involvement typology with six different elements, grounded in the acknowledgment that 'family involvement' means different things to different people at different times (cf. National Network of Partnership Schools, n.d.). One result of this multiplicity of referents associated with the term 'family involvement' is that different people—or in fact the same person at different times—may mean different things when discussing 'family involvement', creating substantial potential for misunderstanding. A second result is that not all types of family involvement are likely to be equal, i.e., some type(s) of family involvement in children's education may in fact have a much stronger association with student achievement than others.

In addition, even the extremely broad statement that "family involvement improves student achievement" is subject to question. That is, while much of the research cited by Henderson & Mapp as well as in other research syntheses establishes a

correlation or *association* between family involvement and student achievement, questions of *causality* remain.[2] How can we be sure that family involvement causes improved student achievement, rather than the reverse, i.e., that improved student achievement causes family involvement? Or, perhaps more subtly and realistically, why would we want to conclude that the causal relationship goes only one way? Family involvement might, in fact, cause student success to some degree, at the same time as family *disengagement* (lack of involvement) might be caused, to some degree, by low student achievement—that is, their child's not doing well in school might lead some parents/guardians to want to avoid involvement with her/his educational process due to feelings of frustration (with the child and/or the school), shame, etc. Such a two-way causal relationship would, of course, be likely to entail research findings of a strong correlation between family involvement and student achievement. In any case, if family involvement does indeed cause student success, how and why?[3]

Finally, discussions of "family involvement" in schools in Massachusetts and the United States more broadly raise, almost automatically, equally complex issues of socioeconomics, culture, race, and gender as well as questions about family and community desires, needs, and capacities that go well beyond the scope of quaint and simple images such as parents' attending open houses or helping their children with homework. One of the realities associated with much of the discourse about students' families in urban schools—whose student bodies tend, in Massachusetts, to consist

[2] I would like to thank one of the members of my Comprehensive Examination Committee, UMass School of Education Professor Kathryn McDermott, for originally making this point, as well as my Comprehensive Exam and Dissertation Committee chair, Jeff Eiseman, for helping me to flesh it out.

[3] A proposed response to these questions can be found in a theoretical model of student academic success included in my (2006) Comprehensive Examination essay, titled "Toward a Theory and Practice of Family Involvement in an Urban Middle School" (available upon request; Chapter 3 of the dissertation will include a summary of this model).

primarily of low-income children of color, while faculties are composed by a significant majority of white, middle-class people—is that it tends to be focused primarily on perceived family *weaknesses*, i.e, the performance-enhancing factors with which school faculty perceive families as failing to provide their children, such as behavioral controls, accountability for homework, a vision of the future, etc. Thus researchers such as deGaetano (2007) and Crozier (2001) have remarked on the prevalence of a deficit focus—including the idea that parents do not care about school involvement—in urban schools with high proportions of low-income and Latino children:

> Many school personnel talk about wanting some sort of increased parental involvement in the schools, but they lament what they perceive as a lack of parental caring particularly by parents of poor and Latino children. We often hear examples of how school personnel have tried, in vain, to invite Latino parents into the school. . . Many teachers, including some Latino teachers, throw their hands up and exclaim, "We really try, but they [parents] just don't care" (de Gaetano, 2007, p. 146).

There are at least two serious problems with such a focus on perceived family deficits. First, there is the possibility (perhaps probability) of a substantial gap between perception and reality. That is, school personnel who believe that parents/guardians do not care (or that parents may care, but fail to provide their children with the basic expectations, knowledge, and support needed for success in school) are likely to be grounding this belief primarily in observations of students' performance and behavior, rather than in direct experience of the students' family contexts. Second, the idea that there are (essentially) only weaknesses in students' families when it comes to involvement with their children's education is likely to put educators in a constant cycle of naming what families are doing wrong (or are not doing) and perpetually perceiving families as

fundamentally incapable—and educators as powerless—in relation to efforts to strengthen family involvement in schools.

The unfortunate upshot, then, is that a focus on perceived deficits and counter-productive behaviors in families—particularly low-income families of color—as an explanation for a perceived lack of family involvement is likely to produce nothing other than an extension of the status quo, i.e., a continuation of educators' lamenting a lack of family involvement rather than carefully considering the kind(s) of work in which urban schools might engage in order to strengthen their relationships and collaborate more effectively with families and, perhaps, ultimately contribute to improved student achievement. A serious and engaged discussion of family involvement in schools demands the development of substantially greater shared understanding among those involved in the discussion about both what is meant by the term "family involvement" as well as the nature—or, perhaps more carefully, nature<u>s</u>—of the families whose children attend a given school. In particular, it demands educators' being able to move beyond a focus on what they perceive as deficits in their students' families in order to develop a stronger understanding of family *assets*, or strengths, that might be drawn upon in the development of stronger school-family relations and, again ultimately, improved student achievement.

<u>Problem Statement</u>

Family involvement is one of the factors to which student achievement is consistently and strongly linked in educational research. Further, educators in urban schools with high proportions of low-income students of color, including and especially

Latino/a students, often perceive a lack of involvement on the part of these students' families as a core factor contributing to poor student achievement. Therefore, increased/improved family involvement—of the type(s) that contribute to student academic development and achievement—has the potential for making a positive difference in urban schools. However, educators' tendency to focus on perceived family deficits, without a clear understanding of students' families' strengths, limits the ability of urban schools to develop effective family involvement programming. In order to determine how to work more effectively with students' families, therefore, urban schools need to begin by identifying the strengths of their students' families that can be used as a basis for planning and implementing high-quality family engagement programming and, over time, supporting improved student achievement.

Research Project Overview and Questions

The Peck Family Strengths Study took place among the families and faculty/staff of William R. Peck Full Service Community School, an urban K-8 school in Holyoke, Massachusetts whose student population is overwhelmingly Puerto Rican in terms of ethnic descent, and overwhelmingly poor.[4] The study was aimed at helping to determine whether a basis for more effective family engagement work at urban schools can be accomplished through efforts to engage faculty/staff members in development of a shared understanding of students' families' strengths. The research was intended, first, to utilize action research methods—specifically, those associated with Appreciative Inquiry[5]—to identify frequently unrecognized strengths of families of low-income Puerto Rican

[4] Chapter 3 includes a detailed description of this school.
[5] Chapter 4 includes an overview of Appreciative Inquiry as well as a rationale for its use in this study.

students that the school might draw upon in developing family engagement programming that supports improved student achievement. The research was additionally aimed at assessing the degree to which the involvement of school community members in identifying and understanding family strengths would lead to a positive transformation in attitudes about students' families within the school community. Thus the Peck Family Strengths Study was guided by the following overall research questions:

1. What strengths of low-income Puerto Rican families—including strengths not widely known or acknowledged by educators at present—might schools draw upon in order to collaborate more effectively with family members in support of their children's learning and performance?

2. Which (if any) actions and patterns of action on the parts of low-income Puerto Rican families are more prevalent among families whose students meet school expectations and state standards than among families whose students do not meet expectations and standards?

3. What impact does implementation of a family strengths study using techniques of Appreciative Inquiry have on both school staff who participate in the study and those who choose not to participate? In particular:

    - How, if at all, will they change their perceptions of and attitudes toward low-income Puerto Rican families and students?

    - What possible actions will they identify that they can take to help *families* draw upon their own strengths to more effectively support their children's learning and performance?

    - What possible actions will they identify that they may take with *students* or with their *colleagues* to more effectively support improvement of student learning and performance?

The goal of the research activity was to generate knowledge that could help school leaders engage the school community in utilizing a more systematic knowledge of low-income Puerto Rican families' strengths to improve student academic performance, through both informal interactions and more structured family engagement programming.

More specifically, the results of this study were expected to have the potential for a variety of positive implications for educational practice and policy:

i. Educators can use a better understanding of family strengths to think about how to support students in being more successful (for example, how best to approach matters such as student motivation, homework and studying, behavior and discipline, etc.).

ii. Awareness of students' families' strengths can give educators a point of reference for reaching out to families (appealing to what they do well, rather than primarily bringing up problems or issues, as a basis for developing relationships).

iii. Families themselves are not always aware of their own strengths, and identifying and naming family strengths can help parents/guardians understand and build on the things they already do well.

iv. Identified family strengths can be used for family education programs (for example, workshops in which parents share with other parents how they draw upon family strengths to support their children educationally).

v. Awareness of students' families' strengths can help with educator morale, in light of many urban educators' tendency to focus on perceived failures and problems, given occasional difficult interactions with students' parents/guardians and negative media portrayals of families and communities of color.

Chapter 2 of the dissertation provides an overview of prior work related to the questions associated with this family strengths study. Chapter 3 provides further conceptualization and contextualization of the research problem, including a summary of a proposed causal model for the relationship between family involvement and student achievement, and a description of the school where the study will be carried out. Chapter 4 includes a detailed description of the research project and methods, Chapter 5 presents the results of the Peck family strengths study, and Chapter 6 presents conclusions, implications and recommendations for educational practice and future research developed on the basis of these results.

CHAPTER 2

PRIOR WORK RELATED TO THIS TOPIC

Family Involvement: Background, Context, Paradigms, and Models

Apparent Consensus and Underlying Differences

As noted in Chapter 1, there is an apparent consensus among researchers in relation to the basic claim that the involvement of adult family members in their children's education is positively correlated with academic achievement among the children. At the same time, and perhaps ironically, a review of related literature quickly establishes that there are significantly different understandings among different stakeholders, as well as among researchers, as to what "counts" as family involvement. And there is even less consensus regarding which behaviors on the part of family members actually result in improved student achievement.

One simple example of this lack of consensus may occur between families and educators with regard to the nature of "family involvement" itself. That is, families and educators may—and I would suggest very often *do*—have different understandings with regard to what constitutes family involvement in children's education. Recognizing such differences in understanding between members of these key stakeholder groups may help us to understand some of the apparent contradictions in relation to research findings in family involvement, such as those between the perceptions of teachers that parents are not involved and do not care cited by DeGaetano (2007) and Crozier (2001) cited earlier in this paper and Dauber and Epstein's (1993) finding that

> Although teachers in . . . urban Chapter 1 schools reported that most parents are not involved and do not want to be . . . parents of students in the same schools tell a different story. They say they are involved with their children but that they need more and better information from teachers about how to help at home" (69).

What is the basis of these apparently contradictory conceptions with regard to whether or not families are "involved" in their children's education? Perhaps more than anything else, that basis reflects core differences in understandings of the nature and locus of family involvement. These differences are perhaps most simply summarized as follows: educators tend to perceive family involvement as something that happens *at school, in a way that is readily visible to teachers*, while parents and guardians tend to think of family involvement as something that happens *at home and other settings outside the school, in contexts rarely observed by teachers*. Casanova (2003) aptly captures this gap between parents' and teachers' perceptions in relation to parent involvement—and the uneasy associated tension—in summarizing a case study by another researcher (Richardson, et. al, 1989):

> A single mother who worked nights at a convenience store explained that she tried to help her son Andy when he needed help but was unable, because of her employment, to support her children as much as she wanted. She commented, "I don't always spend that much time with them (Andy and his sister) cause I'm always at work. . . There's conferences and stuff but I didn't make it. . ." However, she felt she was doing her part: "As far as keeping a roof over their heads and feeding them, I think I've done pretty well." That was not good enough for one of Andy's teachers, who thought his mother was not "real supportive of the school situation."

In other words, recognition of the reality that the very meaning of the term "family involvement" is (perhaps fundamentally) different for different people provides us with a basis for understanding why different people (i.e., a child's teacher and his/her parent or guardian) may have contradictory perceptions of the degree to which the parent/guardian is involved in her/his education. And once we have established this basic recognition, it

is easy to see that terms such as "family involvement" are likely to have *multiple* meanings. This basic insight laid the groundwork for the establishment, over the course of 20+ years, of a typology of family involvement by a team of researchers led by Joyce Epstein, perhaps the most prolific and influential researcher on family involvement in the United States over the past three decades. Epstein's most current typology ("Epstein's Six Types of Involvement"), which is grounded in the acknowledgment that 'family involvement' means different things to different people at different times (and thus that different people—or in fact the same person at different times—may mean different things when referring to 'family involvement,' creating substantial potential for misunderstanding), involves six types, summarized (in terms of the related work of the school) as follows:

> **1—Parenting:** Assisting families with parenting and child-rearing skills, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions that support children as students at each age and grade level. Assist schools in understanding families.
>
> **2—Communicating:** Communicating with families about school programs and student progress through effective school-to-home and home-to-school communications.
>
> **3—Volunteering:** Improving recruitment, training, work, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences at the school or in other locations to support students and school programs.
>
> **4—Learning at home:** Involving families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework and other curriculum-linked activities and decisions.
>
> **5—Decision making:** Including families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy through PTA/PTO, school councils, committees, and other parent organizations.
>
> **6—Collaborating with the community:** Coordinating resources and services *for* families, students, and the school with businesses, agencies, and other groups, and providing services *to* the community.

It is also worth noting here that while each of the first five elements of Epstein's typology can be written (and in fact were originally written in the 1980s) as activities on the part of *parents/families* (e.g., the first one could be written simply as "Set home conditions that support children as students at each age and grade level"), Epstein revised her typology in the late 1990s to be written so as to reflect activity types on the part of *schools*, including adding the 6th type. This shift reflects the distinction introduced early in Chapter 1 between family *involvement* (what parents/families do to participate in their children's education) and family *engagement* (what schools do to develop and support family involvement). The fact that even Epstein, whose work has been at the heart of efforts to understand family involvement and develop family engagement, uses the same term ('family involvement') to refer to both what families do and what schools do can only add to the confusion associated with this term.

In any case, if we agree that "family involvement" is a phrase with multiple referents, it becomes easy to see that parents/guardians may understand themselves to be highly involved in their children's education (where family involvement is understood as, e.g., Epstein's "parenting"), while the same children's school educators may not perceive the parent as involved (where family involvement is understood as, e.g., "volunteering at school"). It also becomes easy to understand how and why the question of the relationship between family involvement and student achievement becomes quite complex. For example one standard thrust in discussions about family involvement among educators is the notion that we need to "get more families into the school" in order to improve student performance The implication here is that there is a causal link between physical presence of more families in the school and improved student

performance. However, while this may feel like a common sense matter, we actually have no immediate evidence for a correlation between the physical presence of families in schools and student performance outcomes. Put alternatively, it is possible that student achievement might be better enhanced by increased family involvement of the types that do not involve families' physical presence in school, i.e., Epstein's 'parenting' and 'school-home communication,' or that it is coming to school for a particular reason (e.g. to discuss one's child's academic progress, as opposed to attending a performance) that makes the difference. How, then, should the relationship between family practices and achievement in school be understood?

Institutional Barriers to Family Involvement

One starting place for seeking this understanding is an examination of the gap between home and school, particularly within the specific context of schools with classically "urban" student populations (low-income students of color) that are staffed primarily by classically "suburban" faculties (middle income Whites). Lightfoot (1978), in one of the pioneering studies of home-school relationships, argues that even before factors of class and race are factored in there exist major "structural discontinuities" between schools and families that automatically create tension and dissonance between these two major institutions of socialization. For example, while parents are focused on their own individual children's interests and needs, the school needs to consider the interests and needs of all children. Lightfoot terms this a difference in *particularistic* vs. *universalistic* expectations. Similarly, the school's fundamental orientation is toward

preparation of children for the future, while families are more oriented toward children's status as a current member of the family unit (Lightfoot, 21-25).

Lightfoot also identifies complex and ambiguous questions about "control and territoriality" in the school-family relationship. For example, while teachers and school staff may feel that they should have authority over what happens in the classroom and in relation to matters such as attendance and keeping children after school, parents may also assume (or demand) this authority. These struggles are often augmented by parents' and teachers' rigid (and negative) stereotypes of each other as well as the reality that "there are very few opportunities for parents and teachers to come together for meaningful, substantive discussion"—from Lightfoot's perspective, that is, PTA meetings and open houses generally serve as "contrived occasions that symbolically reaffirm the idealized parent-school relationship but rarely provide the chance for authentic interaction," and most individualized interactions between parents and teachers are a result of "dissatisfaction, frustration, or anger on the part of parents and/or teachers" (27-28).

Along with identifying these institutional factors associated with virtually all families and schools in the United States, Lightfoot also identifies a range of basic issues of "asymmetry and power" related to issues of families' class status and race/ethnicity.[6] For example, she suggests that, given the reality that teachers are overwhelmingly White and middle-class, they tend as a group to identify with middle class parents, fear "upper" class parents, and look down on poor parents—with the important exception of a tendency to bond with poor parents who accept and reinforce the teacher's authority.

[6] McDermott (1999) provides a case study of local school politics in Connecticut that provides a vivid illustration of how Lightfoot's "structural discontinuities" and issues of "asymmetry and power" combine, at the levels of district and school governance, to maintain a status quo in which it is extremely difficult to achieve greater equity of opportunity among students and families from different class and race backgrounds.

Similarly, teachers and administrators may subscribe to a generalized "myth" about "black and poor" parents—that they "do not care about the education of their children, are passive and unresponsive to attempts by teachers and administrators to get them involved, and are ignorant and naïve about the intellectual and social needs of their children"—when studies suggest, in fact, the opposite (36). All of these factors contribute to Lightfoot's conclusion that "in real life, parents are not helpless, voiceless victims. They are, however, systematically excluded from life inside schools, and the extent of their participation reflects their social class, race, and ethnicity, the teachers' perspective on parents and community, and their individual personalities" (38). As a result, a core part of the child's experience is a daily transition from the family sphere to the school sphere, two spheres that are, as Lightfoot titles her book, "Worlds Apart." While learning to make this transition successfully can have some positive effects in helping students to become "more malleable and responsive to a changing world" (39), the dissonance between families and schools can also affect children negatively, particularly when that dissonance is a reflection of wider social differences of power and status (41).

Lightfoot's claim that schools systematically, if unintentionally, exclude families, and particularly disadvantaged families is echoed and/or amplified in much of the family involvement literature. Comer (1993) locates a critical need for family involvement in low-income and minority communities—more critical than in "middle-class districts"—due to the social gap between educators and families that typically exists in schools serving poor students and students of color. In middle class communities, there is a great deal of mutual reinforcement of values and norms between educators and parents (who

are often friends, colleagues, members of the same clubs and churches, and former schoolmates). Given the lack of such connections and reinforcement in poor or "minority" communities, Comer's model of design/reform of urban schools puts a heavy premium on building family involvement in order to assure mutual reinforcement between home and school so that students do not "rebel against the school teacher and reject the learning situation" (126). Laosa (2005) amplifies Lightfoot's emphasis on the complications of transitions from home to school in focusing strongly on the intercultural aspects of those transitions for students coming from homes that are not White or middle class, and suggests both curricular and family involvement efforts as important steps for schools toward better supporting these students. Edwards (1999) suggests, in turn, that teacher attitudes toward low-income and minority students and families often reflect negative stereotypes due to the reality that teachers simply don't know their students' families well enough to reject such stereotypes. Her model for family involvement programming is based, therefore, on a process of structured listening to parents. Finally, Nakagawa (2000) is explicitly critical of what she identifies as the predominant discourse of family involvement in relation to low-income families/families of color, arguing that the ways in which parent involvement in schools is described in contemporary policy puts parents in what she terms a "double bind"—at the same time they are expected to serve as *protectors* of their children (and their children's schools) by making a major difference in their children's school performance, they (low-income parents) are also viewed as *problems* when they raise concerns about their children's schools or the quality of education they are receiving.

Barriers within the Family

A second major strand of the family involvement literature explores barriers to family involvement located not within the schools but rather within the characteristics and/or struggles of families themselves. Reglin (1993) emphasizes, for example, the stressors facing low-income and African-American families in relation to involvement in their children's education, including those associated with single parenthood and the alienation felt by many African-American parents in relation to the schools in light of historical factors, neighborhood realities, and time and circumstantial constraints such as a lack of transportation. Lareau (1989; 1996), for her part, focuses on what she considers to be a fundamental difference between poor/working-class and middle class families. Her contention is that middle-class parents tend to understand family involvement as something that happens at school and embrace it as such—including involving themselves in the development of school policy (to the chagrin, at times, of educators responsible for policy implementation). Poor/working-class parents, on the other hand, understand family involvement as something that happens primarily at home and want to turn over control of the schooling process (the part that happens at school) to educators, whom they regard as professional and qualified to teach their students. Lareau also emphasizes a cultural gap between families and educators in low-income communities—similar to the gap identified by Comer—that contributes to the powerful "home advantage" she posits for middle-class children in terms of the congruence of goals, values, and communication patterns between their homes and schools in comparison to low-income children.

Evans (2004), finally, is quite direct in identifying the locus of the "family involvement" problem in the home. His contention is that declines in U.S. student achievement in recent decades are due not to a fundamental failure of schools, but rather to a growing "crisis in childrearing": most parents no longer know how to parent, and schools are "much more . . . victims than . . . perpetrators" of this crisis (xi). In Evans' view, an overwhelming number of parents lack the basic understandings and skills associated with the difficult work of effectively socializing students for school success in the context of a rapidly changing society, making it necessary for schools to take on the role of "parenting parents" as essential to family involvement work. While his work represents, in many ways, a more "conservative" strain in its conceptualization of the family involvement problem than that of other researchers considered here, Evans is careful to emphasize that this crisis is not specific to urban or low-income families, but is in fact endemic among the broad range of families in this country. He also avoids an overly apologetic standpoint in relation to schools by acknowledging that there are certainly many areas in which schools also need to improve their work.

Family Involvement Paradigms: A Growing Focus on "Partnership"

Proposed theoretical models for improving family involvement are even more ubiquitous in the related literature than the various explanations of the problem. Writing originally in the late 1970s, Comer (1993) provided an early, and simple, model identifying three levels of parent involvement at a New Haven school with which he and a team of colleagues worked:

> At the first level approximately 1 to 5 percent of the parents worked with the staff in making curriculum and operation policy determinations. The second level is

> where parents participated in the day-to-day life of the school [as "volunteers"]. About 10 to 25 percent are involved here. The third was the broad-based activities of the school which involved 50 to 100 percent of the parents (141).

This model is attractive in its simplicity—that is, one can easily imagine a school leadership team setting as a goal the establishment of exactly this model with similar target percentages for family involvement at each level. What is additionally interesting about this parent involvement model is that it was generated out of practice, i.e., the social workers at one of the schools where the Yale/Comer school "intervention" model was first implemented in the late 1960s/early 1970s identified this three-level model through a review of actual patterns of parent involvement in response to questions raised by an external evaluation team (Comer 1993: 141).

However, the very simplicity of this (early) Comer model is problematic in at least three ways. First, it fails to take into account one of the fundamental insights associated with Epstein's typology of family involvement,[7] which is that family involvement does not happen only (or even primarily) at school, but also at home. Second, it provides limited opportunity for understanding links between family involvement and student achievement. And finally, adopting it as-is leaves schools at risk of focusing primarily on *activities* as constitutive of their family involvement efforts. An understanding of the drawbacks of a simplified understanding of family involvement helps explain why, with notable exceptions,[8] the majority of the researchers considered here focus, based on their understandings of the nature of the less-than-desirable state of

[7] It is worth noting here that while Epstein's "six types" comprise the most well-known and influential typology, the research base includes other typologies, e.g., Henderson & Mapp's (2002) simple "at-home and at-school" framework; Patrikakou *et al*'s (1999) "enriched" version of this framework, which adds "communication" as a third home-school relation type; and Patrikakou *et al*'s (2005) "ecological perspective." [See Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, & Walberg (2005), pp. 8-11.]

[8] E.g. Evans and, perhaps/partially Lareau, among the researchers considered in the prior section.

family involvement in children's schooling, on family-school *partnerships* as a core concept and goal for schools' family involvement efforts.

The focus on partnerships is a logical extension of researchers' various (and generally complementary) analyses of the barriers to family involvement. That is, if the problem is that existing school-family interactions tend to be contrived, ritualistic, and lacking in substance (Lightfoot), grounded in myths and stereotypes, mutual misunderstandings, and/or social and cultural distance between educators and families (Comer, Edwards, Laosa, Lareau), or heavily influenced by circumstances that make parent/guardian participation in school activities logistically difficult (Reglin), then it makes little sense to organize schools' family involvement efforts around activities that reinforce these barriers. Instead, the core question currently posed by many family-school researchers has become not "What activities can schools organize to involve parents?" but rather "How can schools develop meaningful partnerships with their students' families?"[9] This way of framing the question allows for much richer definitions and understandings of parent/family involvement than those associated with more traditional, activity-oriented perspectives. Reynolds & Clements (2005), for example, offer the following definition of parent/family involvement within the context of school-family partnerships:

> [Parent/family involvement is] . . . behavior with or on behalf of children at home or in school, attitudes and beliefs about parenting or education, and expectations for children's future. Common indicators include home support for learning,

[9] One way of recognizing the shift to "partnership" as the preeminent conceptual paradigm is to note the naming of the Johns Hopkins University's "National Network of Partnership Schools," established in 1996 by Dr. Joyce Epstein, who as already noted is widely acknowledged as the most seminal and influential researcher and scholar on parent/family involvement over the past three decades. The point here is that the JHU center names itself in terms of "partnership" rather than "parent involvement" or "family involvement" (see http://www.csos.jhu.edu/P2000). Similarly, the name of the National PTA's current flagship parent involvement program is "Building Successful Partnerships" (see http://www.pta.org/local_leadership_subprogram_1116958575937.html).

> parenting practices, child-parent interactions, participation in school activities, involvement in school associations, involvement in school governance or in community activities, and expectations for children's success or educational attainment.

Psychologically-oriented Paradigms

Given the current prevalence of school-family partnerships as the desired paradigm for family involvement work by schools, it is important to explore models aimed at providing the groundwork for partnership development. One strand of the partnership research is oriented toward what might be considered the "psychology" of family involvement. For example, in conceptualizing school-family partnerships as a matter of shared responsibility between schools and families, Christenson, Godber, & Anderson (2005) acknowledge "structural" matters (those associated with approaches to inviting and welcoming families to the school and addressing logistical issues such as scheduling needs and child care). However, they also heavily emphasize questions of "psychology"—issues of attitudes, stereotypes, efficacy and culture that "direct the course partnerships can take" (p. 31). Their model for schools' efforts to build partnerships with families focuses, then, on "four A's"-- Approach, Attitudes, Atmosphere, Actions.

Similarly, Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, and Sandler's (2005) model for family involvement involves heavy emphasis on core issues of, and recommendations to schools for improving, parent/guardian *motivation* for involvement in their children's education, which they view as a matter of three elements: parents' construction of their own roles in relation to their children's education; parents' sense of efficacy in involving themselves with their children's schooling/learning process; and parents' perceptions of whether the

school is truly inviting them to be involved. Working from these basic motivational considerations, Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, and Sandler posit three "levels" of intermediate connecting variables between the decision by parents/ guardians to get involved and actual impact on their child's success: the actual form(s) of involvement chosen, the way(s) in which this involvement impacts student behaviors and performance, and the degree to which the parent/guardian's specific involvement activities mesh with the needs of the child and the school. (See Figure 1.)

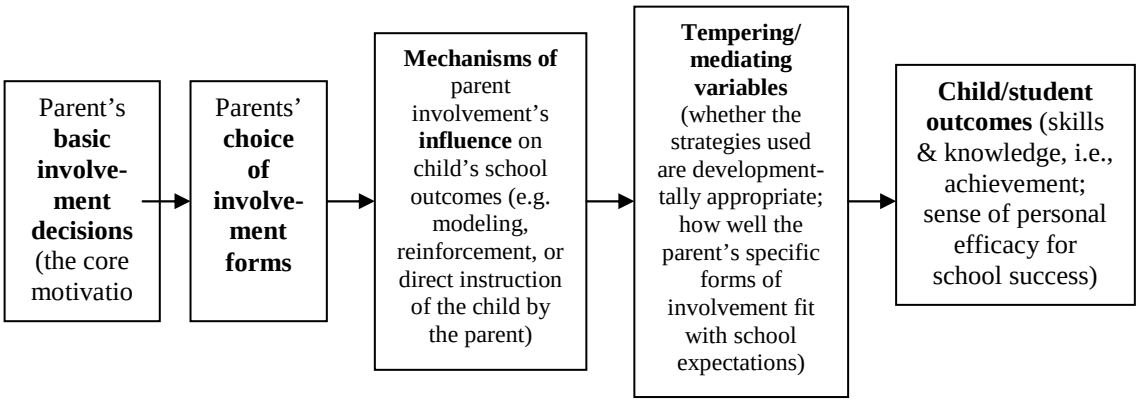

Figure 1. *Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, and Sandler's Five "Levels" of the Parental Involvement Process.*

This model is interesting and important in that, unlike many models, it clearly posits a causal connection between parent/guardian involvement and student outcomes, along with providing a set of general recommendations for schools in supporting parents in making the basic decision to get involved in their children's schooling. At the same time, in casting individual parent *motivation* as the "prime mover" of family involvement, Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, and Sandler's model lacks serious consideration of wider social factors (particularly those associated with poverty) that may affect parent/guardian

motivation and/or impede involvement efforts on the part of families who may be motivated but lack the time and/or means to act on this motivation.

Davis-Kean & Eccles (2005) offer a third psychologically-oriented model for school-family partnerships that attempts to broaden the focus from the individual parent/guardian to include the systems that surround a schoolchild—specifically, the family, the school, and the wider community organizations and institutions that impact a child's development. This model is grounded in an analogy to the cognitive science concept of executive function to present a "social executive function" model of child development, in which responsibility for coordination of a child's development moves from the family alone in very early childhood to being shared between families, schools, and communities as the child reaches school age. Their recommendations for school-family partnership development focus, as a result, on steps that can be taken to establish and improve "coordination between executive functionaries" representing each of these groups of major influence on the child. Unfortunately, while their model is based in an acknowledgement that each of the systems making up the desired set of "executive functionaries" needs the support of the other systems (e.g., the family needs support from the school, and vice versa, and both of these systems need broader community support), it also appears to assume that each of these systems actually has available to it what the others lack—so that effectively supporting the child is viewed as a matter of strong coordination among systems that function, independently, more or less effectively. This leaves us, however, a difficult question: what happens if one or more of the "executive functionary systems" is dysfunctional in its own right and/or simply lacks the resources needed to effectively play its role in the overall executive functionary scheme?

Culturally- and Community-oriented Models

A second strand of family involvement/family-school partnership models involves a stronger emphasis on cultural and neighborhood/ community considerations than on individual psychology. Laosa (2005), as noted earlier, focuses strongly on students' intercultural transitions between home and school (as opposed to the social-structural transitions emphasized by Lightfoot). His model connects curricular interventions to support students in cross-cultural transitions (e.g. culturally sensitive instruction, multicultural education, two-way bilingual education, cooperative learning groups) with school-family partnership development, regarding which he provides a set of recommendations garnered from Boethel's (2003) research review regarding diversity in relation to family involvement:

1. Adopt formal policies promoting parent involvement, including explicit focus on engaging families reflecting student diversity;
2. Demonstrate active and ongoing support from the school principal;
3. Honor families' hopes, concerns, and efforts in regard to their children's education;
4. Acknowledge both commonalities and differences among students and families;
5. Strengthen school staff's capacity to work well with families;
6. Provide supports to help families understand how schools work and what is expected of families and students;
7. Make outreach a priority (through a comprehensive outreach plan); *and*
8. Recognize that it takes time to build trust.

These are of course excellent general recommendations—who could disagree? Nevertheless, Laosa's model is potentially quite useful as a reference point for strategic planning for family involvement, not *only* because of the cross-cultural focus but also

because Laosa posits an intrinsic connection between family involvement work and curricular interventions. That is, he provides a "meta-model" for exploring the relationship between family involvement and what I have named earlier as "internal improvements", giving us a glimpse of how a complex, culturally competent approach to addressing family involvement might fit within an overall strategic school improvement process. Along with getting much more specific about how the pieces of such an overall school improvement process might fit together, one place where this connection needs to be further strengthened for our purposes is in assessing the sorts of curricular interventions Laosa suggests (e.g. two-way bilingual education, multicultural education) within the wider context of instructional and overall improvement pressures in our era of standards-based instruction and accountability.

Scribner, Young, & Pedroza (1999) provide a similar focus on intercultural questions in building collaborative relationships with parents in the context of their wider study of lessons learned from "high-performing Hispanic schools" (specifically, eight schools serving Mexican-American students in the border region between southwestern Texas and northeastern Mexico). They identify five areas of "best practice" observed in school-family relationships in their study process:

1. Build on cultural values of Hispanic parents (e.g. understanding Latino families' experiences with US culture & schooling, strength of extended family, & Latino culture);

2. Stress personal contact [rather than mass communication] with parents (opportunities for positive interaction, small talk, phone calls & home visits);

3. Foster communication with parents (initiate communication, make information accessible, create opportunities for shared experiences between parents & children);

4. Create a warm environment for parents (welcome parents, show empathy, engage students & parents); *and*

5. Facilitate structural accommodations for parent involvement (parent centers, teaming [among teachers] to make contact easier for parents, organize PACs [i.e., working groups of parents on different issues rather than a single "in group" that makes all decisions]).

It is worth noting that four of the five best practice areas they identify are focused primarily on communication and relationship-building, and that the one area specifically focused on structural efforts and specific activities (#5) is also the only one that may be considered as extending beyond Laosa's recommendations. Laosa and Scribner, Young, & Pedroza share, in other words, a great deal of common ground. One way of seeing this is to note that they both focus primarily on the cultural values and strengths families from non-dominant cultures bring to the school-family relationship rather than on the difficulties faced by these families, and suggest (fairly general) approaches that schools can take to embrace these values and build on family strengths.

Taylor (2005) also focuses on the families of students outside the US cultural and economic mainstream—those of African-American and other economically disadvantaged students, to be specific—but includes significant consideration of the challenges facing these families. His model shares, in other words, some similarities with that of Davis-Kean & Eccles in its acknowledgment that family and school are not the only major players in children's lives—i.e., neighborhoods/communities also have substantial impact—while differing in its specific emphasis on the conditions faced by families in poor communities. He emphasizes the impact of several factors (neighborhoods, economic resources, and the availability of emotional support) on parents' child-rearing practices, noting for example that while an "authoritative" (as opposed to "authoritarian" or "passive") style of parenting is often considered to be the best approach, neighborhood conditions faced by disadvantaged families may make an

authoritarian style better suited for assuring the safety of their children. Thinking within this context, Taylor proposes a set of steps that schools can take to enhance social/emotional well-being of economically disadvantaged students that includes a call for efforts on schools' part to advance African-American (and other poor) families' financial circumstances and social networks. His model is, in other words, extremely comprehensive in calling for initiatives by schools that go far beyond traditional approaches to family involvement. One concern here is that Taylor may be calling upon schools to do far more than existing resources and time allow in light of the competing demands already faced by educators.

Family Involvement in Low-income Puerto Rican Communities

Existing research on the involvement of parents and guardians of low-income Puerto Rican children in their children's education is relatively limited. Hidalgo's chapter on the role of mothers and grandmothers in the education of their children, and Rolon's chapter relating the findings of a qualitative study about ten Puerto Rican high school girls, in Nieto's (2000) *Puerto Rican Students in U.S. Schools,* identify several familiar (perhaps classic) themes related to this topic:

i. Parents' belief that the schools can provide their children with opportunities for development that go beyond what they themselves can offer;

ii. The struggle involved in parents' providing "the basics" (food, housing, stability, etc.) for their children in light of poverty;

iii. Parents' emphasis on providing protective spaces for their children in light of the dangers in their neighborhoods;

iv. The central role of extended family members (grandmothers, in the case of the families Hidalgo studied) in supporting their children's learning; and

v. Researchers' concern that many Puerto Rican parents do not have the academic content knowledge required to directly support their children's education at the high school level.

In a review of several books that includes Nieto's, Casanova (2003) expands on these themes in emphasizing the difficulties for Puerto Rican parents associated with being consistently present or volunteering at school, and the related sense that their involvement in their children's education occurs primarily at home (which relates to Epstein's "parenting" and "learning at home" types, particularly monitoring homework). Volk (1992) supports the idea that understanding Puerto Rican parents' involvement entails a focus on learning at home in emphasizing the high percentage of instances of "instructional intent" in the utterances of mothers of kindergarten students of Puerto Rican descent and, in a later paper with a colleague (Volk and de Acosta 2003), providing ethnographic data and analysis about the "network of adults and children in their homes [i.e., the homes of mainland Puerto Rican kindergarteners] who support their developing literacy" via "syncretic literacy practices," i.e., creative integration of oral and written texts (in-home conversation and reading together with children) so as to affirm and extend the cultural context in which the children are being raised. Lopez (2001) also argues for the need for understanding the involvement of "(im)migrant" families in their children's education as different from schools' expectation of parent participation in specific activities organized by the school (attending meetings, volunteering, etc.) in presenting the case of a family within which the parents viewed the cultivation of a strong work ethic—via taking their children to work—as a way of teaching the children the value of education and, as such, being involved in their children's education. Guilamo-Ramos et al. (2007) provide a perspective on the parenting practices of the mothers of Puerto Rican (and Dominican) adolescents that emphasizes the centrality of

assuring their children's safety through close monitoring, and of high-quality mother-child relationships and communication—again, practices and behaviors that occur *outside* the school—in these mothers' accounts of how they support their children.

Perhaps the most interesting and important research about Puerto Rican families' involvement in their children's education for the purposes of this study is the work of Hine (1993) and Antrop-Gonzalez, et al. (2005) to identify common "factors" contributing to the academic success of two groups of high-achieving high school students of Puerto Rican descent. Hine's analysis of in-depth interviews of ten "gifted" Puerto Rican students and their parents revealed eight "common factors which supported academic achievement" in the students' home environments:

i. Press for achievement;
ii. Press for language development;
iii. High educational and occupational aspirations;
iv. Strong family support system;
v. Family bond;
vi. Optimistic outlook/lack of defeatism;
vii. Discomfort with cultural stereotypes/reaction to teacher and community expectations;
viii. School and extracurricular involvement/"social bonding."

In interviewing 10 high-achieving Puerto Rican urban high school students to identify factors related to their success, Antrop-Gonzalez's and his colleagues' focus was not specifically on the the students' home environments, and they identified a smaller but broader set of common factors:

i. the acquisition of social capital through religiosity and participation in school and community-based extracurricular activities;

ii. having a strong Puerto Rican identity;

iii. the influence of these students' mothers on their academic achievement;

iv. the potential for caring teachers and other school staff to influence high academic achievement.

Nevertheless, the third factor they identified (the influence of the students' mothers) is specific to the home environment and family involvement. Antrop-Gonzalez et al. articulate several specific ways in which the students' mothers influenced their academic achievement:

- By helping their children with their homework and/or seeking out resources that would support their children's learning when the mother felt she could not be of direct help (examples included after-school programs, tutoring support, and college information);
- By establishing a relational context combining loving support and high expectations (including, in some cases, emphasizing the importance of their children's *not* dropping out of high school as they themselves had) such that their children felt obligated to make them proud by achieving academically; and
- By serving as friends and mentors when their children experienced need or personal crisis.

This perspective is supported by Henry, et al (2008), who measured the impact of *familismo* ("a high degree of loyalty, respect for, and obligation to one's family members") on student achievement and determined that "high maternal academic expectations and academic monitoring from both father and mother had the most significant impact on GPA" (as paraphrased in Chenevert 2010). Additionally, elements of the first and second factors (religiosity and a strong Puerto Rican identity) are also highly likely to be related to the home contexts and family relationships.

Hine's eight home environment factors supporting academic success among Puerto Rican adolescents, as well as the success factors identified by Antrop-Gonzalez et al.—especially the practices associated with the positive impact that the students' mothers had on their performance—are potentially important touchstones against which to consider the data gathered in the interviews carried out in the current study of the strengths of the families of low-income Puerto Rican students.

Strengths/asset-based models of family development

One of the most important movements in the field of social work (and more specifically, the sub-field of family development) during the past three decades has been that away from approaches to family support and development that focus primarily on families' weaknesses (and in some cases pathologize families), toward approaches aimed at identifying and building on family strengths. Trivette & Dunst (1990) provide a brief overview of the development of research on family strengths through the 1980s, noting that efforts to *assess* family strengths, as well as practice aimed at supporting families in building on their strengths, were central to this research from its beginnings. Ronnau's work in the early 1990s provides helpful examples of the development of this movement in providing, first, a rationale for the strengths approach (Ronnau, 1990) and a subsequent discussion of family strengths assessment tools and principles/examples associated with putting such tools to work (Ronnau & Poertner, 1993). Finally, Early & GlenMaye (2000) distinguish the strengths perspective from a variety of approaches to working with families from the history of social work, including diagnostic approaches, the psychosocial approach, the problem-solving approach, and family therapy.

The 1980s and 1990s also saw a related focus on the study of resilient families, i.e., those able to adapt effectively to change and crisis, led by Olson (e.g., Olson *et al* 1983) and McCubbin & McCubbin, and relating back to earlier work by Otto (1962, 1963). This research often focused on military families as prototypes of families that often need to struggle with both normal and catastrophic setbacks. McCubbin & McCubbin (1988) identify several typologies of resilient families, emphasizing that key characteristics of such families differ across ethnic/racial lines.

By the mid-1990s Weick & Saleebey (1995) summarized the status of the family strengths movement by noting that while professional discourse about families was still "often articulated in the language of pathology, deficit, disorder and disorganization" and that the theory and practice of family support remained often focused on "the problem family and family problems" (p. 144), there was simultaneously an important counter-current of thinking and working with families involving a strengths-oriented approach, which they believed was the direction in which family theory and social work practice needed to move in order to reflect social realities at the turn of the millennium. Weick & Saleebey identified social workers' embracing the following principles as essential to the family strengths approach:

- All families, regardless of their structure or history, have valuable capacities, resources, skills, motivations, and visions that must be tapped in helping them gain more control over their daily lives**.** In particular, there are three key dimensions in assessing families for the purpose of family development work: the discovery of strengths; the invitation to families to tell important family and cultural stories that account for their present life; and a specific accounting of their hopes, dreams, and visions.[10]

[10] There is of course a striking overlap between the approach to assessment for family development articulated in the mid-1990s by Weick & Saleeby and the principles of Appreciative Inquiry as associated with organizational (primarily corporate) development articulated by Cooperrider and his colleagues during roughly the same time period.

- Families can only be effectively understood as existing within a political, economic, racial, and social context—that is, attempts to understand families independently of this context will only lead to misunderstanding and inappropriate attempts to define "normal" vs. "abnormal" families.

- Family change cannot be effectively accomplished only by focusing on addressing problems and crises; rather it must include a focus on the family's own goals and on supporting the family to meet these goals and to participate in the wider community/ society.

- The family's own culture (its "love, tools, narratives, myths, and rituals"), and its own stories (as opposed to a social worker's or therapist's narratives about the family) are a crucial source of potential for each family.

- Finally, "fostering the empowerment of families requires helpers to become the agents of the family, respectful of its knowledge and understanding, attuned to its decisions and choices, and ready to use the family's own expertise" (Weick & Saleeby, 148).

As the family strengths movement and research base has continued to develop, so have family strengths assessment tools and strategies, together with efforts to put these principles into practice on a wider and wider scale. In his introduction to a special edition of *Families In Society* focused on the strengths-based approach, Saleebey (2001) describes a range of work focusing on both contemporary family strengths assessment tools and specific instances of family development practice utilizing a strengths-based approach, noting as well that "the strengths perspective . . . clearly is still developing and . . . requires a serious change of heart and mind . . . [a] realization that the work to be done, in the end, depends on the resources, reserves, and assets in and around the individual, family, or community" (p. 221).

The proliferation of research and assessment tools related to family strengths has resulted in a wide variety of both general definitions of family strengths and itemizations of what characteristics and activities of families actually "count" as the sort of family strengths that can be drawn upon in family development efforts. In a recent research

brief on family strengths, Moore *et al* (2002) provide a simple, overall definition of family strengths as:

> . . . the set of relationships and processes that support and protect families and family members, especially during times of adversity and change. Family strengths help to maintain family cohesion while also supporting the development and well-being of individual family members (p. 1).

Moore *et al* also suggest that family strengths involve a combination of family *relationships* (interactions and mutual treatment) and family *processes* (what families do to support their members). More specifically, they suggest six constructs/measures—five related to processes and one related to relationships—regarding which many American families generally do quite (in fact, surprisingly) well, according to survey data that they cite. These constructs include:

(1) parental positive mental health;

(2) household routines;

(3) time use;

(4) communication and praise;

(5) monitoring, supervision, and involvement;

(6) parent-child warmth and supportiveness.

However, the range of constructs considered to count as essential family strengths varies considerably, as noted by Early (2001) in a review of family strengths assessment instruments. In discussing (among others) the following assessment instruments, Early gives a sense of the breadth of this range of constructs regarding what count as family strengths:

- Family Resources Scale (FRS): "measures tangible and intangible resources that are considered important for families with young children . . . [including] major components of both internal and external supports, such as food,

shelter, financial resources, transportation, time to be with family and friends, toys for the children, and vacation or leisure" (226).

- Family Functioning Styles Scale (FFSS): measures "interactional patterns, family values, coping strategies, family commitment, and resource mobilization" (226).
- Family Support Scale (FSS): measures "the degree to which potential sources of social support have been helpful to families . . . Potential sources of support range from particular family members to various professionals and service providers with whom the family may be involved" (227).
- Family Empowerment Scale: emphasizes the degree to which "clients [are] active in their own change efforts . . . [reflecting] three levels of empowerment (family, service system, community/political)" (227).
- Family Assessment Device (FAD): "intended to measure a number of instrumental, emotional, and psychological aspects of family functioning, including problem solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, and behavior control" (228).

In other words, questions surrounding the itemization and assessment of specific family strengths continue to reflect the reality that families themselves are complex, and that this complexity becomes even more vivid when the social contexts and networks within which all families operate are taken into account.

Given these complexities associated with *assessing* family strengths, what about the *practice* of strengths-based family development work? In distinguishing strengths-based from other forms of family development work (particularly the "problem-solving approach", which they view as the most dominant paradigm for family development efforts through the end of the prior century), Early & GlenMaye (2000) provide a concise and useful characterization of strengths-based work, which they summarize in Table 2.1.

Despite Early & GlenMaye's claim that the practice of the strengths-based approach with families has lagged substantially behind its theoretical articulation, there is at least one context in which this practice has advanced quite significantly over the last

Table 2.1: Comparison of major foci of problem-solving and strengths approaches.

Helping Process	Problem-Solving Approach	Strengths-Based Approach
Initial contact	Identifying and defining the problem. Client, social worker, significant systems contribute to the definition of the problem.	Defining client's vision and hopes for the future. Definition of vision and hopes originates with client.
Goal identification	Stated in terms of client's and social worker's solutions to the problem and the agency's role in facilitating a solution. Goals are bounded by the role and structure of the agency and the capacity of the client. Social worker brings "reality" to the process.	Positively stated in terms of the client's vision and according to client's definition and meaning of the situation. Goals are bounded by the creativity of the client and worker. Social worker elicits strengths and hidden capacities and fosters creative thinking.
Assessment	Problem-based identification of client's needs and factors contributing to the problem. Assessment includes resources and strengths, but primary focus is on identifying and targeting the most critical contributing factors to the problem.	Strengths assessment focusing on identifying what client is doing to make things better, what works, what will facilitate the continuation of desired behaviors and situations. Primary focus of assessment is on what client is doing "right" in relation to goals and vision.
Intervention	Mutually chosen, but based on reasonable and feasible goals. Focus on choosing among alternative solutions to the problem, with consideration of possible barriers to solutions, agency contingencies, and worker expertise.	Mutual strategizing around building on strengths, skills, knowledge, desires toward client-defined goals. Collaborative exploration of strategies with focus on identifying internal, external, created, and naturally occurring resources.
Evaluation bases	Goal attainment based on whether problem has been solved or decreased from an objectivist standpoint.	Goal attainment as continuously defined and redefined by client from a subjectivist standpoint.

Source: Early & GlenMaye (2000), p. 124.

15 years: the implementation of the Family Development Credential (FDC) program originated at Cornell University in the late 1990s and subsequently adopted by the State of New York as its training program for front-line social work staff (Family Development Credential, n.d.). Based in the theories of human development and empowerment elaborated by Bronfenbrenner, Cochran, and colleagues through the landmark “Family Matters” study (Cochran & Henderson, 1986) and translated into training curricula by

Forest (c.f. Forest & Palmer-House, 2003), the FDC program is based in a set of 11 core principles (Forest & Palmer-House, n.d.):

1. All people and all families have strengths.

2. All families need and deserve support. How much and what kind of support varies throughout life.

3. Most successful families are not dependent on long-term public support. They maintain a healthy interdependence with extended family, friends, other people, spiritual organizations, cultural and community groups, schools and agencies, and the natural environment.

4. Diversity (race, ethnicity, gender, class, family form, religion, physical and mental ability, age, sexual orientation) is an important reality in our society, and is valuable. Family workers need to understand oppression in order to learn to work skillfully with families from all cultures.

5. The deficit approach, which requires families to show what is wrong in order to receive services, is counterproductive to helping families move toward self-reliance.

6. Changing from the deficit model to the family development approach requires a whole new way of thinking, not simply more new programs. Individual workers cannot make this shift without corresponding policy changes at agency, state, and federal levels.

7. Families need coordinated services in which all the agencies they work with use a similar approach. Collaboration at the local, state, and federal levels is crucial to effective family development.

8. Families and family development workers are equally important partners in this process, with each contributing important knowledge. Workers learn as much as the families from the process.

9. Families must choose their own goals and methods of achieving them. Family development workers' roles include helping families set reachable goals for their own self-reliance, providing access to services needed to reach these goals, and offering encouragement.

10. Services are provided so families can reach their goals, and are not themselves a measure of success. New methods of evaluating agency effectiveness are needed to measure family and community outcomes, not just the number of services provided.

11. For families to move out of dependency, helping systems must shift from a "power over" to a "shared power" paradigm. Human service workers have power

> (which they may not recognize) because they decide who gets valued resources. Workers can use that power to work with families rather than use power over them.

At this point over 5,000 workers in New York have participated in training and received the FDC, and 15 other states and the District of Columbia have established worker training programs affiliated with the Cornell/New York State program (Family Development Credential, n.d.). While there have been limited opportunities to study the longitudinal impact of strengths-based family development work on large numbers of families, recent research suggests that gaining the FDC has had a substantial impact on the social workers involved (based on both their own self-perceptions) and on the approach these workers take to engaging with the families with which they work (based on family members' perceptions).[11]

In other words, strengths-based family development work is well-established and gaining momentum in the world of social work outside schools. There is, however, little or no evidence of such a movement within the world of public schooling. That is, despite wide agreement on the importance of the family in relation to student achievement, there are few citations in the literature of school-based programs in which educators systematically work to identify the strengths of their students' families and then work to develop programming (either internally, i.e., in-school curriculum or teacher education) or among families (e.g., family outreach and/or education) grounded in these strengths.[12]

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[11] Cf. the Cornell FDC program's "Current Research" webpage (Current research, n.d.) for a listing of related references.

[12] As an example, reviews of the research, resources, and publications on the websites of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships (Epstein's base at Johns Hopkins University, found at http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/center.htm) and the Harvard Family Research Project (www.hfrp.org)–two of the most comprehensive and progressive centers for the study and promotion of family involvement/engagement in children's education—resulted in identification of only one resource that appeared to include a focus on family strengths. This was a brief article (Moore, 2011) in the HFEP's *Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE)* Newsletter, in an issue focused on "emerging leaders in

Instead, most school-based family involvement programs focus, as noted earlier in this review, much more on getting family members into the school and telling them what educators believe they need to know and do than on listening to what family members already know and do, then working to determine how to build on family knowledge and skills in creating a vision and program for working together.

The exceptions to this lack of a strengths-based perspective in school-based family engagement programming are nevertheless instructive. Luis Moll and Norma Gonzalez, in particular, have continuously developed their "funds of knowledge" framework over the past 20 years (Moll *et al*, 1992; González *et al*, 1995, 2001, 2002), within which teams of teachers have been trained in ethnographic methods that they have subsequently used to interview their students' adult family members in order to identify "the accumulated bodies of knowledge of the households" (Moll *et al* 1992, p. 133)—specifically, practical knowledge in such areas as farming, mining, business, medicine, etc. While the original purpose of this teacher action research project was primarily to identify areas in which family knowledge could be integrated into the school curriculum, Moll and Gonzalez's focus over time has shifted toward an emphasis on the importance of teachers' learning ethnographic fieldwork skills—as, potentially, an essential part of teacher training—so that teachers can understand and validate students' identities and the family knowledge students bring with them as a basis for future learning.

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family engagement" by a Family Partnership Advocate from the Federal Way, WA Public Schools in which the author articulates a "vision for family, school, and community engagement [that] focuses on enhancing parents' strengths as partners in their child's education." However, rather than identifying a need to identify those strengths as a starting point, Moore immediately states that her vision "means exposing them [parents] to new knowledge so that they can become more informed, prepared, and empowered to improve their child's long-term academic success inside and outside of the education system."

While extremely rich as a resource for effective ethnographic approaches to working with parents, in other words, the family "assessment" work in which Moll & Gonzalez have engaged teachers has been more focused on identifying family *knowledge* (what families know and are able to do *practically*) than on identifying family strengths vis-à-vis their children's learning, i.e., what families know and do in order to support their children to be successful in school. Patricia Edwards (Edwards *et al*, 1999), on the other hand, proposes a model of "learning to listen to parents" focused on teachers' development of an understanding of the home literacy environments from which their students come, based on the following concerns about teachers of "at-risk students" in the current educational status quo (pp. 6-12):

1. Teachers do not have access to the "hidden" literacies and "funds of knowledge" in the everyday lives of families and their children.
2. Teachers should be taught to recognize when home and school cultures are not compatible.
3. Teachers tend to ignore the "cultural variables" (i.e., social organization, sociolinguistics, cognition, and motivation) and potential "cultural conflicts" (i.e., learning style, interactional or relational style, communication, and differing perceptions of involvement) that contribute to the disconnection between home and school literacies.
4. Teachers sometimes "rush to judgment" and hold false assumptions about families and children and are unaware of their own "cultural baggage".

In order to address these concerns, Edwards and her colleagues propose an intensive ethnographic model in which to engage teachers in preparing for, carrying out, documenting, and interpreting ethnographic field work aimed at gathering and using parent stories in order to strengthen classroom practice with "at-risk" students.

The system promoted by Edwards clearly has an identification of family strengths as a method of improving educational outcomes for at-risk students as a primary goal.

However, two aspects of this system are worth noting. First, the system's identified locus for change is the individual teacher rather than the school: that is, the model she presents involves individual teachers' carrying out ethnographic field research with the parents of at-risk students in their classrooms in order to develop and implement plans and activities in the classroom reflecting the stories these individual parents tell, rather than having the research inform school-wide family involvement efforts. Second, Edwards's model is extremely labor-intensive for teachers, involving a cycle of activities beginning with analysis of which students to interview, development of individualized interview protocols, documentation and interpretation of interviews (including writing ethnographic memos), brainstorming of ideas, and final development of plans for in-class activities reflecting parent stories. While there is no doubt that teachers stand to learn a great deal from utilizing Edwards's model for collecting parent stories, there is significant doubt about its viability as an approach that can be brought to any significant scale among teachers in an urban school setting, in light of the multiple demands these teachers already face as well as the reality that a very high percentage of their students can be considered "at-risk" by virtually any definition.

In other words, while there are interesting and important programmatic and methodological "relatives" to a school-based process of identifying family strengths for the purposes of planning family involvement initiatives and changing school culture by changing teacher perceptions, the Family Strengths Project proposed here is original in that it:

A. Is focused on long-term development of school-based family involvement programming based in an assessment of family strengths;

B. Involves school faculty and staff in core research and/or in responding to research in a way that is specific, time-limited, and collectivized (rather than individualized);

C. Involves consideration of the impact on school faculty and staff of engaging in the family strengths identification process; and

D. Is focused on families in a high-poverty Puerto Rican community context.

CHAPTER 3

FURTHER CONCEPTUALIZATION AND CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

The review in the prior chapter identifies various strands of research related to the topic of the strengths of families of children of Puerto Rican descent in supporting those children's education. It shows that there is substantial research about, and there are multiple models related to, family involvement in children's education in general; there is a much smaller body of research specifically about family involvement in the education of low-income Puerto Rican children; and there is substantial research about strengths-based approaches to family development in the field of social work. However, it is difficult to find even a single reference to systematic efforts on the part of one or more *schools* to utilize a strengths-based approach to effectively strengthen efforts to engage students' families in their children's education. In light of this lack of related prior work on the part of schools, and in light of some of the questions posed in Chapter 1 about the relationship between family involvement and student achievement, it is worth exploring and articulating some observations about possible implications of the available literature for this study, as well as developing an understanding of the context in which the study was carried out, i.e. the Peck Full Service Community School. In doing so I hope to both further "motivate" the question for readers and set the groundwork for the final portions of this dissertation, which include presentation and analysis of the results of the Peck Family Strengths Study and a set of implications and recommendations for related practice and policy.

Home as the Critical Location for Involvement among Puerto Rican Families

The first significant and relevant hypothesis to be drawn from available prior work is that the involvement of family members of Puerto Rican children of limited economic means in their children's education happens primarily *outside* the school building rather than at school. This is not to claim that Puerto Rican parents never attend meetings, conferences, open houses, IEP meetings, or other activities at school. However, among the studies of Puerto Rican family involvement available for review, there is consensus that this involvement cannot be identified or understood via examination of parent/family activities at school (cf., e.g., Hidalgo 2000; Lopez 2001). As Casanova (2003) puts it,

> Parent involvement is generally understood in terms of participation in specific activities such as belonging to the PTA/PTO and participating in fundraisers, as well as volunteer work in parent advisory councils or school governance boards. It also includes overseeing homework and other activities that supplement schoolwork. Parents [of Puerto Rican children of limited economic means] . . . may not be able to volunteer in the school or participate in school activities. . . Volunteering is an unaffordable luxury for most poor urban or rural parents. (p. 230)

Available studies of Puerto Rican family involvement suggest, instead, that this involvement happens primarily in the home and/or community outside the school, and in some cases in manners not traditionally identified as "involvement in education." Thus Volk (1992) and Volk and de Acosta (2003) emphasize instructional intent and support for literacy development on the part of adults and older siblings in the daily home lives of Puerto Rican kindergarten children; multiple researchers emphasize Puerto Rican mothers' focus on providing safe and protective spaces for their children in the context of

neighborhoods perceived as dangerous, (Hidalgo 2000; Rolon 2000; Guilamo-Ramos et al 2007); Lopez (2001) argues that "involvement" can be understood "indirectly" in terms of family practices that communicate the value of an education; and Hine (1993), Antrop-Gonzalez et al (2005), and Henry et al (2008) found that what high-achieving Puerto Rican high school students had in common were home environments in which their parents/guardians (particularly their mothers) established strong and supportive interpersonal bonds with them, set high expectations for their school achievement, and monitored and helped with their school work (and found external help when unable to help themselves). With these studies in mind, and no available prior work pointing to high rates of involvement *at school* on the part of Puerto Rican families of limited economic means, it seems reasonable to surmise that efforts to build on family strengths in engaging such families in improving their children's academic achievement are likely to emphasize support for family involvement that happens *at home* rather than *at school.*

The idea that family engagement efforts aimed at supporting involvement at home may be better aligned than those primarily intended to increase involvement at school with the characteristics of, and situations faced by, Puerto Rican families is congruent with a second hypothesis arising from an analysis of prior work on the topic of family involvement: that involvement at home has a greater positive impact on student achievement than involvement at school. This analysis arises from consideration of the distinction between correlation and causality in terms of the relationship between family involvement and student achievement. That is, as noted in Chapter 1, while common sense suggests a strong relationship between family involvement and student achievement, and research over the past three decades has consistently affirmed that there

is indeed a clear correlation, the assumption in that research often appears to be that student achievement is a result of family involvement and there is in fact limited prior work aimed at identifying and articulating the actual relationships of *causality* in the family involvement/student achievement relationship. The working assumption, in other words, is that family involvement is an *input* and student achievement an *output*.

However, it is certainly logically possible that this conception has things backward: that, in other words, student achievement may cause family involvement rather than the other way around, or that both are outputs caused by some other input(s). One might, for example, suggest that—given a general human tendency to be drawn toward emotionally positive experiences—some parent/guardians become involved with their children's education process because their child is successful, since it is enjoyable to support that success (and to have experiences such as positive feedback in parent/teacher conferences, etc.). An interesting related conjecture here could be that while involvement is "normal" for most parents if all other things are equal, poor student performance causes family *dis*engagement, so that the parents/guardians of students who are performing poorly get "weeded out" over time, leaving those families whose children are *not* failing to be "normally" involved. This possibility is particularly compelling when one considers a common response from parents/guardians whose children are doing poorly to contact by the school—the response of "what is wrong now?"—and keeps in mind how much easier it is for most people to shy away from, rather than concentrate our attention on, areas of our lives in relation to which we experience sentiments of frustration, shame, or failure.

At the same time, it is worth noting here that this reversal of the common sense assumption is, in fact, much easier to conceive when we think in terms of student "success" rather than "achievement." That is, while experiences such as having a positive parent/teacher conference, receiving word of the selection of one's child for a city-wide student art exhibit, or watching one's child receive an 8th grade completion certificate are certainly indications of the child's *success* at some aspect(s) of school, they are not necessarily indicators of *achievement* as defined in the narrower sense as scoring well on assessments that measure a student's performance in relation to a standard and/or in comparison to other students' performances. In light of the reality that indicators of achievement such as the MCAS come later, and much less frequently, in students' academic careers than the more tangible indicators of success, then if the causal relationship between school performance and family involvement were primarily that the former is an input and the latter an output, achievement would presumably be much less likely to cause family involvement than "success" defined more broadly. Yet the research appears to support a relationship between family involvement and student "achievement" just as strongly as it does between family involvement and student "success."

So while it is useful to acknowledge that student success may in fact serve as a motivating factor that leads to higher levels of involvement in their children's education on the part of some parents/guardians, given the consistent validation in the research of the family involvement/student achievement relationship, family involvement is considered an input leading to the output of student achievement for the purposes of this study. But accepting this premise, in the context of considering what schools can and

should do to improve student achievement, leads to a whole array of additional causal questions, particularly when we accept the basic realization that there are multiple types of family involvement. In other words, if there are multiple types of family involvement, on which one(s) should schools focus in attempting to increase student achievement?

In considering these and related questions, some researchers (cf., e.g., the Canadian Royal Commission on Learning [1994] and America's Choice [2005]) cite a comprehensive research review by Cotton & Wikelund (1989) suggesting that while all forms of family involvement make a difference at all grade levels, "[l]ooking more closely at the research, there are strong indications that the most effective forms of parent involvement are those which engage parents in working directly with their children on learning activities in the home. Programs which involve parents in reading with their children, supporting their work on homework assignments, or tutoring them using materials and instructions provided by teachers, show particularly impressive results" (p. 3). Making this claim amounts to endorsing the fourth of Epstein's six types of involvement[13] as the most critical among the different types in causing student achievement. Note, however, that in most cases this "learning at home" involvement type depends on the family's already having in place at least two of the other five types. That is, the ability to lead one's child in learning at home is highly likely to be built on a basic foundation of "parenting" (Epstein's first type of involvement) that includes raising the child in a way that promotes basic physical and mental health, getting her/him to school ready to learn, and setting home conditions that support learning. Similarly, facilitating home learning that augments and reinforces school learning

[13] As a reminder, Epstein's six types of family involvement include: (i) Parenting; (ii) Home-school communication; (iii) Volunteering at school; (iv) Learning at home; (v) School leadership and decision-making; and (vi) Fostering school-community collaboration.

presumes reasonably effective home-school communication (Epstein's second type), in that activities such as homework help and engaging students with school-generated materials and activities depend on effectively engaging with communication from the school.

But taking the notion that learning at home is a key causal factor in student achievement a bit deeper leads to some more interesting connections, particularly if we consider what students need to do in order to "achieve" in our current educational environment. That is, at least in Massachusetts, student achievement is measured primarily in terms of performance on the MCAS. And the MCAS is not just a demanding test, but in fact a test that makes a very particular type of demand: in order to score well on the MCAS, students consistently need to demonstrate not just mastery of "basic skills" (e.g. reading fluency, basic mathematical operations, memorization of core facts) but also—and essentially—*conceptual understanding*, i.e., the ability to identify, understand, integrate and apply "big ideas." This emphasis is demonstrated in, for example, the strong emphasis in the MCAS English Language Arts (ELA) test not just on reading comprehension or standard essay development, but also on the ability to apply complex concepts and/or express inferences about given reading passages through difficult open response items.[14] Similarly, the MCAS Math and Science tests include, in addition to a variety of (often complex) multiple choice and short-answer items, open response items whose scoring is based more on the degree to which students can explain how/why they

[14] One striking example for me relates to the 2006 **6th** grade ELA test, within which students were provided with the Thomas Hardy poem "Throwing a Tree", and given (after four fairly traditional—albeit difficult—multiple choice comprehension items) the following open response question: "In 'Throwing a Tree', the poet uses personification, a literary device that uses human qualities to describe an object. Give at least two examples of personification used in the poem. Explain why each is an example of personification. Support your answer with important details from the poem."

have arrived at their solution to a given problem than on whether they have provided the correct answer.

Rothstein (2004) presents a compelling case as to why this emphasis on conceptual understanding in determining student achievement is important in relation to "learning at home" as a family involvement type. His claim is that differences in childrearing approaches between parents/guardians of different social classes provide a key explanatory factor for the persistence of the "achievement gap," i.e., for why students from middle class, primarily White households have continuously outperformed, on the average, students from low-income, primarily Black (and, presumably, Latino) households. These differences include the following:

- Most White, middle-class, college-educated parents read to their children every day from a very early age, while many fewer children of less-educated parents and parents of color benefit from daily reading. (The same differences pertain with regard to availability and use of computers across class and race divides.)
- *When reading*, lower-income parents/guardians tend to focus children on listening and de-coding, while "parents who are more literate are likely to ask questions that are creative, interpretive, or connective" (21)—questions, that is, that support development of conceptual understanding.
- Similarly, educated/middle-class parents are more likely to consistently *talk with* children in a way that promotes development of conceptual understanding: explaining events in the broader world, asking questions then providing answers (allowing children to work through and internalize the reasoning behind a rule or command), and including the child in adult conversations in order to support her/him in developing individual opinions. Lower-income parents, on the other hand, are more likely to keep a stronger boundary between adults and children, and to use more direct and commanding language, and provide less explanation, than middle- or upper-class parents (Rothstein, 21-25).

Rothstein is clear in stating that the middle-class practices he identifies are not "morally" better ways of raising children than those of low-income families. The point, rather, is that middle-class families' practices are more aligned with what schools expect students to know and be able to do, and thus that middle class children are highly privileged by the

(informal *and* formal) learning at home opportunities available to them in comparison with poor children, and are therefore much more likely to out-achieve poor students on standardized assessments—particularly those that, like the MCAS, place a high premium on conceptual understanding.

Family Involvement: A Causal Model

The understanding of differences in childrearing practices related to learning at home provided by Rothstein provides an important connection in development of a generalized causal model of the relationship between family involvement and student achievement. A diagram of the model I propose is found in Figure 2.

The understandings underlying its key features are as follows:

- The desired *output*—student achievement—is framed in terms of the development and application of the kinds of conceptual understanding mentioned above.

The inputs pertaining to family involvement need to be contextualized within an overall set of causal factors that may contribute to student achievement that relate to individual students, schools, and communities as well as to families. For example, many educators have experienced "exceptional" individual students who are so inherently capable that they manage to achieve despite adverse family, school, and community conditions. Similarly, there are students of more "average" capacity who may receive limited family and community support, yet have consistently excellent schooling that supports them in achieving.[15] Finally, there are students of

[15] Rothstein's discussion (pp. 63-71) of Dr. William Sanders' "Tennessee Value-Added System" of assessing student progress is interesting here. The system is a complicated one, but the upshot is that by studying student test scores over a multi-year period, Sanders has concluded that students who receive three

"average" capacity who receive such strong family and/or community support that they achieve despite receiving merely adequate (or even poor) schooling. The reality that family involvement needs to be conceptualized within the context of a wider set of causal factors for (inputs into) student achievement supports, obviously, the assertion that family involvement initiatives need to be aligned with systematic school improvement efforts.

The factors (these might be thought of as "immediate inputs") associated with family involvement that contribute most directly to individual student achievement are associated with three of Epstein's family involvement types: parenting, communication, and learning at home. The "parenting" type functions, essentially, as a baseline condition: without a stable home environment supportive of learning at school, one can expect only the most exceptional children to be able to achieve. The "communication" type functions in some ways as a baseline (a precondition to structured support for learning at home that reflects the school's curriculum), but also contributes to parent/guardian expectations for student achievement, in that establishing high expectations for one's child depends very significantly on an understanding of what counts as achievement within the context of her/his schooling. Finally, the 'learning at home' type reflects both structured support for learning happening at school (e.g. homework support, helping or "coaching" with school-assigned projects and materials) and the sorts of informal learning (e.g. highly

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or more straight years of the very highest quality of instruction possible make, on the average, huge leaps in achievement in comparison to their peers who receive instruction of average quality, no matter these students' individual characteristics and family/community backgrounds. While Rothstein's purpose is to argue that it is impossible to jump from this conclusion to the further conclusion that *all* students can achieve in our current educational system, I am simply noting here the conception that consistently excellent instruction can lead to high achievement.

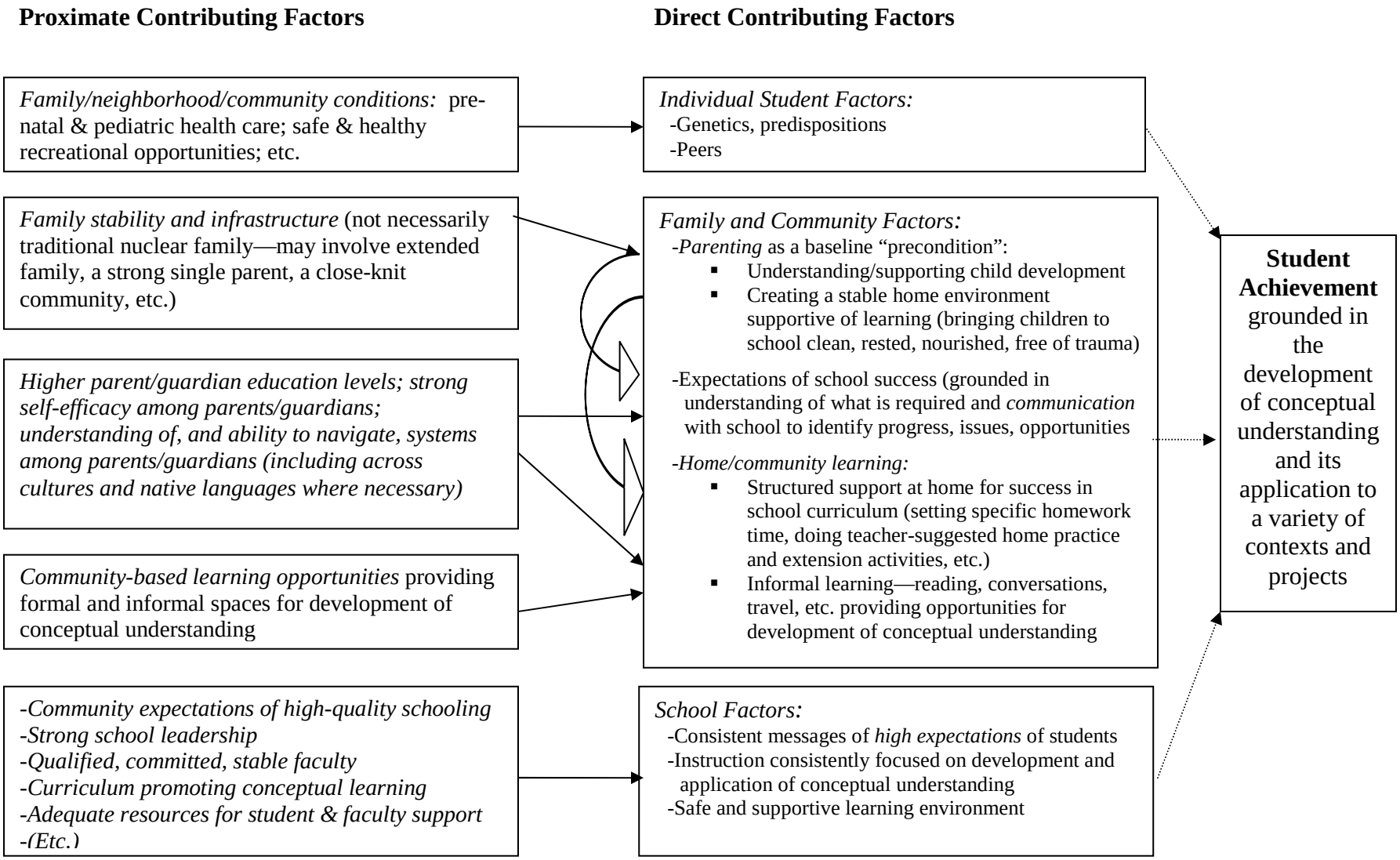

Figure 2: A Causal Model Relating Family Involvement and Student Achievement

interactive reading, conceptually-oriented conversations) that Rothstein identifies as so important to the advantage that middle-class children hold over their low-income peers in relation to school achievement.

- In relation to the "learning at home" type of involvement, it is worth noting that this sort of learning does not necessarily have to happen in the home for it to contribute to student achievement. It may, in fact, happen in other community settings—after-school programs, summer programs, etc.—and one might argue that one aspect of a comprehensive program aimed at improving achievement among low-income children should include providing them with such community-based learning opportunities (i.e., those which provide both structured support for school learning and informal learning opportunities supporting students in developing the kinds of conceptual understandings to which their middle-class peers have in the context of their family lives).
- Finally, there are "proximate" causes that contribute to the direct factors included in this model. For example, a parent's/guardian's ability (or lack thereof) to engage in the "parenting" type of family involvement is likely to be significantly linked to the degree of overall family stability and infrastructure in which s/he is engaged in childrearing. Examples of such proximate factors are included in the diagram for each direct causal factor listed.[16]

[16] This overall stability and infrastructure is related to neighborhood conditions, economic factors, and other issues on which the Taylor model of family involvement discussed in chapter 2 focuses. In fact, Taylor's model can be distinguished from many of the other models in its strong emphasis on the importance of schools' addressing proximate factors as part of our family involvement work. Rothstein emphasizes proximate factors equally strongly, although perhaps with less expectation that schools be the institution responsible for addressing these factors.

This causal model supports a strong emphasis on learning at home (both structured and informal) as a strong differentiating factor in terms of student achievement. If Rothstein is correct about the gap in home practices between the families of low-income children and their more economically advantaged peers, it would appear that a focus on developing and supporting learning at home might be an appropriate priority for the family engagement efforts of schools serving primarily low-income children.

The Peck Full Service Community School

The Peck Full Service Community School definitely fits the bill in this regard. Peck is located in Holyoke, Massachusetts, a prime example of what is sometimes euphemistically referred to as a "gateway city:" a small city (with, in Holyoke's case, a population of approximately 40,000 people) that was developed for industrial purposes (in Holyoke's case, paper manufacturing using power from a dam in the Connecticut River) and, after an earlier economic boom, was left with a drastically reduced number of living-wage jobs and, simultaneously, a substantial amount of available housing stock. Thus Holyoke has served for the past several decades as a "gateway" to Massachusetts for families of limited economic means, most specifically families from Puerto Rico seeking a better life as a result of the even more depressed economy in their country. Latinos—more than 90% of whom are of Puerto Rican descent—now comprise nearly half of the city's population, and in light of the fact that this population is dramatically younger than the majority (White, non-Latino) population, Latino children currently comprise more than three quarters of the city's public school population (77% in 2010-11

according to figures from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education).

While there are "pockets" of low-income Puerto Rican families located in apartment complexes in various locations in the city, the highest concentrations of these families are concentrated in three Holyoke neighborhoods, and as a result of a series of decisions by district leaders beginning in 2002 to reorganize Holyoke's schools away from a "modified school choice" approach to student assignment toward an "attendance zone" model through which students are placed into K-8 schools based on where they live, Peck currently serves the families who live in one of these neighborhoods, which is historically known as 'Churchill.' In fall 2011, Peck began its fourth year as a K-8 attendance zone school, with a population of just under 700 students (an increase of nearly 100 over the prior school year as a result of a Holyoke School Committee decision to "re-zone" a residential area near Peck in order to reduce overcrowding at the school that had previously served this area). Peck's student body is approximately 90% Latina/o, with about two thirds (65%) of students coming from households where English is not the first language, and more than 40% currently considered Limited English Proficient/English Language Learners. Because the Churchill neighborhood remains a "starter" neighborhood for families from Puerto Rico, approximately one in every nine students (about 11%) is a beginning English learner (i.e., a student in the first year of US schooling). More than 90% of Peck's students are qualified as low-income (receiving free or reduced lunch), and—in part because all of Holyoke's family homeless shelters are located in the school's attendance zone—Peck is the school with the highest student

mobility rate in Holyoke, which has the highest student mobility rate among all cities in Massachusetts.[17]

Peck was originally built as a comprehensive junior high in the 1970s, and the building functioned as a junior high and then middle school through the 2007-08 school year, at which point it was closed as a middle school, with students and faculty moved to other schools. At the same time, the elementary and middle schools (Lawrence and Lynch Schools, respectively) that served the Churchill neighborhood were closed and merged into the Peck building, creating an "instant" K-8 school. In the process of planning and opening the "new Peck" in the summer and fall of 2008, school leaders decided that Peck would become a full service community school. Full Service Community School (FSCS) is a term that the federal government uses to describe schools that "provide comprehensive academic, social, and health services for students, students' family members, and community members that will result in improved educational outcomes for children."[18] Organizational models for full service community schools vary widely, with the vast majority functioning through various "push-in" versions in which an external partner, most often a community based organization or college/university, receives a grant to place staff and programming at a school. Peck's model differs from other full service community schools in that regard: While the school is highly oriented toward partnerships as a way to deliver programs and services that are beyond the capacity of school staff alone (with approximately 40 external partners engaged in collaborative efforts in areas ranging from health services and other basic needs to family

[17] This statistic is included in a forthcoming report about student mobility from the Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy (www.renniecenter.org).
[18] This description was taken from a 2010 announcement of a full service community school grant competition at http://www2.ed.gov/programs/communityschools/index.html.

engagement, tutoring/mentoring, after-school programs, instructional improvement, integration of the arts into learning, early college awareness, and strengthening the school's capacity to effectively manage difficult student behaviors), Peck's FSCS development happens from the "inside out," with key coordination and program staff employed by the school and reaching out to potential partners based on an internal analysis of assets and needs.

The specific analysis—on the basis of which Peck's development as a full service community school has evolved—was carried out as part of a planning process in 2008-09 that included gathering and analyzing both available quantitative data (demographics, academic performance, discipline statistics, etc.) and extensive qualitative data gathered from meetings, interviews, and focus groups of parents/guardians, faculty, representatives of both existing and potential partner organizations, and middle school students. The result was the identification of several top priority areas for FSCS development at Peck, and the school currently works in each of these areas via "working groups" comprised of a combination of dedicated staff, teachers and other faculty members, representatives of external partner organizations, and parents/guardians.

The most important result of the planning process from the standpoint of this dissertation is that while participants in the 2008-09 planning process identified a wide variety of possible developmental priorities for the school from which the short list of top priorities was ultimately developed, virtually every adult who participated—whether a parent/guardian, faculty member, or current or potential community partner—identified family engagement as an area of highest need for development. As a result, Peck's development as a full service community school has been highly oriented toward family

engagement. These efforts have included initial and ongoing dedication of resources to hire and maintain both a full-time Family Access and Engagement Coordinator and two Family Case Managers, and development of a Family Access and Engagement working group and a Family Assistance Team.

These staff members' and working groups' initiatives have, in turn, resulted in development of a substantial range of programs, services, and opportunities for students' family members that did not exist at Peck (or its predecessor schools) prior to FSCS implementation, including regular workshop series and other educational events for parents/guardians, a parent/guardian volunteer program, and major events such as an annual Puerto Rican heritage celebration in the fall, a parent-organized teacher appreciation event in the spring, and an end-of-year event honoring Peck's families. In addition, the Family Access and Engagement Coordinator and several parent leaders formed, in 2009-10, a new work group named Peck Parents United in Action (P-PUA) that has worked to impact Holyoke Public Schools policies impacting Peck, including prevailing upon the School Committee both to provide additional busing for Peck elementary students during the winter of 2011 and to support a school uniform program at Peck initially implemented in September 2011.

In sum, the Peck School has worked extensively to strengthen its family engagement efforts since opening as a K-8 in 2008-09. Interestingly, student achievement as measured by the MCAS also rose significantly during the first two years of full service community school implementation: Peck's Composite Performance Index (CPI) for English Language Arts rose by 7.3 points (on a 100-point scale) from 2009 to 2010, and another 5.1 points from 2010 to 2011, and its Math CPI increased by 11.4

points from 2009 to 2010 and another 6.6 points from 2010 to 2011. These results were far better than any returned by either Peck or its predecessor schools (Lawrence and Lynch) since the advent of the MCAS in the late 1990s, and while the absolute achievement of Peck's students remained low relative to statewide averages, the school's Student Growth Percentile (SGP)—the best measure available of the "value added" to student achievement by schools—was substantially above state averages in both 2010 and 2011.

However, while there appears to be broad correlation between concerted efforts at Peck to strengthen family engagement and improvements in student achievement at the school over a two year period, asserting a causal link in this regard would be, at best, extremely dubious in light of the reality that family engagement was—while central—one of several developmental initiatives at Peck in 2009-10 and 2010-11. Along with the other initiatives associated with full service community school implementation (such as tutoring/mentoring, enhanced after-school programming, and early college awareness), the school also engaged in an ambitious variety of instructional program development and improvement initiatives that are likely to have contributed significantly to achievement growth from 2009 to 2011. Additionally, while Peck's family engagement programming developed substantially from a point of "near zero" in 2008-09 to a much more robust status in 2010-11, as of spring 2011 school leaders' best estimate (using a rough, self-developed measurement scale) was that Peck was:

- "highly engaged" with about 15% of its families—meaning that family members either participated regularly in family programming (four or more times during the school year) or were receiving services such as case management at a fairly intensive level;

- “somewhat engaged” with about half (roughly 50%) of its families—meaning that family members had participated in family programming on a limited basis (one to three times during the school year); and
- “not yet engaged” with about a third (roughly 35%) of its families.

At the time of writing of this dissertation, the school was working on development of a system to begin correlating student performance with the degree to which the school was engaged with individual students’ families, but, in light of the complexity of the measurements involved and the still “primitive” nature of its tools, was not yet at the point of being able to make initial projections as to such correlation.

In addition, while Peck did a great deal of work to increase its level of engagement with its students’ families during its first two years of implementation as a full service community school, this work was guided primarily by school staff and partners’ beliefs and “best understandings” about the kinds of family engagement programming that would best serve the families (and the school). In other words, Peck’s family engagement programming was developed “organically” rather than on the basis of a systematic analysis of the families served by the school. It was within this context—during the first two years of full service community school implementation, a time of extraordinary developmental activity in multiple areas of the Peck School—that faculty and staff members carried out the parent/guardian interviews comprising the core research associated with this dissertation.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH PROJECT AND METHODS

Research Questions and Project Overview

As noted in Chapter 1, the Peck Family Strengths Study was guided by the following overall research questions:

1. What strengths of low-income Puerto Rican families—including strengths not widely known or acknowledged by educators at present—might schools draw upon in order to collaborate more effectively with family members in support of their children's learning and performance?

2. Which (if any) actions and patterns of action on the parts of low-income Puerto Rican families are more prevalent among families whose students meet school expectations and state standards than among families whose students do not meet expectations and standards?

3. What impact does implementation of a family strengths study using techniques of Appreciative Inquiry have on both school staff who participate in the study and those who choose not to participate? In particular:

    - How, if at all, will they change their perceptions of and attitudes toward low-income Puerto Rican families and students?

    - What possible actions will they identify that they can take to help *families* draw upon their own strengths to more effectively support their children's learning and performance?

    - What possible actions will they identify that they may take with *students* or with their *colleagues* to more effectively support improvement of student learning and performance?

In order to answer these questions, the Peck Family Strengths Study was established as an Action Research (AR) project, grounded specifically in techniques of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), an organizational research and development approach developed by David Cooperrider and colleagues. Overall elements of the study included:

1. Collaborative efforts among school faculty/staff members and parents/guardians to identify the strengths of low-income Puerto Rican families whose children attend Peck School, through a structured appreciative interview process;

2. Collaborative analysis of the information gathered through the appreciative interview process; and

3. Assessment of the impact of involvement in the appreciative interview and data analysis processes on participating school faculty/staff members, and of the impact of learning about the appreciative interview findings on faculty/staff members who did not participate in the research process.

Research Framework and Rationale

Action Research

The overall research framework within which the Peck family strengths study was located is that of **Action Research** (AR). The AR tradition enjoys a rich and complex set of traditions and historical "knowledge interests" identified by Herr and Anderson (2005) as including, among others:

- Organizational development approaches emphasizing worker participation growing out of the human dynamics movement associated with Kurt Lewin and other US organizational theorists beginning in the mid-20th century, and including a variety of European organizational development projects initiated in the 1980s;

- Participatory research aimed at understanding the impact of, and transforming, social dynamics that contribute to the collective subjugation of members of oppressed groups, in the tradition of Brazilian theorist and activist Paulo Freire; and

- Educational research involving teachers in a variety of countries in a systematic process of identifying and working to solve problems associated with their own practice, occurring initially (in the 1940s and 50s) in the US in congruence with John Dewey's emphasis on human experience as essential to the construction of knowledge, and resurging later (in the 1980s and beyond) in response to a perceived overemphasis on quantitative, positivistic paradigms of research as well as a growing belief that "school-based problem-solving approaches to change were more likely to be successfully implemented than large . . . outside-in initiatives" (p. 21).

As a result of the range of contexts within which activities broadly construed as action research have been implemented, the multiple purposes to which such activities have been put, and the (often significant) disagreements among AR practitioners about what "really counts" as AR from a political standpoint, there is no single, broadly-accepted definition of AR. There are, however, multiple descriptions of the purposes and characteristics of action research that generally have a great deal in common. For example, while acknowledging the varied traditions and uses of AR noted above, Herr & Anderson offer a set of characteristics of AR that they see as common across what we might call the "AR spectrum":

- True to its name, AR is concerned not only with creating valid knowledge (although this is an essential element), but also with *action*—in other words, not just learning about a problem and how it might be solved, but rather with actually attempting to solve the problem (or improve a practice) as the basis for the knowledge creation process.

- AR involves a process of *structured reflection*—it is "deliberately and systematically undertaken and generally requires that some form of evidence be presented to support assertions" (p. 3).

- Rather than having generalizable knowledge as its primary focus, AR is primarily (or at least initially) focused on "*local knowledge*", which is "most often shared . . . with only an immediate community of practitioners or community members. It is meant to address the immediate needs of people in specific settings. . ." (p. 6).

- AR generally involves *collaboration* among people who have a stake in the problem under investigation, rather than being carried out individually or by a group of "outsiders". As such, while AR is a form of inquiry *about* a given organization or community, it is carried out *by* or *with* insiders to that community/organization, not performed "on" or "to" them.

- AR is explicitly and self-consciously *value-laden*: along with being committed to solving problems or improving their practice, its practitioners tend to acknowledge their commitment to a specific vision and understanding of the context within which the inquiry takes place, very often with an explicit admission of (and desire to change) the reality that this context "reflect[s] . . . conflicting values and an unequal distribution of resources and power" (p. 4).

Similarly, in discussing AR as a branch of educational research, Gay & Airasian (2003) also emphasize the localized character of the knowledge usually generated through action research, and offer four "key concepts" characteristic of action research:

- Action research is participatory and democratic.
- Action research is socially responsive and takes place in context.
- Action research helps teacher researchers examine the everyday, taken-for-granted ways in which they carry out professional practice.
- Knowledge gained through action research can liberate students, teachers, and administrators and enhance learning, teaching, and policy making. (p. 265)

Gay & Airasian note that school-based AR is generally focused at one of three levels—individual teachers, small teacher teams in a single school or department, or school-wide—and stress that

> [g]ood action research integrates theory, practice, and meaningful applications of research results. Action research encourages change in schools, empowers individuals through collaboration with one another, encourages teacher reflection, and examines new methods and ideas. Action research is typically focused on a particular issue or concern that is examined in a single school. (p. 261)

For the purposes of this dissertation AR is understood as an approach to research that engages teams consisting of (or at least including) "insiders" in a given organization or situation in a process of studying and working to positively transform—based on their shared conviction about the need for improvement—some aspect(s) of that organization or situation. The particular concern examined and addressed at Peck was the school's engagement with its students' families. The research and change effort involved developing a collective understanding of students' families—including, especially, these families' strengths—that the faculty did not yet share, and then using this understanding to attempt to strengthen the ways in which the school works with families toward maximizing student achievement. The project was grounded in the conviction that such

work can best be accomplished by a group of members of the school community who gather, report, analyze, and generate conclusions derived from information about students' families, and are then prepared to engage other members of the school community in informed conversation—informally as well as more formally in the context of faculty workshops—about the strengths of the families and the ways in which the school can most effectively engage them in order to improve student achievement over time.

Appreciative Inquiry

Within the overall action research framework, the specific methods utilized in the study were grounded in Appreciative Inquiry (AI). Originally applied in the context of private business in the late 1980s and 1990s, AI has since been used in a wide variety of contexts including public planning, community development, and educational reform as an approach to organizational development through which teams of organizational insiders systematically identify the "positive core" of the organization and then engage in a planning and implementation process to strengthen the organization through building on the positive core (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003; Michael, 2005). By "positive core", AI practitioners are referring to strengths, including when defined most broadly

> . . . what people talk about as past and present capacities: achievements, assets, unexplored potentials, innovations, strengths, elevated thoughts, opportunities, benchmarks, high point moments, lived values, traditions, strategic competencies, stories, expressions of wisdom, insights into the deeper corporate spirit or soul—and visions of valued and possible futures (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005).

AI was developed, in other words, as an explicit effort to move away from organizational development strategies that focused on problems/what is *wrong* with an organization,

toward strategies that affirm and build on the competence of the people who make up the organization, as identified through those people's own memories and stories.

As a full organizational development model, AI is currently conceived of most broadly as involving a four-step process (Discovery, Dream, Design, Destiny) corresponding—roughly and with significant differences from action research as traditionally conceived—to phases of research, developing a vision, strategic planning, and implementation (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). At the heart of the AI data-gathering process is the "appreciative interview", through which research team members, including organizational insiders, ask other insiders a series of open-ended, affirmatively-framed questions about their experiences in order to identify the positive core of the organization's work. Practitioners of AI tend to emphasize the importance of engaging in a full AI cycle (which may be approached in a variety of ways, from multiple meetings over a period of weeks or months with a group of stakeholders to major large-scale, short-term events such as an "AI Summit" in which all stakeholders in an organization engage in the four steps in a much shorter timeframe [Whitney & Cooperrider, 2000]). Michael (2005), however, notes that the appreciative interview can be productively used as a stand-alone interview technique or part of an organizational development process that does not strictly follow the full AI cycle.

The Peck Family Strengths Study involved a team of Peck School faculty/staff members in working to identify the positive core of the families of Peck students as it related to their children's education—the strengths of these families that the school could draw upon in working to improve student achievement—by way of developing and carrying out an appreciative interview process with students' parents/guardians. The

specific focus was on the families of low-income students of Puerto Rican descent, in light of the fact that Puerto Rican students made up the overwhelming majority of the Peck student body and presented, unfortunately, the lowest collective achievement levels in Holyoke and other urban communities.

The focus on school faculty members' working to identify the positive core—in this case, that of Peck's students' families—was appropriate in that, as previously noted, this study was aimed not just at identifying family strengths for the purposes of planning outreach and education activities with families, but also at transforming school discourse about families away from perceived family deficits and problems to one focused on assets/what is right (families' *existing competencies* and *potential*). AI was also considered to be a potentially effective approach in a context such as the Peck family strengths study in that the core concepts associated with the AI interview—an affirmative topic, a set of positive questions, and meaning-making through stories and best practices—were likely to have intuitive appeal to school community members interested in learning more about our students' families.

Research Process

The research process incorporated the following phases which, it is important to note, were not, nor could they have been, absolutely sequential steps. Rather, as Herr & Anderson note, the phases of action research processes tend to spiral, with (for example) the results of interviews sometimes leading to additional background research and/or to redesign of research tools. Similarly, in discussing analysis of qualitative research data Gay & Airasian describe a "simultaneous interaction of data collection and analysis"

within which researchers continuously review and ask questions about all data that is generated, then refine the research focus and process based on the "concepts and issues . . . stated by the participants" (p. 228). In the case of the Peck Family Strengths Study, such data included not just parents/guardians' responses during appreciative interviews, but also research team members' comments, questions, and responses throughout the implementation of the project, as well as school faculty and staff members' responses to questionnaires related to their attitudes and perceptions about students' families. In any case, specific details of each research phase were planned and implemented based on feedback from both the Dissertation Committee and the school team. An overall timeline of the research process is included in Table 4.1, which is found at the conclusion of this chapter.

Background Research and Preparations

Work on this phase, which began in early 2007 and continued until shortly before my defense of this dissertation, included two broad elements:

i. Research, initial drafting, and multiple revisions of and additions to Chapters I, II, III, and IV. After initial research and drafting, I made revisions and additions based on re-reading earlier versions, committee feedback, and recognition at several points in the research process of the need for attempts to identify and provide additional information related to both key conceptual areas of the project (family involvement context, paradigms, and models; features of the families of low-income Puerto Rican children; strengths/asset-based models of family development; causal questions about

family involvement and student achievement; etc.) and the context within which it unfolded (the ongoing development of the Peck Full Service Community School).

ii. Finalization of informed consent protocols and forms, the appreciative interview tool (included as Appendix A of this dissertation), and the faculty/staff impact measurement tools (included as Appendices C and D of this dissertation), including seeking and receiving institutional review and approval for the research project.

Recruitment and Orientation of Faculty/Staff Interview Team

This phase was initiated via a letter (Appendix B of this dissertation) that I sent to all Peck School faculty/staff providing background on the project and inviting participation in an initial meeting about the project, then responding to individual questions about the project from faculty/staff members prior to the scheduled meeting. While 12 faculty and staff members initially expressed interest in participating in the interviewing process, eight actually attended the initial meeting and two others were oriented separately at a later date, resulting in a total of 10 faculty and staff members who carried out family strengths interviews.[19] Four of the interviewers were teachers, two were guidance counselors, three were staff members dedicated to the full service community school initiative, and one was an administrator. Three of the interviewers were Latinas, and seven were "Anglos" (i.e., in the terms of the US Census Bureau,

[19] It may be useful to note here that a similar meeting was held in the spring of 2008 at Lynch Middle School for a sort of informal "dry run" process related to this project, and that some faculty members (including several who were later transferred to Peck) participated in discussion of the earliest version of the interview tool, providing feedback that was incorporated into a revised version, and asking questions about interview expectations and logistics. Following that (2008) meeting, three interested faculty members selected and interviewed families using the revised interview tool and provided me with summary reports about these "dry run" interviews (the results of which are not included in this document) as well as feedback on the tool that I used in creating the final version (attached as Appendix A of this dissertation).

"White Non-Hispanic"). Four of the interviewers were Spanish/English bilingual and carried out their interviews in Spanish, while the other six interviewers were English dominant and carried out their interviewers in English. Two interviewers carried out three interviews each; four interviewers carried out two interviews each; and four each carried out one interview.

During the initial meeting of the research team I facilitated, presented, and led discussion on the following items:

i. Team members completed an initial questionnaire regarding their perceptions, attitudes, and actions in relation to Peck students' families and family involvement prior to participation in the research process. The questionnaire, a copy of which is included in Appendix C, addressed:
    - interview team members' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of Peck families and of current types/levels of engagement with their children's education;
    - the types of communication and work with families in which interview team members were engaged prior to the interview process; and
    - interviewers' perceptions as to whether, how, and why the school should work to improve family involvement;

ii. An overview of the research project background/rationale and goals;

iii. A discussion of the draft appreciative interview tool during which the interviewers reached consensus on several small changes to the protocols associated with introducing the interviews to interviewees and semantic items associated with two of the interview items;

iv. Clarification of interview expectations, protocols, and logistics; and

v. A discussion of families to be interviewed. This discussion included two key elements:

a. The identification of focus families for interview. "Focus families" referred to families that individual interview team members were especially interested in interviewing in light of a perception on their part, grounded in experience with an identified parent and/or her or his children, that the study was likely to be enriched by an interview with that parent. Team members' selection of focus families was not driven by specifically-articulated criteria such as high academic performance on the part of its children or parent participation in family engagement programming at the school; in fact, the findings in Chapter 5 demonstrate that the children of "focus families" were not, on the whole, higher performers than those of the families selected at random. Rather, focus families were selected by some interviewers simply because the interviewers believed that the school had something to learn from these families. (The next subsection of this chapter provides more information about the focus families.)

b. Consideration of desired attributes for identification of a wider group of families for participation in the interview process as part of a stratified random sample. Along with being families of low-income children of Puerto Rican descent (the most basic requirement for participation), the interview team considered identifying particular features of families for selection into the sample set in

order to assure involvement of an appropriately representative set of families involved in the research project. Dimensions for stratification that the team considered included:

- the numbers, grade levels, and genders of children the family had at Peck;
- whether a child's family had a single parent/guardian or two parents/guardians; and
- the child's attendance, disciplinary, and academic records (in order to assure that the study included families of children with low-frequency vs. high-frequency absenteeism, families of high-frequency vs. low-frequency rule violators, and/or families of academically high and low-performers).

After some work to support all interview team members in understanding the logic of stratified random sampling, and a subsequent discussion of the pros and cons of "privileging" certain possible stratification dimensions, the team reached consensus that it would be best to simply use true random selection to identify families (other than focus families) for interview, with the one caveat that while some members of the interview team were able to carry out interviews in either English or Spanish, others could only interview in English. Thus I proposed, and the team members agreed, that I would develop two lists for random identification of interviewee families—one of families whose home language was identified in the school database as English, and the other whose home language was identified as Spanish.

In order to be sure to capture any and all discussion that might be, upon reflection, relevant to the overall research process, I audio-recorded (with team members' expressed permission) this initial team meeting and all subsequent meetings. I also took detailed

notes during this and all team meetings and subsequently utilized these notes (and, less frequently, the audio-recordings) in the development of research memos aimed at capturing key understandings achieved in the meetings.

Appreciative Interviews

This phase (which ran from February 2010 to June 2011) included:

A. Identification and selection of families for parent interviews by research team members.

i. *Focus Families.* As noted above, the six focus families were selected by team members who had an interest in interviewing specific parents based in the belief, grounded in experience with the identified parent and/or her or his children, that the study was likely to be enriched by an interview with that parent. Thus:[20]

- A teacher selected a father (Juan) who she experienced as highly communicative with her (as teacher) regarding his daughter's daily comportment and progress;
- Another teacher selected a mother (Barbara) who she knew had made major changes in her own and her family's lives—moving from Puerto Rico to Holyoke—specifically because she (Barbara, the mother) was concerned about how her children were doing in school in Puerto Rico and wanted what she believed would be a better educational and community setting for them;
- One staff member selected a mother (Mariana) whom she considered, based on multiple interactions, to be a highly reflective practitioner of parenting;
- Another staff member interviewed a couple (Leo & Teresa) whose family members she experienced as highly interconnected;

[20] In order to protect confidentiality, I assigned pseudonyms to all students in this study and their family members.

- One guidance counselor interviewed a mother (Lillian) of three Peck students who worked in a community based organization with which the school partnered closely, and whose older two sons (who were in 5th and 6th grade at the time of interview) were high achievers; and

- The other guidance counselor selected a mother (Laura) of three sons at Peck, the oldest of whom the counselor considered to be a young man with great character.

It is important to note that while each of these six "focus" families was considered especially interesting by an interviewer due to some specific perceived feature, it was not the case that their children were, taken collectively, especially high-achieving or well-behaved students relative to their peers. That is, of these families' 14 children who were students at Peck (or could have been, in light of their ages/grades and residence in the attendance zone) at the time of interview:

- One was placed, at the time of his parent's interview, in the Holyoke Public Schools' alternative program for students who present serious behavior problems;

- One was placed in a substantially separate special education program for students with global intellectual disabilities;

- One was placed in a classroom for beginning English Language Learners and was making slow progress, relative to her peers, in developing English language skills;

- Another was placed in the Peck kindergarten room where early-stage English Language Learners are concentrated, and was making good progress in developing English skills but presented intermittent behavioral challenges to her teachers;

- Two were sisters (in kindergarten and first grade) who were making average academic progress but had high rates of school absenteeism;

- Two were young boys who were retained in first grade due to lack of academic progress (one of these students also presented significant behavior challenges to his teachers);

- One was a third grade boy who was considered an average student by his teachers;
- One was a 7th grade girl who had struggled with academics throughout elementary school (in another school district) but whose performance improved dramatically during middle school at Peck;
- One was a 5th grade girl whose academic performance was strong but who needed substantial support from her family in relation to her socialization with other children; and
- Three were upper elementary/middle school boys whose academic performance was quite strong and whose engagement with school and behavior were generally considered especially good by their teachers.

ii. *Random families.* The selection of 12 families at random was intentional, i.e., the research plan included selection of two families at random for each focus family included in the study. In order to achieve random selection of these families, I developed two lists of parents from the school database—one of parents from English-speaking households and one of parents from Spanish-speaking households—and used a random number generator to identify the parents on each list who would be interviewed. I assigned these families to each interviewer based on their capacity to interview in Spanish or English—i.e., assigning monolingual Spanish-speaking parents/guardians to Spanish-speaking interviewers and English-speaking parents (those who were bilingual as well as those who were English-dominant) to monolingual English-speaking interviewers) in the order that the interviewers came to me for their assignments. No other basis was used to attempt to match interviewers to interviewees. In four instances, parents identified via random selection declined to be interviewed, with the result that I assigned the next families

from each list as ordered/identified by the generator, resulting in the final identification and interview of 12 families at random. The 25 children from these randomly identified families included:

- Five kindergarteners, of whom: one was considered quite high-achieving (performing academically well above the levels of the majority of his peers); one was making solid language development progress in the classroom focused on early-stage English Language Learners; one presented very serious behavioral challenges to her teachers and was subsequently assigned to the district's alternative school for evaluation; and two were "typical" in terms of academic progress and behavior;

- Three first graders, two of whom (sisters) were quite far behind their peers academically, and one of whom was "typical;"

- Four fourth graders, two of whom were making good language development progress in the early-stage ELL classroom at their grade level, and two of whom (cousins) were academically behind their peers;

- Four fifth graders, one of whom was "typical", one of whom had an Individual Education Plan for inclusion, and two of whom were placed in Peck's substantially separate special education program for students with global intellectual disabilities (the Functional Academics program);

- Four sixth graders: one in the Functional Academics program, one with an Inclusion IEP, one ELL making relatively slow progress in language and academic development relative to his peers, and one "typical;" and

- Two seventh graders and three eighth graders: one girl performing strongly relative to her peers, and the others (two of whom were intermediate-level ELLs) making typical progress.

More information about the children and families included in the study, including several tables providing summary data, can be found early in the next chapter of this dissertation.

B. Research team members' engagement of assigned parents/guardians in appreciative interviews, using the tools and protocols agreed upon by the team (February 2010-June 2011). The 18 parent/guardian interviews were carried out in two waves: 12 interviews were completed shortly after the initial meeting/orientations of interview team members (between February and May 2010), with the final six completed about a year later (between February and May 2011).[21] Interview team members contacted their assigned parents/guardians to provide them with a brief overview of the project and ask them to participate in an interview, then arranged for the interviews to happen in locations agreeable to the parents/ guardians involved. Thus 11 of the interviews were carried out at the school, four happened in families' homes, and three were held in community settings convenient for the parents/guardians involved (restaurants and the public library). The briefest interview lasted approximately 20 minutes, and the lengthiest interview lasted approximately 90 minutes. 11 of the interviews were carried out in English and seven in Spanish (see below for information about the processing of Spanish-language interviews). 16 of the 18 interviews were audio-recorded, with written permission of the parents/guardians based on the interview protocols, and all were documented with written interviewer notes in relation to each question on the space included on the interview tool form. Additionally, interviewers completed the "Interviewer Follow-Up Form" at the end of the tool before returning the completed tool to me.

[21] The reason for the long gap between completion of the first 12 and the last six interviews related directly to my own capacity in terms of the ability to manage the data being returned as school year 2009-10 came to a close (including transcribing interviews within a reasonable timeframe), some personal matters during Summer 2010, and the intensity of starting a new school year in Fall 2010. I thus reorganized myself in late fall 2010 to move the team forward in Winter/Spring 2011 to complete the interviews.

Organization, Review, and Analysis of Interview Results

A. *Transcription and Translation (February 2010-June 2011).* The first step I took as interviews were completed and interview forms and audio recordings were returned was to review the interview forms and recordings and create an individual Word document capturing each interview. While in most cases I was able to develop these documents within one to two weeks of receipt of the materials submitted to me by the interviewers, there were four interviews (for all of which I had complete audio recordings) for which I completed the Word documents within a month to six weeks. There were three different processes involved in creating these Word documents:

   i. Directly transcribing interviews carried out in English: Of the 11 interviews carried out in English, 10 were audio-recorded. Upon receiving the completed interview forms (with interviewer notes and the completed follow-up form) for seven of these ten, I listened to the audio recordings and transcribed the interviews word for word. In the case of the other three interviews, one interview team member (who interviewed three parents) volunteered to transcribe the interviews on her own; I had confidence in her transcriptions and checked them for accuracy primarily by comparing them to the detailed notes she had taken during her interviews.

   ii. Translating and transcribing interviews carried out in Spanish: Of the seven interviews carried out in Spanish, six were audio-recorded. In order to develop English-language transcripts that could be used for analysis, I listened to these six and translated them. While I utilized direct word-for-

word translation wherever doing so was possible and sensible, in developing these translated transcripts my focus was to portray parents' meaning in English as accurately as possible, including translating use of vernacular terms and phrases common to the mainland Puerto Rican context in which the families lived—including the code-switching between languages (sometimes roughly described as 'Spanglish')—with English terms and phrases that best (in my opinion) captured parents' meaning in English. So for example when, in the context of a parent's statement about togetherness and unity as what he liked best about his family, he emphasized "*el compañerismo que tenemos como familia,*" I translated '*compañerismo'* (literally 'comradeship' or 'companionship' in Castilian Spanish) as 'strong connection' in order to capture the parent's phrase as "the strong connection we have as a family."[22]

iii. Creating summary documents for the two interviews not audio-recorded: In the case of the two interviews (one in English and one in Spanish) for which the parents did not consent to audio recording, the interviewers took particularly detailed notes, including writing down the interviewees' exact words in as many instances as possible. In these cases I worked to produce the Word documents as quickly as possible in order to be able to check them against the interviewers' memories while still fresh. Specifically, I reviewed the interviewers' notes and worked to identify, to the best of my ability, portions of the notes that appeared to capture

[22] The sections of Chapter 5 that include findings from the family interviews are coded so that quoted statements originally made in Spanish and translated via this process are marked to indicate having been translated.

interviewees' exact words as compared to portions that were abstractions/generalizations of parent statements. I then spoke with the interviewers (within a few days of the interviews) to check my sense of which components of the notes could be considered "quotes" (vs. abstractions/generalizations), and revised the Word documents for these interviews based on the interviewers' feedback.[23] In the case of the non-recorded interview that was originally carried out in Spanish, I additionally checked my English translation of these "quotes" with the interviewer (who was fully bilingual) to assure that she agreed that the translated "quote" captured the parent's meaning.

B. *Initial Review of Interview Data (June-August 2011).* Upon completion and transcription of all 18 interviews, the first step of overall review of the interview data was my reading each interview several times in order to develop an initial sense of the data. During these readings, I highlighted what I thought of as key passages and wrote several brief research memos to myself. My next step was to develop a master document summarizing information about the families of all interviewees and incorporating each interviewee's response to each interview question. (That is, the summary document included each interview question in order, with interviewees' responses organized in a bulleted list below the interview question.) At this point I revised the summary document to change the names of the parents interviewed as well as their children, thus making the families anonymous for the purposes of

[23] The sections of Chapter 5 that include findings from the family interviews are coded so that "quoted" statements taken from the two interviews that were not audio-recorded are identifiable.

upcoming team review of interview results. Upon completing this task and re-reading the complete summary document, I developed a lengthy research memo identifying my own preliminary hypotheses about important features and strengths of the families involved in the appreciative interviews. These hypotheses were grounded in observations about both the frequency of mention of specific themes within the interviews overall as well as the duration and intensity or passion with which the parents spoke about specific themes and topics.

C. *Research Team Review of Interview Data (August 2011).* In early August 2011, six members of the research team met for three hours to discuss the data gathered during the interviews. Prior to the meeting, participating team members were provided with an advance copy of the summary document (with fictitious names for all family members) that included information about interviewees, their families, and their responses to each question on the interview form. This meeting included:

i. Sharing of experiences and general impressions of the interview process and information gathered through the interviews;

ii. Detailed analysis and classification of interview data: Using a graphic organizer that I developed and distributed, team members reviewed both the overall information about the families at the start of the document and the full set of parent responses to each item on the survey, with a focus on identifying trends and patterns in interviewees' collective responses to each interview question, as well as in their responses to the questions overall (i.e., trends/patterns identifiable across interview questions). Similarly to my own

individual analysis, interview team members' hypotheses and statements about the data combined observations about both the frequency and the duration/intensity/passion with which parents spoke about specific topics and themes in their responses to interview questions.

iii. Summarizing: At the close of the meeting I presented the team members with a summary—based on my meeting notes—of key trends and patterns that interview team members had identified in interviewees' responses to both individual questions and the overall set of questions from the interview. I then asked team members to add to, question, and contest the identified trends and patterns. The result of this conversation was an initial consensus about the overall "set" of strengths identified in the interviewees' families by the interview team, as well as about several other general conclusions about the interview data.

This meeting was documented via facilitator notes, individual team member notes on the graphic organizer, and audio recording. Immediately afterward I developed a research memo summarizing the team meeting process and identifying the trends and patterns in the interview data on which the team had come to consensus.

D. *Comparative Analysis and Drafting of Interview Findings (August-September 2011).* I carried out the next steps in the process via individual analysis of the interview results with two overall (and sequential) focuses:

i. Comparison of interview team analysis with individual analysis and development of preliminary list of overall family strengths. I re-read (several

times) both the memo I had developed after my own preliminary (individual) review of interview results and the research memo I had written including the trends and patterns in the interview data identified collectively by the team members, and compared the trends/patterns/tentative conclusions in the two memos. While this comparison resulted in generally consistent outcomes (i.e., consistency between my preliminary analysis and the team's analysis), there were several trends and patterns identified by research team members that substantially expanded my individual analysis. Based on the findings arising from analyzing and comparing the two sets of trends/patterns/ conclusions identified in the data (i.e., my individual ones and those of the team), I drafted the sections of Chapter 5 that outline the set of overall strengths of the families whose parents were interviewed. This material provided a response to the first research question guiding this study: "*What strengths of low-income Puerto Rican families—including strengths not widely known or acknowledged by educators at present—might schools draw upon in order to collaborate more effectively with family members in support of their children's learning and performance?*"

ii. Comparative analysis: Parents of Higher Performing Students vs. Parents of Average/Low Performing Students. Once I had the preliminary identification of the overall strengths of the families interviewed, I went back into the data to do an internal comparative analysis among the interview responses. Specifically, based on a review of each student's academic record, school attendance, and discipline data, I categorized the children of these families who were Peck

students at the time their parents were interviewed into two categories: those that were meeting or exceeding school and state performance expectations in all three of these areas, and those that were not meeting school and state performance expectations in at least one category. I then sorted the parent interviews into similar categories, i.e., into those of the parents whose children were and those whose children were not meeting expectations in each area (academic performance, attendance, and discipline). Based on this categorizing process, I then re-read both the overall interviews and the summary documents I had developed thus far reviewed in order to draft the comparative findings between "Parents of High Performers" and "Parents of Average/Low Performers." These findings were identified via two steps: determining which actions/patterns were prevalent among all or most of the six families of high-performing students, then determining whether those that were prevalent among these families were also prevalent among the other 12 families.[24] In cases where correlations appeared, I then reviewed the quality of the responses to consider degrees of passion and specificity in parent comments. I then drafted the results of this analysis into the sections of Chapter 5 that provide a response to the second research question guiding this study: *"Which (if any) actions and patterns of action on the parts of low-income Puerto Rican families are more prevalent among families whose students meet school expectations and state standards than among families whose students do not meet expectations and standards?"*

[24] The fact that there turned out to be six families of high-performing students and 12 families of average/low performers is coincidental in relationship to the fact that there were six focus families and 12 randomly-selected families included in the study. Specifically, the children of two of the six focus families were identified as "high performers," while the children of the other four focus families were identified as "average or low performers."

Presentation of Interview Data to Faculty/Staff and Wider School Community

After drafting the interview findings as described above, I planned and facilitated two presentation/discussion meetings—the first with the research team, and the second with the full school faculty and wider school community members—in early October 2011. Each of these meetings included:

i. A brief overview of the research process (see Appendix E for the handout provided);

ii. Presentations of preliminary findings about the interviewees' families overall, and the findings comparing the families of higher-performing students with those of their peers who were not performing as well (again, see Appendix E for handouts);

iii. Discussion of questions and answers about the research process and interview findings; and

iv. Completion of questionnaires to identify faculty, staff, and community member reactions to the preliminary findings. In the case of interview team members this involved a final questionnaire highly similar to the initial questionnaire (but including some additional items soliciting reflections on learning from the research process). In the case of faculty/staff and wider school community members who had not participated in the interview process, this included questionnaires soliciting their feedback in relation to the interview findings as well as any changes in their individual intentions for engaging students' family

members and their perceptions about the most important things the school needed to do to strengthen family engagement based on the interview findings.

Assessment of Impact on the Perceptions and Intentions of the Interview Team Members and Wider Faculty and Staff

The final stage of the research process involved work to answer the third research question associated with this study: *What impact does implementation of a family strengths study using techniques of Appreciative Inquiry have on both school staff who participate in the study and those who choose not to participate? In particular:*

- *How, if at all, will they change their perceptions of and attitudes toward low-income Puerto Rican families and students?*
- *What possible actions will they identify that they can take to help families draw upon their own strengths to more effectively support their children's learning and performance?*
- *What possible actions will they identify that they may take with students or with their colleagues to more effectively support improvement of student learning and performance?*

During this stage, which I carried out during October and November of 2011, I analyzed questionnaires completed by faculty and wider school community members as noted below, and drafted findings based on this analysis. (Copies of all questionnaires are included in Appendices C and D.) In every case where responses could be quantified (for example, the numbers of respondents who indicated different levels of agreement/disagreement with specific items), I tallied and summarized these responses. In the case of open-ended items, I transcribed these items into Microsoft Word documents in order to group responses into categories, then subsequently reviewed these documents for both frequency patterns and the qualitative nature of individual responses

from members of each constituency (interview team members, teachers who were not part of the interview team, and wider school community members who were not part of the interview team). I also compared response patterns for different items in questionnaires completed by members of the same constituency, as well as response patterns to similar items on different constituencies' questionnaires. The specific steps involved, the results of which are discussed in the section of Chapter 5 describing findings related to Research Question 3, included the following:

i. *Comparative analysis of the results of the initial and final questionnaires completed by the members of the interview team*. I received initial questionnaires from the 10 members of the interview team, and final questionnaires from eight of the members (one of the others was on extended medical leave at the time the final questionnaires were completed, and the other no longer worked for the school). The analysis of these questionnaires included:

- Comparing the degrees to which interview team members perceived, in their initial and final questionnaires, the degree to which a series of possible factors (including both school and family activities and characteristics) impact student learning. This analysis was accomplished by members' assigning a number of points to each factor so as to identify the relative importance of that factor in such a way that the total of their assigned factors would equal 100.
- Compiling and analyzing responses to an open-ended question on the final questionnaire asking team members to share any changes they had noticed in their perceptions of the relative importance of the factors

identified in the prior item, or any other key factors contributing to student effort, learning, and achievement they had identified since beginning to participate in this research project.

- Comparing responses to a section on both the initial and final questionnaires where team members identified whether they strongly disagreed, somewhat disagreed, somewhat agreed, or strongly agreed with a series of statements related to family involvement at Peck. For analysis, I assigned point values (one for "strongly disagree" through four for "strongly agree") to individual interviewer's responses, then calculated mean responses for comparison between initial and final questionnaires.
- Comparing responses to an item requesting team members to give their best estimates at the given time of the percentage of Peck parents who engaged in each of a series of activities related to their children's education. I calculated and compared mean results of interview team members' responses to these items on the initial and final questionnaires.
- Comparing responses to an item asking team members to indicate how often they practiced a series of tactics associated with family engagement. For analysis, I assigned individual responses points as follows: Less than monthly = 1 point; At least once a month but less than weekly = 2 points; About once a week = 3 points; Averaging more than once a week = 4 points. I then compiled and compared mean results to assess the frequency with which interview team members practiced these family

engagement tactics from the time of the initial to that of the final questionnaire.

- Analysis of open-ended items included in the final questionnaire asking team members to identify: what (if any) important changes they had made with regard to their work with students' families since becoming initially involved in the research project, and what (if any) changes they intended to make with regard to their work with students' families based on what they had learned through the research project.
- Comparing responses to a final item included in both the initial and final questionnaires asking interview team members to identify the three most important steps they felt the school should take to improve family engagement. I transcribed and grouped the responses in order to compare the proportions of responses that fell into certain categories on both the initial and final questionnaires, then reviewed the responses to identify trends and establish hypotheses about the reasons for these trends in the response data.

Upon completing these steps I reviewed the overall results of the initial and final questionnaire and developed a summary response to research question 3 as it related to the members of the research team; this summary is included in the sub-section of Chapter 5 entitled "Summary: Findings from Interview Team Members' Initial and Final Questionnaire Responses."

ii. *Analysis of the results of the questionnaires completed by the faculty and wider community members who participated in the faculty/community meeting where the interview results were presented*. During the (October) faculty and wider school community meeting in which the parent interview results were presented, each participant, with the exception of interview team members (who had already completed initial and final questionnaires) was provided with a questionnaire and given time at the end of the meeting to complete it. 44 teachers returned completed questionnaires and gave consent for use of the questionnaire results in this dissertation, in addition to the four members of the interview team who were teachers that filled out initial and final questionnaires, meaning that 48 of 64 Peck teachers (75%) completed questionnaires after being presented with the parent interview results. Additionally, 17 (non-teacher) school staff and wider school community members completed questionnaires in response to the parent interview results shared at this meeting, in addition to the six non-teacher members of the interview team who completed final team member questionnaires.

While the surveys provided to teachers contained more items than those provided to wider faculty and school community members (see below), both surveys contained six open-ended items that were exactly the same, soliciting:

- Respondents' perceptions of the most important findings of the parent interview results with which they had been presented;
- Respondents' identification of information coming from the parent interview results that was new to them;
- Respondents' identification of parent interview findings that challenged or contradicted their understandings of Peck students' families and/or the school;

- Respondents' identification of parent interview findings with which they agreed, and those with which they disagreed; and
- Respondents' perceptions of the three most important things needed to improve family engagement at Peck.

I reviewed and organized teachers' and other faculty/school community members' responses to each of these areas into categories, then re-read and reflected on the categorized responses in order to identify and present a variety of insights into faculty and wider school community members' responses to the findings and their experiences and perceptions of Peck families. These are included in the sections of Chapter 5 where teachers' and other faculty/school community members' responses are presented.

In addition, the teacher questionnaire included a section in which teachers were asked to self-report about how often (less than monthly; at least monthly but less than weekly; weekly; more than weekly) they had practiced a variety of tactics related to family engagement during the past year. I compiled the percentages into which the responses of the teachers who returned questionnaires fell, then analyzed these results to identify the highest- and lowest-frequency family engagement practices identified by Peck teachers, as well as identifying several other interesting and potentially useful trends in the data.

Finally, in addition to the item (already mentioned above) soliciting perceptions of Peck's three greatest needs in order to improve family engagement, teachers were asked on their questionnaire to identify any changes they planned to make with regard to their work with students' families. I reviewed and organized teachers' responses to this question into categories, then compared teachers' stated personal intentions to their stated perceptions about what the school should

do to improve family engagement. Discussions of both teachers' personal intentions and the comparison between their personal intentions and their perceptions of actions the school should take are included in the findings related teacher questionnaire results in Chapter 5.

Table 4.1: Overall timeline of the research process.

Time Frame	Research Activities [and Researchers Involved]
January 2007-November 2011	Background research and preparations: • (01/2007-10/2011) Research, initial drafting, and ongoing revision of Chapters 1-3 [Hyry-Dermith] • (08/2007-08/2009) Development, discussion, and securing of institutional review and approval for dissertation proposal, including research protocols and tools [Hyry-Dermith, with support from Committee and IRB]
January-February 2010	Recruitment and orientation of Faculty/Staff Interview Team • Initial letter to faculty inviting participation in research process [Hyry-Dermith] • Initial meetings and training with Interview Team members, including discussion and decisions about "focus families" and criteria for choosing families for wider sample, and completion of Interview Team pre-questionnaires [Hyry-Dermith and Interview Team members] • Revision of introductory (explanatory) sections and Spanish-language version of family strengths interview tool [Hyry-Dermith, with Interview Team feedback]
February 2010-June 2011	Family Strengths Interviews completed, compiled, and transcribed • Interviews completed in two waves: February-May 2010 and February-May 2011 [Interview Team members] • All interviews that were audio-recorded were transcribed within three weeks of completion of interview (Hyry-Dermith, with one Interview Team member transcribing three interviews that she carried out); all interviews recorded in Spanish were transcribed in English [Hyry-Dermith]
June-September 2011	Organization, review, and analysis of interview results • (June-August) Re-reading of all interviews, compilation of summary interview documents, research memo with hypotheses re: interview findings [Hyry-Dermith] • (August) Initial Interview Team meeting for collective analysis and summarizing re: interview findings [six Interview Team members] • (August-September) Further analysis and drafting of family strengths findings [Hyry-Dermith]
September-October 2011	Presentations and discussion of draft interview findings with, and collection of reactions and responses from, Interview Team, faculty, and wider school community • (September) Meeting with Interview Team to present and discuss draft interview findings; completion of Interview Team post-questionnaires • (October) Presentation of family strengths interview findings to full Peck faculty and wider school community members; completion of faculty and wider school community questionnaires (Hyry-Dermith presentation)
October-November 2011	Compilation, analysis, and drafting of Interview Team, faculty, and wider school community questionnaire results sections of dissertation (Chapter 5); revision of family strengths findings sections of dissertation (Chapter 5); drafting of research description sections of Chapter 4; drafting of implications and recommendations (Chapter 6). [Hyry-Dermith with J. Eiseman support]
December 2011	Dissertation defense [Dissertation Committee, Hyry-Dermith]
December 2011-March 2012	Dissertation revisions based on Committee Feedback [Hyry-Dermith with J. Eiseman support]

CHAPTER 5

RESULTS OF THE PECK FAMILY STRENGTHS STUDY

Interviewers

The family strengths data for this study was gathered via interviews with 19 parents of current students at the Peck Full Service Community School. One interview was carried out with a mother and father couple with several children at Peck, meaning that a total of 18 interviews were conducted. Ten Peck faculty and staff members carried out the interviews: four teachers, two guidance counselors, three staff members dedicated to the full service community school initiative, and one administrator. Three of the interviewers were Latinas, and seven were "Anglos" (i.e., in the terms of the US Census Bureau, "White Non-Hispanic"). Four of the interviewers were Spanish/English bilingual and carried out their interviews in Spanish, while the other six interviewers were English dominant and carried out their interviewers in English. Two interviewers carried out three interviews each; four interviewers carried out two interviews each; and four each carried out one interview.

Interviewee Families

The demographic characteristics of the families of the 19 parents interviewed varied substantially. Eight of the parents were Spanish-dominant (and their seven interviews were carried out in Spanish), while seven were fairly well-balanced Spanish/English bilingual and four were English-dominant (these eleven interviews were carried out in English). Three of the interviewees were mothers of "intact families" (i.e.,

families in which the birth parents of the children were still together and raising the children); three were fathers of "intact families"; five were mothers who were currently in committed relationships with partners who were not their children's biological parents; and eight were mothers identified as single at the time of their interviews. In terms of birth location, eight of the parents were born in Puerto Rico, four were born in Holyoke, six were born in other places in the mainland US (three in New York City, two in Holyoke's neighboring city of Springfield, and one in Chicago), and one was born in Central America. While eleven of the interviewees had lived most of their lives in Holyoke, only three of these 11 were actually born in Holyoke. Three other interviewees had lived most of their lives in other communities in the United States, and the remaining eight had lived most of their lives in Puerto Rico.

The interviewees had a total of 61 children among them at the time that they were interviewed. Five of their families had two children, seven families had three children, four families had four children, one family had six children, and one family—Lisa's, a blended family—had eight children. Thus both the mean and median number of children per family in the study was three. 38 of these 61 children attended Peck at the time of their interviews, with eight children too young for kindergarten (ranging in age from 21 months to four years), three who were age-appropriate for Peck but attending other schools in Holyoke, and 12 who completed 8th grade and were either in high school, had graduated, or had left school at the time of interview.

The 38 children of interviewees who were attending Peck at the time of interview comprised roughly 7% of the school's total population. The process of selecting interviewees was not guided by consideration of the number or ages of their children, and

the spread of the children across grade levels reflects this reality, as noted in the table below. While there were significant differences between the numbers of children at different individual grade levels (e.g., seven kindergarteners and six first graders but no second graders), there was a quite even balance between primary grade children (13 in grades K-2), upper elementary children (11 in grades 3-5), and middle school children (14 in grades 6-8). This suggests that parents' collective responses to interview questions reflect experiences and practices associated with children across the full range of grade levels at Peck. This assertion is supported when the children's grade levels are identified by family, as noted in Table 5.1, which identifies both the numbers of children attending Peck that each parent had at the time of interview and the numbers of these

Table 5.1: Peck Students whose Parents Participated in Family Strengths Interviews by Grade.

Parent(s)	**K**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**Total Child-ren at Peck**
Concepcion							Michael			1
Ana	Steven									1
Leo & Teresa								Lucía	Teresita	2
Beatriz								Pablo		1
Juan	Yazmin	Micaela								2
Brenda									Catalina	1
Mariana						Bianca		Silvia		2
Rosa	Ricardo									1
Lisa						Raúl	Emily Charlie	Olivia		4
Laura		Victor		Julian			Felipe			3
Barbara	Esperanza									1
Lillian		Josiah				Eduardo	Roberto			3
Blanca		Graciela Ruby			Isabel					3
Anita	Inés				Marisol					2
Pedro						Freddy	Alfredo			2
Miriam					Jesse				Tanya	2
Victoria	Rosalía				Roberta	Yeris				3
Gloria	Jorge	Jeniah				John			Esteban	4
Totals	7	6	0	1	4	6	6	4	4	38

children in each grade level at the time of interview.[25]

As captured in Table 5.2 below, when asked the interview question about adult family members (other than the interviewee) who played an important role in their children's lives,[26] grandparents and aunts/uncles were clearly identified as the most significant contributors. That is, while all but two of the interviewees identified grandparents and/or aunts/uncles as important in their children's lives, in only half of the interviews were other parents or step-parents identified as important in their children's lives. Additionally, the number of grandparents and aunts/uncles identified as important figures in interviewees' children's lives (*n*=44) was nearly five times the number of other parents/step-parents identified (*n*=9). This reality suggests that, as with other Latino families, the centrality of the extended family (rather than the nuclear family alone) was a feature of the low-income Puerto Rican families participating in this study.

Table 5.2: Important Adults (Other than the Parent[s] Interviewed) in the Lives of Children whose Parents Participated in Peck Family Strengths Interviews.

Type of Relationship to Child	**Number of Interviewed Parents Identifying Important Adults in this Category**	**Number of Adults Identified by Parents Interviewed**
Grandparents	13	24
Aunts & Uncles	10	19
Other Parent or Step-Parent	9	9
Family Friends (including Godparents)	3	7
Other (Teachers, Mentors, Cousins)	4	4

[25] The names of all parents and students involved in the interviews have been changed to protect confidentiality.

[26] The full interview question reads, "We know that 'family' means different things to different people, and that there are many different kinds of adults who play important roles in children's lives. For example, grandparents, step-parents, aunts/uncles, older brothers/sisters, and even close friends and neighbors can be important adult family members for a child. Besides you, who are the most important adult family members in your child(ren)'s life, and what is their relationship to the child(ren)?"

Focus Families

Six of the interviews were carried out with parents identified by an interviewer as "focus" families. The identification of a "focus" family was not grounded in specific criteria shared among the interview team such as high academic performance on the part of its children or parent participation in family engagement programming at the school, but rather in the interviewer's belief, grounded in experience with the identified parent and/or her or his children, that the study was likely to be enriched by an interview with that parent. Thus:

- A kindergarten teacher selected a father (Juan) who she experienced as highly communicative with her (as teacher) regarding his daughter's daily comportment and progress;
- Another teacher selected a mother (Barbara) who she knew had made major changes in her own and her family's lives—moving from Puerto Rico to Holyoke—specifically because she (Barbara, the mother) was concerned about how her children were doing in school in Puerto Rico and wanted what she believed would be a better educational and community setting for them;
- One staff member selected a mother (Mariana) whom she considered, based on multiple interactions, to be a highly reflective practitioner of parenting;
- Another staff member interviewed a couple (Leo & Teresa) whose family members she experienced as highly interconnected;
- One guidance counselor interviewed a mother (Lillian) of three Peck students who worked in a community based organization with which the school partnered closely, and whose older two sons (who were in 5th and 6th grade at the time of interview) were high achievers; and
- The other guidance counselor selected a mother (Laura) of three sons at Peck, the oldest of whom the counselor considered to be a young man with great character.

While each of these six "focus" families was considered especially interesting by an interviewer due to some specific perceived feature, it was not the case that their children were, taken collectively, especially high-achieving or well-behaved students relative to their peers. That is, of these families' 14 children who were students at Peck

(or could have been, in light of their ages/grades and residence in the attendance zone) at the time of interview:

- One was placed, at the time of his parent's interview, in the Holyoke Public Schools' alternative program for students who present serious behavior problems;
- One was placed in a substantially separate special education program for students with global intellectual disabilities;
- One was placed in a classroom for beginning English Language Learners and was making slow progress, relative to her peers, in developing English language skills;
- Another was placed in the Peck kindergarten room where early-stage English Language Learners are concentrated, and was making good progress in developing English skills but presented intermittent behavioral challenges to her teachers;
- Two were sisters (in kindergarten and first grade) who were making average academic progress but had high rates of school absenteeism;
- Two were young boys who were retained in first grade due to lack of academic progress (one of these students also presented significant behavior challenges to his teachers);
- One was a third grade boy who was considered an average student by his teachers;
- One was a 7th grade girl who had struggled with academics throughout elementary school (in another school district) but whose performance improved dramatically during middle school at Peck;
- One was a 5th grade girl whose academic performance was strong but who needed substantial support from her family in relation to her socialization with other children; and
- Three were upper elementary/middle school boys whose academic performance was quite strong and whose engagement with school and behavior were generally considered especially good by their teachers.

Children of randomly-selected families

The remaining 12 interviewees were selected through the randomized process described in Chapter 4. Their 25 children, taken collectively, included:

- Five kindergarteners, of whom: one was considered quite high-achieving (performing academically well above the levels of the majority of his peers); one was making solid language development progress in the classroom focused on early-stage English Language Learners; one presented very serious behavioral challenges to her teachers and was subsequently assigned to the district's alternative school for evaluation; and two were "typical" in terms of academic progress and behavior;

- Three first graders, two of whom (sisters) were quite far behind their peers academically, and one of whom was "typical;"

- Four fourth graders, two of whom were making good language development progress in the early-stage ELL classroom at their grade level, and two of whom (cousins) were academically behind their peers;

- Four fifth graders, one of whom was "typical", one of whom had an Individual Education Plan for inclusion, and two of whom were placed in Peck's substantially separate special education program for students with global intellectual disabilities (the Functional Academics program);

- Four sixth graders: one in the Functional Academics program, one with an Inclusion IEP, one ELL making relatively slow progress in language and academic development relative to his peers, and one "typical;" and

- Two seventh graders and three eighth graders: one girl performing strongly relative to her peers, and the others (two of whom were intermediate-level ELLs) making typical progress.

Families' arrivals in Holyoke

There was a wide range among the parents interviewed in terms of the amount of time they and their families had been in Holyoke. While Laura was born in Holyoke and had lived there her entire life, several parents (for example, Concepción, Leo and Teresa) had lived there for little more than a year at the time of their interviews, and one (Barbara) had been in Holyoke for just a few months. Similarly, the reasons each parent gave for their families' arrivals in Holyoke varied substantially. On the one hand, five parents identified issues in places where they were living before. For example:

- *I had lost my job and everything*[27]. . . (Barbara)
- I left New York City because of an incident that happened with my daughter. (Brenda)
- My mother was 22 and poor in Puerto Rico. (Rosa)

On the other hand, most parents' responses included information about why they had come to Holyoke in particular. Thus eight mentioned that their families had moved to Holyoke because they had friends or family there, and eight mentioned aspects of Holyoke that they believed would lead to good things for their family (housing, school quality, physical and mental health care, and church were all mentioned) as important reasons why their families had moved there. Several members of the interview team interpreted the overall reasons for families' decision to move to Holyoke as generally constitutive of wanting a better life for their families, and one member noted that it appeared that many of the families expressed a strong "draw to community" in how they spoke about moving to Holyoke in light of the fact that 11 of the 18 responses included mention of some aspect of community (family, friends, the schools, church) as central to the families' reasons for doing so.

Broadest Findings: Hopes, Dreams, and Caring

In meeting to review the overall data generated during the interviews, interview team members noted that, taken collectively and at the broadest levels, the data showed that, while the parents interviewed demonstrated a broad range of interpretations of, and skills associated with, supporting their children to be as successful as possible in school,

[27] As parents are quoted throughout this chapter, quotes that are *italicized* will indicate that the interview was carried out in Spanish and translated into English. Quotes in regular type are taken from interviews carried out in English.

***every* parent interviewed cared deeply about, and accepted personal responsibility for, their children's learning.** Put more specifically, all but three of the parents expressed specific hopes and dreams for their children's future that included education and/or career goals—from Mariana's simple statement "I want them to go to college" to Beatriz's "*I dream that they want to continue studying*" and Concepción's "*That they can become professionals . . . is the greatest hope that one has as a mother*"—and every parent interviewed described specific things that they teach their children about how to be successful in school as well as ways in which they had worked to support their children toward success, helped their children solve problems, supported their children's academic learning, and kept their children going when discouraged. (Examples are ubiquitous in the section of this chapter entitled "Specific Findings—Families' Support of their Children's Education.") While this finding might appear obvious or as something to be assumed, the broad finding that *the parents interviewed cared deeply about, had high hopes for, and worked to support their children's academic success* was important to interview team members because, as one team member stated, it counteracts stereotypes about low-income Puerto Rican parents—that these parents don't care about their children's education, do little to help their children, etc. Additionally, as discussed later in this chapter, this finding appeared to be quite striking and important to many of the Peck teachers and wider community members when presented with a summary of the family strengths findings.

With this broad understanding in mind, the interviewees' responses to the question about their hopes for their children's future also provided interesting information, particularly when disaggregated. That is, in 12 of the 18 interviews the

parents specifically mentioned educational goals for their children. Among these 12 parents, seven parents specifically mentioned *college* as an aspiration for their children, while three specifically mentioned high school graduation and two were more broad, stating "For them to finish school, you know, get a good education" (Laura) and "*That they stay in school . . . don't make the mistake of leaving school early*" (Miriam). While these data suggest overall that Peck has some distance to go in promoting college readiness as a goal for its students, one interview team member noted the particularly striking fact that while three of the four English-dominant and four of the seven "balanced bilingual" parents specifically mentioned college as something that they hoped for in their children's futures, *none* of the eight Spanish-dominant parents interviewed specifically mentioned college. This reality would suggest that the school's ongoing efforts to promote early college awareness and readiness may need to be especially focused on engaging Spanish-dominant parents and guardians.

Another result worth noting in relation to the question about parents' hopes for their children's futures was that along with expressing high hopes for their children's educational and professional success, the other major area of hope on the parents' parts related to *character*, as expressed in statements of hope such as that they "do things the correct way, learn from their mistakes, work hard at what they want" (Lisa), "*don't take a bad road*" (Leo), and "*prepare for a better future, so that they become good women*" (Anita). Finally, it is worth noting that six of the mothers interviewed used themselves as touchstones for relating their thinking in this area; that is, they explicitly expressed hopes that their children could achieve things that they themselves had not been able to accomplish. For example, Laura said she hoped her sons could "get a good education—

something that I couldn't do," Rosa said that she hoped her children "will go further than me or their father in school," and Ana said that her hope was that her children would "not . . . have kids at a young age like I did." As one interview team member noted, this pattern of responses reflected pathos in the sense that these mothers appeared to think of their own lives were in the "past tense," i.e., that their own potential for growth and achievement in the future was quite limited, and at the same time demonstrated how centrally they think of themselves as parents, in clearly elevating their hopes for (and work toward) their children's futures over their own.

Specific Findings Related to Research Question 1

An intensive review of the results of the appreciative interviews, integrating the analysis of the author of this study with the analysis of members of the interview team as described in Chapter 4, resulted in the responses below to the first research question guiding the study: *What strengths of low-income Puerto Rican families—including strengths not widely known or acknowledged by educators at present—might schools draw upon in order to collaborate more effectively with family members in support of their children's learning and performance?*

Specific Findings—Core Family Strengths

The analysis process resulted in identification of several clear patterns and trends in how the interviewee parents responded to specific questions as well as in their responses across multiple questions. These can be broken down into two broad areas, based on the division of the "substantive" (as opposed to basic and demographic)

interview questions into the two broad categories of general questions about family life and questions about supporting children's success in school. The general questions about family life were those that focused on:

- Favorite family memories;
- What interviewees liked best about their families;
- What interviewees and their families do to give their children a strong family life; and
- The final question asking the three things about which interviewees were most proud in relation to their families.

Analysis of the responses to these four questions resulted in identification of three major areas of strengths, or "core strengths" in the overall family lives of the interviewees. These "core strengths" are distinguished from family strengths specifically related to supporting their children's education, which are discussed in the next section of this chapter. In keeping with Weick and Saleeby's identification of two essential types of family strengths as discussed in Chapter 2, these strengths can be categorized into those associated with *relationships* (interactions and mutual treatment) and *processes* (what families do to support their members, including mobilizing resources as needed). The analysis also resulted in several additional points of interest that are discussed at the close of this subsection.

Core Strength 1: Family Unity

In terms of the relationships (interactions and mutual treatment) among family members described by the parents interviewed, one strength emerged clearly: that of relationships grounded in *family unity*, comprised of a strong emphasis on "togetherness" (spending time together as a whole family), warmth, mutual respect, and communication.

13 of 18 interviews included statements about the importance of unity in responding to the four "general" questions about their families, with one parent mentioning family unity/togetherness three times, seven mentioning it twice, and five mentioning it once. In general, the statements about family unity were powerful and definitive; some examples of the more than 20 responses that reflected an emphasis on family unity include:

- We are very united. We have the most respect for each other. We could actually sit down at a table and talk and put everything on the table without feeling like we're going to be judged. So I think our family is very close. (Mariana on what she likes best about her family)

- *The unity we've had since we arrived here—being together, knowing more about my kids, knowing how to help them. . .* (Barbara on what she likes best about her family)

- Togetherness. We're in the back of one another, always worried about the next person. (Brenda on what she likes best about her family)

- *We are always together as a family, our favorite thing to do is to share as a family. . . it would be hard to pick just one moment.* (Leo's response to the question about favorite family memories)

- [We give our kids the message] *that we are together, that we support them; we maintain family unity*. (Pedro on building a strong family life)

- *We are always together. If we go out, we go out together*. (Miriam on building a strong family life)

- The way we stick together as a family. (Laura on what she's most proud of about her family)

It is worth noting that few or none of the parents interviewed responded to the questions about general/core family characteristics in *individual* terms (e.g., "I am very close to each of my children") or in terms of achievement (e.g., "I am proud of what my children have accomplished"), which would likely be quite common and natural responses on the part of parents in some cultural contexts. In fact, in responding to the questions about favorite family memories, what they liked best about their families, and the things about their families about which they were proudest, only three of 54 responses

included mention of specific individuals (Concepción talked about her mother, Gloria talked about an aunt who had died very recently at the time of her interview, and Miriam talked about the strong connection between her older daughter and her husband). Rather, the responses to these questions on the part of the parents interviewed focused almost entirely on the family as a whole and on relationships and activities among all family members.

Core Strength 2: Whole-Family Activities

This centrality of family unity as a strength is magnified by the two additional strengths identified in interviewees' responses to the "general" family questions: *doing things as a family unit* (a "process" strength, i.e., an important element of what families do to support their members) and *talking* (a "relational" strength). In terms of whole-family activities, the same proportion of parents/guardians interviewed (13 of 18) emphasized the importance of doing things together, as a whole family, as at the heart of their family process, with two parents mentioning whole-family activities twice. It is important to note that, while a smaller number of parents (seven, including several who were among the 13 noted above) mentioned major vacations and holiday activities as part of their responses about favorite memories, the "doing things together as a family" responses noted here did not include these descriptions of major events, but rather were comprised by vivid and compelling descriptions of regular, consistent, smaller-scale whole-family activities—activities in which the *time spent together* (dancing in the kitchen, going to a park for the afternoon, watching movies, playing games, etc.) was presented as much more important than the specific "content" of the activity. For example:

- Like on Tuesdays on my days off, we just like to jump in the car and drive, go and eat, and have some fun. (Juan on favorite family memories)

- *Going fishing as a family is something that we enjoy and always have special memories of*. (Beatriz on favorite family memories)

- *When we can all share something that everyone likes. . . Everyone in the house likes music and likes to dance*. (Miriam on what she likes best about her family)

- *In the summer, we all go to the park, and let them bring their friends.* (Leo on building a strong family life)

- *We take time to share as a family—to watch a movie, go to the park, play games at home*. . . (Anita on building a strong family life)

Again, in other cultural contexts one might find a different emphasis in parents/guardians' responses. For example, in relation to the question about favorite family memories, along with providing a higher proportion of responses about vacations and holidays, parents in a different cultural context might be expected to mention specific events such as "the day my first child was born" or "my grandparents' 50th anniversary." And in relation to the question about how they give children a strong family life, parents in other contexts might be expected to speak about making time to spend with each child individually, sending their children to spend time with their grandparents, or going to church or other family-centered institutions. It is thus important to acknowledge the centrality of informal, togetherness-oriented, whole-family activities to the family processes identified by the parents interviewed for this study.

Core Strength 3: Communication and Talk Within the Family

Along with the centrality of *family unity* and *whole-family activities* as strengths of the families interviewed, a third area of common strength was an emphasis on *communicating and talking within the family*. While the proportion of parents

interviewed who explicitly mentioned talk and communication (8 of 18) was lower than the proportion mentioning family unity and whole-family activities (13 of 18), the frequency and intensity with which those who spoke about communication and talk are worth noting, especially in light of the emphasis interviewees placed on talking with their children when asked specific questions about how they support their children's education (see below). Many of the responses focused on talk and communication were fairly general and linked to interviewees' emphasis on family unity, as when Laura said, when asked what she liked best about her family, "How we just talk to each other, understand each other. We talk about everything. It is very good." Similarly, Rosa's answer to the same question was "How close we are, we are always together, we communicate," and Leo and Teresa's answer was "*Our communication. . . The strong connection that we have*."

Beyond these general statements about communication, a variety of parents were quite detailed and specific in describing the centrality of talk in their families, and the ways in which it was a clear strength. In several cases parents described finding opportunities to talk about matters of importance. For example, Concepción, who mentioned family communication three times in her answers to the four "general" family questions, said that the way she and other family members work to build a strong family life for her children was to:

> *Get along well, have lots of communication, including giving them [the kids] the chance to learn about adults such as their grandparents, who are the ones who spend a lot of time talking with the kids—sitting down and talking with them in a positive way, whether about good or bad things, explaining things in a way they can understand and know what is happening in life, so that they can keep improving as human beings and citizens in life and the future.*

Concepción went on to discuss a quite specific example:

> *For example, if someone at school invites them to do something negative, for example to smoke, you ask him what's happening—and these things can happen, but you've already oriented him at home not to do that . . . in relation to all the negative things that could happen at school, we should be talking in advance about them with our kids to make sure they don't fall into them. Talking every day with our kids allows us to clarify things that they shouldn't get involved with; if we do that, then they have our support and they won't fall into the mistakes.*

Similarly, in discussing how she works to give her children a strong family life, Blanca described a strategy that she used to make sure that she had solid communication with each of them:

> Sometimes I try to take them out one at a time. Sit there and talk with them. Like if I am going to a store, I'll take one of them or if I am going out I'll take one of them and then the other one the next day to talk with them, to just see where they are coming from, what they come up with . . .

Additionally, two mothers talked about fairly formalized processes for communication within their families. Mariana described "weekly family meetings to touch bases," and Brenda said:

> We discuss a lot of things, like if there is a problem we sit around—we have family meetings. If she [one daughter] needs help in one thing, then maybe she [another daughter] can help her. . . Anyone can ask for a family meeting, like if someone is bothering them, they're like, "Ma, it's time for a family meeting," and we all have to respect that and come downstairs and listen to what the next person has to say. Nobody can say anything until that person gets it off their chest."

Core Strengths: Additional Points of Interest

In addition to the strengths of unity, whole-family activities, and communication noted above, members of the interview team identified several themes in the interviewed parents' responses that they considered valuable to point out. One was that many of the parents expressed a strong sense of *joy in/about their children*. For example, in responding to the questions about what they liked best, and were most proud of, about their families, many parents were quite explicit:

- I would say my kids, I love my kids. (Lillian)
- *Very good kids—obedient and with good principles; hard-working students.* (Beatriz)
- My kids. They're great. . . (Blanca)
- *My son and daughter*. . . (Barbara)
- My three daughters—they're everything for me. (Juan)
- *My kids.* (Miriam)
- My daughters. (Brenda)
- My kids (Lisa)
- All of my children (Gloria)

Other responses carried this theme of joy in children, from Laura's statement that "I'm most proud of how my mom loved me enough that now I know how to love my children," to Pedro's "I am proud that they are studying; you can see that they want to progress," and Victoria's statement of pride that "They [my kids] are always happy."

Along with this strong sense of joy about their children, many of the parents also described *having fun and playing together* as central to their family dynamics. Examples of how families played together included dancing (e.g., Barbara said "*I love to dance with my two kids, to put on the radio and dance*"), going to parks (e.g., Ana: "If we're all off on the same day, we'll take them all [her children and nieces/nephews] to a park and play"), games (e.g., Anita: "*We take time to share as a family, to . . . play games at home*"), and joking (e.g., Concepción: "*. . . to play with them and make little jokes. It can make me feel like a girl again*"). The responses carrying this focus overlapped strongly, but were not completely aligned, with those described above in relation to whole-family activities—that is, many but not all of the responses describing whole-

family activities incorporated an emphasis on fun and play as a primary purpose. Nevertheless, fun and play were clearly of great importance to many of the interviewees, and worth considering in Peck's efforts to strengthen family engagement.

Finally, it is somewhat striking that religious faith and practice were, for the most part, *not* identified by the parents interviewed in the study as associated core or general family strengths. While one parent mentioned her daughters' baptisms as a favorite family memory, and four parents mentioned Christmas in relation to favorite memories or what they liked best about their families, their focus in these instances appeared to be much more on the family togetherness elements of these events and holidays. For example, Mariana mentioned " . . . our last Christmas. . . It was more family togetherness than it has been in years," and Beatriz noted "*Christmas, birthdays, and special occasions that we enjoy as a family*" as favorite family memories. In fact, no parent mentioned anything related to religion or spirituality as part of what they liked best or were most proud about their families, and the only statement about religion/spirituality made in relation to giving their children a strong family life was Juan's that "The most important thing [is that] we gotta go to church. . . I'm just trying to teach them [my daughters] that, at least, you gotta spend some time with God, 'cause he was the one that gave you the life." Several interview team members expressed interest and some surprise in this regard, in light of personal knowledge that many of the families in the study did go to church, and in some cases were quite involved with their churches. One team member conjectured that it may have been the case that, because the interviews were carried out by people associated with *school*, and many parents may have a sense that school is on the "state" side of the separation between church and state, the parents interviewed may

have either been reluctant to mention religion or simply not have thought about religion during the interview in light of an unconscious separation of school from church in their thinking.

Summary: Overall Family Strengths and Points of Interest.

To conclude this section of the findings, analysis of parents' responses to the "general" questions about their families—their favorite family memories, what they liked best about their families, what they and other family members did to give their children a strong family life, and what they were most proud of about their families—resulted in identification of three significant strengths common to the families interviewed as part of this study: *family unity* as a relational commitment, and *whole-family activities* and *talk/communication within the family* as essential family processes. In addition, we have noted that in answering these questions parents expressed a strong sense of *joy in their children* and, in many cases, a delight in *fun and play* as core family processes. Finally, it was observed that Peck families' religious and/or spiritual lives and practices would not appear to be a primary area for focus in strengthening the school's engagement with its families. Along with the strengths and other findings identified through the analysis in the section immediately below, these understandings had already had substantial impact on Peck's framework for planning and implementing its family engagement work by the time this dissertation was finalized.

Specific Findings: Supporting Children's Success in School

Along with the four questions related to general family strengths in relation to which responses are analyzed above, the appreciative interview process associated with the Peck

Family Strengths Study included nine questions specifically related to ways in which the interviewees and their families supported their children's education and learning. These questions focused on the following:

- What the parents taught their children about how to be successful in school;
- Describing a time when one of their children had been successful, and the parent's/family's role in that success;
- Describing a time when a child had had a problem in school, and how the parent/family had helped the child solve the problem;
- How the parent(s) helped their child(ren) understand that school is important;
- How the parent(s) helped their children when they were upset or discouraged about school;
- Ways in which the family helped their child(ren) with their academic learning;
- Ways in which the parent had worked together with teachers/school staff to support their children's education;
- Ways in which the parent had made use of community resources to support their child(ren)'s education; and
- The most difficult aspect in helping their child(ren) be successful in school, and how the parent and other family members help them in relation to this challenge.

While there was predictably wide variation in responses to these nine broad and open-ended questions, there were also several clear patterns. One element that interview team members noted and felt it important to emphasize was that, in the course of responding to these questions, *every parent described specific, active steps that s/he took to support his/her children's education*. This understanding contradicts some common stereotypes of low-income Puerto Rican parents as passive bystanders in relation to their children's learning and schooling, and suggests that the families of Peck and other schools serving similar neighborhoods and communities have a great deal to share if the

school is willing to listen. With this in mind, the interview results demonstrated that, taken as a whole, the families interviewed had significant strengths related to supporting their children's education in the areas of *motivational and advisory communication* and *creating structures for learning at home,* and *specific, often creative, support for their children's academic learning.* Additionally, several parents shared practices and observations worth noting, and the lack of certain sorts of responses also bears notice.

Supporting School Success Strength 1: Motivational Communication

Open and loving communication with one's children emerged as a major "relationship" strength in interviewees' responses to the general questions about family strengths analyzed in the prior section, and the centrality of talk—and especially talking in a way that offered support and motivation to their children—in the parents' responses to the questions about how they supported their children's education cannot be over-emphasized. Virtually every parent interviewed (18 of 19) described specific conversations (or lines of conversation) that they had had (and, in most cases, had on a regular basis) with their children in order to help them understand the importance of education, to advise them about how to be successful in school, to help them solve specific problems, and to help them persevere when upset or discouraged about school. Some of the many such examples of responses describing motivational communication included:

- I always tell them to try their hardest, always give it all they have and more if they can. Even if, let's say, they don't pass a test, just to try harder for them at the time. (Laura on what she teaches her children about how to be successful in school)

- *I tell them to study hard so they can have a career, not depend on anyone, and take care of their mother.* (Pedro on what he teaches his children about how to be successful in school)

- I tell them you can't drop out of school because then you won't get a good job. . . I try to put any excuse in there to talk about college. (Blanca on helping her children understand the importance of education)

- He was kind of like, "Oh, this is going to be so hard," and I said, "You know, it's not hard if you give it your best, and I'm sure you're going to do a good job," and it made him feel more—I would say—it made him stronger about the whole thing, and he did it. (Laura on how she had supported one of her children toward a moment of success in school)

- I talked with him, let him know that he could talk to me, teachers, a lot of people. I think talking with him helped him. (Rosa on helping her son through a problem in school)

- I give them examples, like "What do you want to do with your life? You can't let somebody else mess that up; you've got to keep on going. You can't just give up—not to be a quitter." (Brenda on helping her children when they are upset or discouraged about school)

Nearly half of the parents interviewed described multiple, detailed examples of motivational talk: one parent gave four such examples, three parents and the one couple gave three examples each, and three parents gave two examples each, with nine parents each sharing one example. There was also a very strong representation of the practice of motivational talk on the part of the parents of the six "focus families" identified by interviewers as especially important or interesting; five of these six families were among the eight whose parents gave at least two examples of motivational talk as a practice they had used to support their children's educational success.

While motivational talk is of course central to the repertoire of skills and strategies of parents and guardians everywhere, it may be even more important in the context of Peck's families than in the contexts of some other communities with greater access to resources supporting educational attainment. That is, in light of the reality that

approximately half of the students who enter Holyoke's high schools leave before graduating, and that the vast majority of parents/guardians whose children attend Peck have relatively limited educational attainment, unlike their peers in more affluent communities it cannot be taken as a given for Peck students that they are likely to complete high school and go to college. Because educational attainment goes "against the tide" in the neighborhood that Peck serves, and because parents/guardians in this neighborhood have limited access to, and experiences with, the "trappings" of educational attainment, consistent motivational talk with their children—constantly reinforcing the importance of school—is likely to be an especially vital tool for low-income parents/guardians of Puerto Rican descent.

This understanding helps illustrate two specific features of the motivational talk described by many parents. The first is the link many parents described making, in talking with their students about the importance of school, between education and material wealth. For example:

- I tell them that school is important because they need to have a career in the future . . . not just for them, but for their families. (Lillian)
- I always explain to them that school is important. They're always talking about how they want nice houses, and how they want nice cars, and how they want this, and I tell them, 'The only way you can get all this is if you get a good education, a good job, a good-paying job, and you become very successful. (Laura)
- I tell them, "If you don't get a good education, you're not gonna find a good job." (Juan)

Interestingly in this regard, the parents from five of the six "focus families" explicitly emphasized the link between education and future economic well-being/material wealth in their responses to the question about how they help their children understand that school is important. It may, again, be the case that explicitly and

consistently emphasizing this link is especially important in the context of Peck and similar schools, because unlike their peers in more affluent communities, this link may not be natural or obvious to Peck's students, who live in a neighborhood where visible material wealth is more often associated with short-term success in the underground/illegal economy than long-term development of a career in the "legitimate" economy.

Secondly, half of the parents interviewed (those of 9 out of 18 families included) specifically described ways in which they used themselves as examples in engaging in motivational talk around education with their children. This included several examples where the parents described themselves in terms of their lack of educational attainment (e.g., "*I always tell them, 'Look at me; I don't have an education'*" [Teresa] and "I tell them that I don't want them to end up like me; I dropped out of Holyoke High in 10th grade" [Gloria]). It also included several more mixed and positive examples associated with parents' efforts to attain more education as adults. For example, Blanca, who was enrolled in an adult literacy program at the time of her interview, said that:

> . . . what I'll do sometimes when we're having parties, like little graduation parties [at her adult literacy program], I try to take them with me so they can see. . . Mommy's doing this. Or I'll tell them, "Baby, you know what? School is so important that Mommy is going on a field trip for her school."

And Miriam shared as follows:

> *Sometimes I share with them the example of their parents. We both left school early, and I came and finished my GED last year, which was one of my priorities. . . . both could see that I did finish and feel proud of their mother for finishing school. Their dad also left school at a young age, but he hasn't been able to finish. Sometimes he says to them, "You have to study hard so that you don't end up like me, having to have a job in which you depend on a very small amount of money that they pay you; if you want to be successful, you have to stay in school and study. That's the most important thing so that what happened to us won't happen to you.*

Supporting School Success Strength 2: Structure and Organization for Learning at Home.

Along with motivational talk as a relational strength, the second strength area identified by the parents interviewed was the process strength of providing organization and structure for learning at home. While parents described home learning structures in several different ways, and in response to several different interview questions, there was a particularly strong emphasis on having structured homework time, as noted in the following examples:

- When they come home, the first thing they gotta do is, they gotta do homework, cause if they don't do no homework when they get to school they're gonna be lost. (Juan on what he and his wife teach their children about how to be successful in school)

- Organization. . . Without being organized, there is no success. . . Practice, practice. Repetition is always the key to getting everything done. If you repeat everything, you will learn it. Homework comes before playtime. (Mariana on what she teaches her daughters about how to be successful in school)

- [I make sure they know that] *they should be studying every day, all the time—doing their homework and making sure it is ready on time, and handing it in in a way that is correct, clean, and organized*. (Concepción on how she helps her children understand that school is important)

- I make sure they do their homework if they have any; I make sure they read. (Rosa on how she helps her children understand that school is important)

- . . . make them do their homework right in front of me, and get it right back into their book bags. I help my kids stay organized. (Gloria on how she helps her children with their academic learning)

15 of the 18 families interviewed described providing structure for study at home—and particularly for homework completion—as central to how they worked to support educational success for their children. These descriptions came in response to four different interview queries (things they taught their children about how to be successful in school; their roles in a moment of success in school for their child; how they

helped their children understand that education is important; how they helped their children with their academic learning), with many parents mentioning it multiple times: one parent emphasized structured homework/study time in three different responses, six mentioned it twice; and eight mentioned it once.

In discussing parents' thoughts in relation to structuring and supporting learning at home, it is important to note two areas of interest and potential importance. The first is that, when asked about the most difficult aspect of helping their children to be successful in school, the parents gave a wide range of responses (see later sections of this chapter for more in this regard). However, the highest-frequency response category (5 out of 18) included varying versions of parents' having the structure for homework/home learning in place, but not being able to actually help their children with their work. A variety of reasons were shared in this regard:

- A lot of it's difficult for me, because I don't know what they have for homework as they get older . . . So I have to rely on what they tell me . . . sometimes it's hard to be involved. You have to . . . wait until that progress report comes to see how their homework was. (Lisa)
- The only thing that's hard is when they have something that I don't understand. . . They have that math, and I actually had to call the school to speak with the teacher to get the help, because I can't understand it. (Brenda)
- *The hardest thing for me has been the language, because I understand some English, but I don't really know how to help or explain things [about my kids' school work] to them*. (Miriam)

In other words, in these parents' cases the difficulties came not from a lack caring, structure, or will but rather as a result of the parents' not having some specific knowledge (what their child's homework was, or how to do it due either to complexity or a language barrier) that they identified as a need in order to help their children.

The second point in this regard was that while almost all of the families identified providing structured time for *homework* as central to how they supported their children toward school success, a much smaller proportion discussed time for *reading* as a core part of their home learning practices. In fact, in only 4 of the 18 interviews did parents mention reading as a home practice. In one case (Gloria), this was a brief statement that part of what she teaches her children about how to be successful in school was to "read rather than watch TV." In the other three examples, the parents described significantly more organization and structure. For example, Ana mentioned reading with her children three times, including saying that "I will sit down with them and read. I will read to them at bedtime." Rosa noted that her son's success in reading was in part because "Ricardo constantly sees me reading. Seeing a role model, he would grab a book and read next to me." And Mariana explained her thinking and approach around her daughters' reading in great detail:

> I always keep them interested, especially in reading. Reading is such a big issue with kids. They don't want to read—that book is boring. But if you look for books that the kids enjoy, they will sit and read. . . So you buy the books that keep them interested. . . And they read 40 minutes before they go to bed. It's a must. Even if it's not part of the homework, it's a must to read 30-40 minutes before they go to bed.

Nevertheless, these parents were in the minority among those interviewed in terms of a stated focus on reading as part of learning at home.

<u>Supporting School Success Strength 3: Creative Academic Support</u>.

While motivational talk and providing structure for homework and study were clearly the highest-frequency responses from interviewees about supporting their children's success in school, two-thirds (12) of the interviews included examples shared by parents about how they went beyond simply providing a structure for learning at home

to intentionally engage with their children's learning in highly specific, and often quite creative, ways. For example, several parents described working to turn everyday interactions with children into opportunities to learn:

- Even if we're eating and there's a piece of bread and they want me to cut it, I'll cut it and start counting how many pieces we're cutting it into. Like small things. (Ana)

- When I am walking around [with my kids we will] sing the alphabet or I'll be like, "What's 1+1, 2+2, 10 + this. . ?" I'll just . . . walk and talk with them. . . learn the alphabet. (Blanca)

In other cases, parents described approaches to helping their children learn specific academic content currently being covered in school:

- I look for things to motivate them. So if it's, "Mami, I don't know how to do the math, I don't like it," then I look for ways to do things—maybe with drawing or construction paper—and we'll practice, for example, writing numbers. . . we sit down at the table, and my son helps her too. . . she loves it when he sits down with her to help. . . because the playing helps them to stop thinking "I have to do this" and think, instead, "It's a game and we're going to play!" (Barbara)

- With my first grader what I do is, he's learning the wall [sight] words. . . what I have is the little sticky note pads, and I actually put different words on them, and stick them on the refrigerator, wall his room, everywhere, and I tell him, "Well, go get the ____" and he goes and he just gets it, and if he brings back the wrong one I tell him, "You've got to go back and get the right one. . ." (Laura)

Finally, one parent (Mariana) described very intense steps that she took at a time when she had learned that her older daughter, who was then a fifth grade student at a school in a neighboring district, had not completed a significant amount of "morning work" and was in danger of failing a class:

> . . . for a week straight I would sit with her at morning class right next to her from 8:30 all the way until the bell rang, making sure she did her morning work. And I got all the work she was missing and I sat with her all weekend and we got it all done. And she passed. . . with a D. But she passed.

It is worth noting that, while such specific/creative approaches to supporting their children's learning was mentioned by parents in 12 interviews, there was a quite high

frequency of such descriptions among those whose interviews did include them (two parents each described four such examples, two described three such examples, two described two such examples, and three described a single example). Additionally, specific/creative support for their children's learning was mentioned by parents from four of the six "focus families," including multiple examples from two of these parents.

Supporting School Success: Additional Findings.

Analysis of interviewees' responses to the nine questions about supporting their children to be successful in school revealed, as noted above, clear patterns of family strengths in the areas of motivational communication, providing structures for homework and study, and finding specific and often creative ways to engage directly with their children's learning. In addition, there were several types of response to these questions that were less frequently offered overall but nevertheless bear mention and consideration. The first is that half of the interviews (9 of 18) included parents' specifically stating that *promoting respect and good behavior* was central to supporting their children to be successful in school, and in eight of these nine interviews, the promotion of respect and good behavior was the very first thing that parents mentioned upon being asked the very first question about supporting school success. Examples of such statements included:

- First of all, to listen to their teachers and to everyone that's older, and to have respect. (Lillian)
- *I tell them to be good people, to respect their elders.* (Pedro)
- I just tell them to behave. . . (Victoria)

In about half of these responses, interviewees went beyond mention of respect for teachers to including respect for all adults—an expression of the traditional Puerto Rican

value of *respeto*, which tends to specifically mean respect for one's elders. On the other hand, half of the interviewees did not mention efforts to promote good behavior and respect on the part of their children.

A second trend worth considering is that in 13 of 18 interviews, parents described communication with teachers as a step they had taken to support their children's success in school. This included general statements as well as a few specific examples:

- . . . if anything, I'm always here asking questions; I like to talk to the teachers, I come to the meetings. . . (Lillian on how she has worked together with teachers/school staff to support her kids' education)

- *I always try to call the teachers, to have contact with the school, communication so that I know what is going on with them, because it is really important to have it, whether it's about an assignment or any other question that I have that's important.* (Concepción on how she has worked together with teachers/school staff to support her kids' education)

- *I went to the teachers and asked for mediation. . .* (Beatriz on how she helped one of her kids through a problem that s/he was having with some other students at school in PR)

- I call the school and now I have [the math teacher's] number, so I'll just call him directly. I leave him a message and when he can he'll get back to me. And if I can't get hold of him, I'll write him a note—"Please excuse her, and explain it to her, because she didn't understand it and I couldn't help her with it." (Brenda on the most difficult aspect of helping her children be successful, and how she helps in relation to this challenge)

Thirteen of 18 represents a relatively high overall frequency of families who cited communication with teachers as a practice, and three parents mentioned communication with teachers twice during their interviews. However, it is important to point out that in 10 of the 13 cases the parents' mention of communication with teachers came in direct response to the question about how they had worked together with teachers or other school staff to support their children's education, and many of these responses were somewhat vague. For example:

- *I make myself available to the teachers—if they need something, they can call me. . .* (Miriam)
- I do come to the conference. And that's really all I can do, because I'm always working. (Ana)
- *My husband goes to meetings and responds to calls from the school.* (Beatriz)
- I go to IEP meetings sometimes. (Victoria)

Another way of thinking of this is that, in response to the eight questions about supporting their children's education that did *not* specifically solicit responses about working directly with teachers, only three parents provided responses that included mention of communication with teachers. This includes the questions about how parents had supported their children in relation to a problem at school (there were two additional responses here that included mention of communication with an administrator [as opposed to a teacher] to address a problem, but in both cases the parents were among those who mentioned communication with teachers in other contexts), and how they addressed the most challenging aspects of supporting their children toward school success. In other words, while there was no suggestion that the parents interviewed were negatively disposed to teachers—once asked directly, many readily came up with responses that suggested that they thought of teachers as allies—but it does not appear that these parents saw collaboration with teachers/school staff as a *primary* resource in relation to supporting their children to be successful in school.

Another relative dearth of responses worth noting is that there were only four interviews in which parents provided examples of ways that they had availed themselves of specific non-classroom supports (such as medications, therapy, speech services, or Individual Education Plans) in relation to their children's education. This low frequency

includes parents' responses to the question about how they had made use of community resources to support their children's education, in relation to which most parents mentioned either the public library or after-school/out-of-school time programs offered either at Peck or in the wider community. In other words, the interviews seemed to reveal that, rather than looking primarily to either teachers and school staff or community-level supports, most of the parents interviewed tended toward reliance on themselves, and/or on their family/personal network to help their children with school success, including helping them through problems, discouragement, and major challenges.

Finally, the responses to the question about the *most difficult aspect of helping their children be successful in school* (and how the parents addressed this challenge) varied quite widely, rather than being centered around one or two topics. As already noted, five parents mentioned challenges associated with knowing how best to help their children with academics, due to not being able to ascertain what homework a child had (Lisa), not knowing the content well enough to help (Laura, Mariana, Brenda), or a language barrier (Miriam). Other responses could be categorized as follows:

- In three interviews (Lillian, Barbara, and Leo/Teresa) parents mentioned their children's behavior and/or ability to focus as a challenge;
- Two parents (Blanca and Victoria) mentioned difficulties in motivating their children to come to school.
- Two parents (Ana and Rosa) mentioned limitations on their own time (in light of their own work and/or studies).
- Two parents (Beatriz and Pedro) mentioned difficulties meeting their children's material needs.
- Two parents (Gloria and Victoria) mentioned neighborhood dangers (drugs and violence).

- One parent (Anita) mentioned the language barrier her children faced as a challenge.
- One parent (Juan) mentioned transportation difficulties.
- One parent (Concepción) mentioned her own worries about her children's future, in light of the uncertainty of life.

This broad variety of responses demonstrates both the range of challenges that Peck's families face in supporting their children's education and at the same time suggests that there is no single area of family challenges on which the school could focus in order to best support its families in helping their children with educational success.

Summary: Strengths and Points of Interest Related to Families' Support of their Children's School Success.

Analysis of parents' responses to the nine questions about how they supported their children to be successful in school resulted in identification of three significant strengths common to the families interviewed as part of this study: *motivational talk, organization and structure for learning at home,* and *creative approaches to helping their children learn*. In addition, about half of the parents emphasized *respect and good behavior* as a matter of high priority, and while most parents could cite, when specifically asked, examples of *communication with teachers and school staff* in which they engaged, it did not appear that such communication occurred to them as a primary approach to helping their children learn or solve problems. Further, a relatively small proportion of the parents interviewed identified reading as central to how they engaged with and supported their children toward school success, and an equally small proportion identified accessing resources such as therapy or special education support as central. Finally, there were no evident patterns among the broad range of parents' responses to the question

about the most significant challenge they faced in supporting their children's success in school.

Comparative Findings Related to Research Question 2. A second analysis of the family interview data, comparing the responses of the six interviewee parents of the ten high-performing students identified as noted in Chapter 4 with the responses of the other 12 interviewee parents, resulted in identification of the findings noted below to the second research question guiding the study: *Which (if any) actions and patterns of action on the parts of low-income Puerto Rican families are more prevalent among families whose students meet school expectations and state standards than among families whose students do not meet expectations and standards?* The findings in relation to this question were identified via two steps: determining which actions/patterns were prevalent among all or most of the six families of high-performing students, then determining whether those that were prevalent among these families were also prevalent among the other 12 families. In cases where correlations appeared, the quality of the responses was then reviewed in order to consider degrees of passion and specificity in what parents had to say. This resulted in identification of three types of findings: actions/patterns in which the families of high-performing students stood out (i.e., in which there was a high degree of commonality among the families of these students and little commonality among the families of students whose performance was not as strong); actions/patterns that could be identified among families of high-performing students and also among the other families, but in relation to which the comments of parents of the high-performing students were more frequent, specific or passionate; and actions/patterns

in relation to which there appeared to be no discernible difference between the responses of parents of high-performing students compared to the rest of the parents interviewed.

Comparative Findings: Demographic Features

In terms of demographic features of the families, with just one exception there appeared to be little or no correlation between most demographic features of the parents/families identified during the interviews and their students' success. That is, there were no apparent correlations between student performance and where the parents were born, where they had lived most of their lives, their language dominance, the numbers and ages of their children, or the numbers and types of other adults (besides spouses/partners) in their children's lives. The one demographic feature in which there was a correlation with student performance was the current relational status of the parent. That is, five of the six parents of the 10 high-achieving students were either together with their children's other birth parent or were currently in a relationship with a long-term partner who was identified as a step-parent to their children. So while only one of the six parents of high-achieving parents was a single mother at the time of their interviews, seven of the other 12 parents were single mothers at the time of interview. While this pattern of findings in no way suggests that low-income children of Puerto Rican descent raised by single mothers cannot be high performers in school, or that all such children who live in two-parent households are guaranteed success, the correlation is strong enough to warrant acknowledgement. At the same time, while some possible indirect results of parent relational status may be addressed in a school's family engagement plan, because there is likely to be quite little that a school can do to specifically affect parents'

marital/ relational status, this variable will not be directly addressed in the plans for Peck's family engagement work to be developed on the basis of the findings of this study.

Comparative Findings: Core Family Characteristics and Strengths

In reviewing parents' responses to the general questions about family life (those focused on reasons for coming to Holyoke, favorite family memories, what interviewees liked best about their families, what interviewees and their families do to give their children a strong family life; and the three things about which interviewees were most proud in relation to their families), the families of high-performing students clearly stood out in one area, and the parents of these students were more specific and passionate than the other families in a second area of overall high-frequency responses (i.e., overall family strengths). The action/pattern in which the responses of parents of high-performing students clearly stood out was that of a heavy emphasis on communication (talking with their children) as central to building a strong family life. Specifically, four of the six parents of high-performing students provided vivid and/or detailed descriptions of the ways in which they talked with their children as a central part of building a strong family life, from Mariana's statement about weekly family meetings to communicate and Concepción's descriptions of how she sits down and talks with her children about specific life situations (both quoted earlier in this chapter) to Laura's statement that:

> . . . I like to tell my kids a lot of how I grew up, and my type of feelings, and experiences that I had as a child. . . so, when they feel they're going through the same thing, they feel a lot better when they say "Well, my mommy went through this, or my dad went through this, or my grandma," so they probably either find a solution because they already know what I've told them, or they can come to me and tell me, "Well, this and this is going on, what do I do?"

On the other hand, just two of the 12 parents of students who were not performing as well in school emphasized communication and talk in their responses as to how they work to build a strong family life for their children.

The second area of core family strengths in which the responses of the parents of higher-achieving students bear mentioning has to do with hopes and aspirations for their children. On the one hand, it is important to remember that, as noted earlier in this chapter, virtually all of the parents interviewed for this study relayed high hopes for educational and professional achievement by their children, and this sense of hope and belief in their children's potential needs to be considered an overall strength of the participating families. At the same time, it is worth noting that a slightly higher proportion (five of six) of the parents of higher-achieving students specifically mentioned college and/or a good career as part of their responses to the question about their hopes for their children's future, as compared to eight of the 12 parents of students whose achievement was not as strong. Perhaps more strikingly, five of the six parents of high-achieving students explicitly stated that it was their hope that their children would achieve things that they themselves had not been able to accomplish, as compared to two of the 12 parents of students whose achievement was not as strong, and as exemplified in statements such as Rosa's hope "[t]hat they will go further than me or their father in school. . . Every generation gets better; I hope they follow that."

Comparative Findings: Supporting Children's Success in School

In addition to the differences in frequency and/or intensity of the responses of parents of high-achieving students as compared to their less high-achieving peers noted above in

terms of broad family characteristics, there were several differences between these families in terms of specific actions and patterns of actions associated with supporting their children's school success. Interestingly, the first notable area of difference in this regard came up in patterns of response to the question in which the parents were asked to describe a problem that their children had had in school, and how they had helped their child solve this problem. Five of the six parents of higher-achieving parents described, in their responses, problems that their children had had *with other children*—fights, or being pushed down or picked on—as compared to just three of the other 12 parents. Further, in describing how they supported their students in solving this problem, all five of the parents of higher-achieving children said that their efforts had been focused on talking with their own children to help them resolve the problem. For example, in relation to her son Roberto's problem with another boy, Lillian said that "I told him [Roberto] to take it easy. . . go back to school, try to solve the problem. . . try to talk to him [the other boy]. So that's what he did. . . when he got home he was like 'Oh yeah, he talked to me, he's in my group again and we're friends.'" Similarly, Laura remembered that her son Felipe, who was in middle school at the time of her interview, had had a fight with another boy when they were at the Lawrence Elementary School (prior to its merger into Peck):

> . . . I had a big thing where I don't tell my children, "When someone hits you, hit them back," because I'm against that. . . because when I was growing up, I heard [that] from a lot of my family members. . . and I . . . realized that only makes the problem bigger. . . So . . . we told Felipe, "Ignore the situation; if you feel that it's getting out of hand, speak to an adult; adults always know best." And this day down here in Peck, now they are close, close friends.

Among the parents of students who weren't achieving at the same levels, on the other hand, only three of the 12 mentioned problems with other students (the remainder focused primarily on their students' behavior in school and/or academic struggles), and

those three parents emphasized, in their responses about how they had helped their students, their own efforts to advocate for their children over talking with their children to support them in solving the problem. For example, in talking about how she had responded when her daughter told her that another student was making fun of her physical appearance, Brenda said, ". . . I spoke to [the principal] about it, and he spoke to the young man with it. . ."

A second, related pattern among the parents of higher-achieving children was associated with motivational talk: talking with, advising, and encouraging their children. As noted in the discussion earlier in this chapter about the strengths of the families when considered as a whole group, motivational talk was identifiable as an important strength among the majority of families participating in this study. However, the parents of the higher-performing students mentioned motivational talk more frequently and consistently than the parents of the students who were not performing as well. For example, as noted above, five of the six parents of high-performing students mentioned motivational talk as their primary way of helping their children to deal with a problem in school, four of the six mentioned talk and communication as central to their efforts to build a strong family life for their children, and all six described motivational and advisory talk as their core support strategy when their children were upset or discouraged about school. In comparison, eight of the 12 parents of students who were not performing as strongly mentioned motivational and advisory talk in response to at least one of these three questions, and four of the twelve mentioned motivational/advisory talk two times in relation to these three questions. Thus it appears that while virtually all of the parents in the study utilized motivational and advisory talk as a strategy in some situations, such

talk may be the primary "go-to" strategy for parents of higher-achieving students at a higher rate than it is for their peers.

Another action pattern that was relatively frequent among all families (13 of 18 mentioned it in one way or another) while being identified among all six of the parents of the higher achievers related to home engagement with academic learning. That is, each of the parents of the higher achievers described, often with quite detailed examples, ways in which they provided structure and organization for homework/study and/or reading at home, and/or engaged their children in supplementary learning activities outside of school. This was also true for seven of the 12 parents of students who were not performing as well, suggesting that home engagement with academic learning may function as a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for strong academic performance on the part of many Peck students.

An additional type of parent action described by all of the six parents of higher-achieving students was an emphasis on consistent communication with teachers as a primary approach to working directly with the school (in response to the question about how they, as parents, have worked directly with school staff to support their children's education). Thus, for example, Lillian said, ". . . if anything, I'm always here asking questions, I like to talk to the teachers, I come to the meetings," Miriam said "*I make myself available to the teachers—if they need something, they can call me, whether it relates to my kids or any other child they think I can help with. . .*" and Rosa said "I work on a good relationship with my kids' teachers." Among the 12 parents whose children were not performing as highly there were also six who mentioned communication with teachers in response to the question about whether and how they worked directly with

school staff to support their children's education, but in many cases the responses described communication patterns that were more reactive than proactive. For example, Pedro said "*I don't have much time, but when they call, if there's a problem, I come*," Ana said "I do come to the conference, and that's really all I can do, because I'm always working, and I'm a single mom," and Victoria said "I go to IEP meetings sometimes."

Finally, the parents of higher-performing students reported utilizing the resources of community-based organizations for out-of-school-time activities as part of their support for their children's learning at a much higher rate than the other parents in the study. Specifically, five of the six parents of higher achieving students stated that their children participated in after-school and/or summer programs offered via the YMCA, Homework House, and/or Girls, Inc. while just three of the other 12 parents mentioned such participation on the part of their children (mentioning the YMCA, Homework House, the Boys' & Girls' Club, and CareerPoint).

Before summarizing this section it is worth briefly noting that there was a variety of interview questions in relation to which there was no discernible pattern of differences between the responses of the parents of higher-performing students and those of students who were not performing as highly. These included: what parents taught their children about how to be successful in school; the examples of their children's school success, and how they and their families had supported this success; how parents helped their children understand that school was important; the most significant challenges they faced in supporting their children's success, and how they address those challenges; and, interestingly, parent participation in meetings, activities, and/or volunteer opportunities at school. In relation to this last area, three of the six parents of higher-achieving students

indicated that part of their work directly with the school included participation in meetings, events, or volunteer opportunities, as did seven of the 12 families of students who were not performing as highly.

Summary: Comparative Findings Among Families

Overall, then, a comparative analysis of the responses of the six parents of the 10 students in the families studied who were meeting or exceeding school expectations and state standards, as opposed to the responses of the 12 parents of the 29 students who were not performing as strongly, revealed the following differences in family strengths:

- The parents of the higher-achieving students strongly emphasized the *importance of communication within their families as central to building a strong family life* with more frequency than did the parents of students who were not performing as strongly.

- The parents of the higher-achieving students focused on *proactive communication with their children's teachers* as a primary strategy for collaborating directly with the school at a higher rate than parents of students who were not performing as strongly.

- When asked to describe a problem (any problem) that their children had had in school, and how they had supported their children to address this problem, the parents of higher-achieving students overwhelmingly identified problems between their children and other students, and described how they had *counseled and advised their (own) children to effectively address the problem*. The parents of the students who were not performing as well either described other types of problems or, in cases where they mentioned a problem between their child and another child, described patterns of action on their own parts that included attempts to directly address the problem (at the school and/or with the other child's parent).

- The parents of higher-achieving students reported *utilizing the resources of community-based organizations for out-of-school-time activities* as part of their support for their children's learning at a much higher rate than the other parents in the study.

Additionally, comparative analysis resulted in identification of differences in self-identified family strengths that were less striking in terms of frequency, but in relation to which there were differences in the specificity and/or passion in parent responses:

- While *all* parents in the study expressed high hopes and aspirations for their children's educational success, the parents of the higher-achieving students expressed more specific hopes and aspirations for college and/or career for their students than the remaining parents. Further, the parents of higher-achieving parents expressed the specific hope that their children would out-achieve them (accomplish more than they had) in their future education and employment.

- While a high overall proportion of the parents interviewed mentioned motivational talk with their children as an important strategy for supporting their educational success at some point in the interview (i.e., it was mentioned in 16 of 18 interviews), the parents of the higher-performing students mentioned motivational talk with their children more repeatedly, and with higher levels of specificity and passion, than did the parents of the students who were not performing as well.

- While a relatively high proportion (13 of 18) of the parents mentioned specific and concrete approaches to home learning (providing structure and organization for study, engaging their students in fun and creative learning at home, and/or reading with their children) as central to how they supported their children toward school success, this proportion included *all* of the parents of higher-achieving students.

Findings Related to Faculty/Staff Perceptions and Intentions: Research Question 3

The third research question shifted the focus from the families to the faculty and staff of the Peck School, in order to determine ways in which the actions of adults working at the school might be impacted by an understanding of the families' strengths. Specifically, the research question asked: *What impact does implementation of a family strengths study using techniques of Appreciative Inquiry have on both school staff who participate in the study and those who choose not to participate? In particular:*

- *How, if at all, will they change their perceptions of and attitudes toward low-income Puerto Rican families and students?*

- *What possible actions will they identify that they can take to help families draw upon their own strengths to more effectively support their children's learning and performance?*
- *What possible actions will they identify that they may take with students or with their colleagues to more effectively support improvement of student learning and performance?*

The findings related to this research question were identified via analysis of questionnaires completed by faculty and staff members. In the case of faculty/staff members who participated in the research process, this involved comparing results of questionnaires completed prior to their beginning to interview parents with the results of questionnaires that they completed after the parent interviews were completed and the findings about the families were presented to the research team in summary fashion (about 20 months after they took the initial questionnaire). In the case of faculty/staff members who did not participate, the findings were identified via analysis of questionnaires completed at the conclusion of a summary presentation of the family strengths findings made to the full faculty and wider school community.

Faculty/Staff Findings: Impact on Interview Team Members

As noted earlier in this chapter, the family strengths interviews were carried out by ten members of the Peck faculty and staff. Eight of these faculty/staff members participated in the pre-interview meetings and completion of the initial questionnaire, carrying out interviews, and meeting after the interviews were completed to review the preliminary findings about family strengths and complete the final research team questionnaire. One of the other interviewers left Peck during the period between completion of the initial and final questionnaires, and one was on medical leave at the time of the final meeting of the research team during which the final questionnaire was

completed. Comparison of the initial and final questionnaires completed by the eight interview team members who participated in the full process led to the findings below.

Interviewer Perceptions of the Factors that Affect Student Learning

The first task on the interviewer questionnaires involved identifying the degree to which interview team members believed a series of possible factors impact student learning. Each interview team member was asked to assign a number of points to each factor so as to identify the relative importance of that factor in such a way that the total of their assigned factors would equal 100. Another way to look at this was that each interviewer was asked to identify the percentage to which each of a series of factors contributed to student learning overall. Table 5.3 includes the mean results for interviewers' pre- and post- questionnaire responses in relation to this task.

The results of this item demonstrate, first, that the interviewers believed that families have a critical impact on student learning. Taken together, the mean for items C through H, which focused on the impact of steps that parent/guardians take in relation to their children's learning, was 68.8 on the pre-questionnaire and 73.1 on the post-questionnaire. In other words, the results indicate that the interviewers believed that students' families' actions (or lack of actions) have a much greater impact on student learning than do the child's natural talent or the teaching the child receives in school. Second, the results indicate that interviewers' perceptions of the factors impacting student learning remained quite steady overall from the initial to the final questionnaire. There was no change in the mean attribution of impact of more than five points for any item, and the only item for which there was a change greater than three points was that related to the child's natural talent/intelligence/ability, for which the mean attribution declined

Table 5.3: Interviewers' perceptions of the relative weight of a variety of factors on student success in school before and after participating in the interview process.

Factor	Mean points assigned (initial questionnaire)	Mean points assigned (final questionnaire)
A. The child's **natural talent**/intelligence/ability.	13.5	9.4
B. The **quality of teaching** the child receives at school.	17.7	17.5
C. Steps parents/guardians take to **emphasize the importance of education** in raising their children.	16.7	18.1
D. Steps parents/guardians take to create a **strong family life** outside of school.	13.3	15.6
E. Steps parents/guardians take to **help the child with homework (or reading) at home.**	10.4	10.0
F. Steps parents/guardians take to **create a consistent structure for homework/reading at home** (even if they don't/can't directly help with homework or read).	10.8	10.6
G. Steps parents/guardians take to **actively collaborate with school staff** to support their children's education (attending conferences, volunteering at school, etc.).	10.2	11.3
H. Steps parents/guardians take to **access support and opportunities for their children in the wider community** (outside home and school).	7.4	7.5
TOTAL	100	100

by just over four points. Thus these results suggest that the interview team members believed, throughout the process, that family involvement is central to student learning. This finding is supported by the comments research team members made in relation to a question asked on the post-questionnaire calling for qualitative responses:

> *Have you noticed any changes in your perceptions of the relative importance of the above factors, or have you identified any other key factors contributing to student effort, learning, and achievement, since you began participating in this research project? If so, please share these (changes in your perceptions and/or other factors you have identified as essential to student effort, learning, and achievement).*

In response to this question, **no** interviewer identified a specific change in their perceptions of relative importance of the listed factors or additional key factors, and two interviewers stated fairly explicitly that their perceptions had not changed:

- I've always felt family involvement was extremely important so that hasn't changed much. The research reinforced the importance of communication both within the family and between the family & school.

- Over the past 16 years as a teacher in Holyoke I have always recognized that education is a partnership between teacher & family & student. However, through my participation in this project I came to the realization of just how challenging it can be for a family to emphasize the importance of education with all the other factors today's families are confronted with.

Other interviewers identified their own beliefs or aspects of the family strengths findings that they considered surprising and/or important; for example:

- I do believe that the child's natural talent/intelligence/ability has a strong impact, but the other areas are also very important factors in a child's education and success.

- I think that if the child has a strong and positive family life it will help them both socially and academically. The child's background knowledge will be rich.

- I think this was a surprise for me: Parents of high performers emphasized advising/counseling their kids about how to solve problems with other children, rather than taking the problem into their own hands.

<u>Interviewer Perceptions of the Importance of Family Involvement, Parents' Potential, and Peck Staff</u>

Team members were asked whether they strongly disagreed, somewhat disagreed, somewhat agreed, or strongly agreed with a series of statements related to family involvement at Peck. For analysis, individual interviewer's responses were assigned point values (one for "strongly disagree" through four for "strongly agree"), and the

means were then calculated for responses on the pre- and post-questionnaires and are presented in Table 5.4.

Analysis of mean responses suggests that interview team members' perceptions of the importance of family involvement, of the potential of Peck parents to support their children's education, and the level of interest of Peck parents in being involved in their children's education remained quite stable from the initial to the final questionnaire. The

Table 5.4: Interview team members' mean levels of agreement before and after participating in the research process with a series of statements related to family involvement in general and at Peck School.

Statements	Mean responses	
	Pre	Post
1. Family involvement is important for student success in school.	3.9	4
2. If our students' parents/guardians try really hard, they can help their children learn even when the children are unmotivated.	3.5	3.5
3. All parents/guardians could learn ways to help their children with schoolwork at home, if shown how.	3.75	4
4. Parents of children at Peck want to be involved more than they already are.	3.25	3.5
5. Peck School staff view parents as important partners in their children's educational process.	2.75	3.25
6. We need to improve family involvement at Peck.	4	3.75

one area in which perceptions changed a bit more was interviewers' perceptions of the degree to which Peck staff view parents as important partners in their children's educational process. While this item was the one with the greatest growth in mean responses from the pre-questionnaire to the post-questionnaire, it was also the item receiving the lowest mean response in both the pre- and the post-questionnaire.

Interviewer Perceptions of Peck Parents'/Guardians' Involvement in their Children's Education

While the interviewers' perceptions of the relative importance of family involvement changed very little—and remained quite high—from the beginning to the end of their participation in the study process, their perceptions of Peck families appear to have changed substantially in relation to several indicators. They were asked in both the initial and final questionnaires to "*give your best estimate at this time (based on your experience) of the* ***percentage*** *of Peck parents/guardians who do each of the actions/activities named.*" Mean results of interview team members' responses to this portion of the questionnaires are included in Table 5.5.

Comparison of initial and final questionnaire results demonstrates that interview team members expressed more positive perceptions of the role that Peck students' parents/guardians played in relation to their children's education at the end of the study than they did at the beginning. Mean perceptions of the percentage of parents engaging in each action/activity grew by at least 10 points from the initial to the final questionnaire, with perceptions of the percentage of parents who consistently emphasize the importance of education as they raise their children growing especially strongly (mean change of 27% from initial to final questionnaire). Additionally, interview team members' mean perceptions of the percentage of Peck parents who "do very little to support their children's educational process" was nearly cut in half (the mean perceived percentage was reduced from 31% to 16%). This change in perceptions was summed up quite neatly by a response to the qualitative question posed at the end of this section

Table 5.5: Interviewers' perceptions before and after participating in the research process of the percentages of Peck parents/guardians engaging in specific actions/activities associated with supporting their children to be successful in school.

Action/Activity	Mean percentage identified by interviewers (initial questionnaire)	Mean percentage identified by interviewers (final questionnaire)
1. Peck parents/guardians who work hard to create a strong family life at home for their children.	72%	83%
2. Peck parents/guardians who, in the process of raising their children, consistently emphasize the importance of education.	49%	76%
3. Peck parents/guardians who regularly help their children with schoolwork (or reading) at home.	37%	54%
4. Peck parents/guardians who create a consistent structure for homework/ learning in the home (even if they don't or can't actually help with homework or reading).	40%	58%
5. Peck parents/guardians who actively collaborate with school staff to support their children's educational process.	32%	44%
6. Peck parents/guardians who access support for their children in the wider community (outside home and school).	36%	46%
7. Peck parents/guardians who make a significant, positive educational difference in their children's lives.	45%	61%
8. Peck parents/guardians who do very little to support their children's educational process.	31%	16%

of the final questionnaire: *Have you noticed any changes in your perceptions of Peck parent/guardians as a result of your participation in this research project?* The response read, "However differently defined, more Peck families do work hard to create a strong family life at home for their children than I originally thought. Because families may not actively collaborate <u>with school staff</u> to support their children's educational process, this <u>doesn't</u> mean that the families aren't involved in their children's learning." Two of the

other three responses to this qualitative question focused on specific aspects of family involvement (creative support for learning at home and whole family activities), and the third was a broader statement of the respondent's general belief that parent involvement positively impacts academic success.

Interview Team Members' Reports of their Own Current Practices and Intentions for the Future in Relation to Family Engagement

Team members were asked to indicate how often they practiced a series of tactics associated with family engagement. For analysis, individual responses were assigned points as follows: Less than monthly = 1 point; At least once a month but less than weekly = 2 points; About once a week = 3 points; Averaging more than once a week = 4 points. Analysis of mean results, which are presented in Table 5.6, suggests that the frequency with which interview team members practiced these family engagement tactics involved limited change in most areas, with mean changes of less than half a point from the initial to the final questionnaire. The three areas in which interviewers' responses indicated substantial change in their practices were: "Ask a parent/guardian to visit their child's classroom(s)," for which the mean more than doubled (moving from 1.3 to 2.9 points); "Involve a parent as a volunteer," for which the mean nearly doubled (moving from 1.1 to 2.0 points); and "Give a parent/guardian ideas to help him or her become an effective advocate tor their child," for which the mean increased by slightly more than half a point (from 2.1 to 2.7). One aspect worth noting in relation to the first two areas of substantial change (involving parents as volunteers and asking parents to visit their children's classrooms) is that Peck's Family Access and Engagement Coordinator worked quite hard, and with success, during the period between the initial and final

Table 5.6: Interview team members' reports before and after participating in the research process about the frequency with which they practiced a series of family engagement tactics.

Family Engagement Tactic	Means	
	Initial Questionnaire	Final Questionnaire
1. Have a conference with a parent/guardian.	2.1	2.4
2. Contact a parent/guardian if the child has problems or experiences failure.	3.0	2.7
3. Contact a parent/guardian if their child does something well or improves.	2.5	2.4
4. Involve a parent as a volunteer.	1.1	2.0
5. Tell a parent/guardian about the skills their child must learn in specific academic subjects.	2.2	2.3
6. Provide specific activities for a parent/guardian to do with their child in order to help the child be successful.	2.1	2.1
7. Assign homework that requires an adult family member to interact with their child.	2.2	2.0
8. Ask a parent/guardian to listen to their child read.	2.3	2.7
9. Ask a parent/guardian to help their child with homework.	2.4	2.6
10. Encourage a parent/guardian to ask their child about the school day.	2.7	2.4
11. Ask a parent/guardian to visit their child's classroom(s).	1.3	2.9
12. Ask a parent/guardian to take the child to the library or community events.	2.3	2.6
13. Give a parent/guardian ideas to help him or her become an effective advocate for their child.	2.1	2.7
14. Send home 'letters' telling parents/guardians what their children have been learning and doing in class.	2.3	2.2
15. Visited the home of one of your students.	1.0	1.1

questionnaires to strengthen the school's parent volunteer program and to develop programming through which parents visit their children's classrooms. In other words, the change in interviewer's reports of their practices in these areas may be partially attributable to the fact that there were more opportunities for parent volunteering

and parent presence in classrooms at the time of the final questionnaire than existed at the time of the initial questionnaire.

That interview team members' family engagement practices did not change dramatically from the initial to the final questionnaire is perhaps underscored by their responses to the following qualitative question included in relation to this part of the survey in the post-questionnaire: "In reflecting on what you have learned through participating in this research project, what (if any) are the most important changes you have already made with regard to your work with students' families?" Three responses focused on frequency and/or quality of communication with parents/guardians:

- Increased positive communication with parents
- Making a personal connection with all families even if it is a phone call home. Parents love to hear that their child is doing well. Also, letting parents know that they are an important part in their child's education and success.
- Always beginning conversations/conferences with something positive about students.

The remaining responses fell into two categories:

i. Those that indicated changes in practice about which they had not been asked in the frequency scale. For example, one interviewer said that s/he had "invit[ed] parents on college trips and to participate in college positive events (Hip Hop Evolution, college simulation)," and another reported having "created non-academic opportunities for students and families to come together at Peck."

ii. Those that indicated initial discussions that had not yet resulted in specific changes in practice; for example, "We have begun to focus on learning at home as critical to family engagement" and "Being mindful that <u>whole</u> family, fully bilingual, culturally relevant and fun activities that actively address multiple intelligences will be most successful."

Interview team members' responses to a second open-ended question related to changes in practice revealed a different response pattern. This question related to interviewers' *intentions* with regard to their practice in light of the family strengths study:

"Based on what you have learned through participating in this research project, what (if any) are the most important changes you plan to make with regard to your work with students' families?" Interviewers' responses, which were gathered shortly after they received a presentation of the preliminary interview findings, appear to reflect substantial intention to utilize the interview findings in their practice. Four of the responses related to plans to disseminate and/or use the findings as a whole:

- Bring these findings to every [Full Service Community School] workgroup.
- Reflect with [Peck's Family Access and Engagement Coordinator] to hear how she plans to incorporate learnings. Think together and plan.
- Talk about these findings with the families that I know. Call my three interviewees when it is complete to talk about it.
- See if we might incorporate any of these specific questions from the protocol into our new family orientation.

Four of the responses were focused on intentions related to more, and higher-quality, communication with families:

- Personally invite (via phone) parents/guardians to visit classroom and/or school activities.
- Sending more weekly notes home that give ideas of how parents can work with their child at home. Remind parents that they are welcome to help out, read, and be part of our school.
- More positive phone calls and communication with families about student progress, behavior, etc.
- I need to contact more parents on a regular basis.

Two responses addressed the findings that identified whole-family activities as a strength and suggested the need for more reading in students' homes:

- We will focus on whole-family activities and on supporting reading at home as we go forward.

- I definitely want to prioritize reading at home or *en familia* with older siblings and other family members in: a) asking families about ways that they already support reading at home through new family orientations; b) offering additional ways that are meaningful and individualized to family's situation; c) prioritize reading in the objectives and plans of action in the Family Engagement and Education Workgroup; and d) collaborating with the librarian in order to have families take better advantage of the school library.

One response was related to the finding about monolingual Spanish-speaking parents' not identifying college as a hope/aspiration for their children:

- Asking [the Family Access & Engagement Coordinator] to communicate with monolingual Spanish families to invite on college visits, etc. (with bilingual support).

And one related to increasing parent presence in a classroom:

- We would like to plan more time in the classroom with our parents. We would love to have more parent volunteers.

Interviewers' Beliefs about the Directions the School Should Take in Relation to Family Engagement

The last item of the interview team questionnaires involved completing the following open-ended prompt: *Based on my experience and understanding at this time, the* ***three most important*** *things that we need to do to improve family involvement at Peck are:*_____ Review, categorization, and subsequent analysis of the interviewers' responses led to the development of Table 5.7.

As Table 5.7 demonstrates, interview team members' collective beliefs about what the school should do to improve family engagement/involvement appear to have changed in several ways as a result of their participation in, and awareness of the findings from, the process of identifying family strengths. First, the proportion of responses in the category of "family engagement programming" increased from 25% (6 of 24 responses) on the initial questionnaire to 39% (9 of 23 responses) on the final questionnaire. In

Table 5.7: Interview team members' identification of the three most important things needed to improve family involvement at Peck on initial and final questionnaires.

Categories of Response with Sample Responses	# of interviewer responses in this category on each questionnaire	
	Initial	Final
Family engagement/education programming. Sample responses from the initial questionnaire: • Have workshops for parents (according to grade level) • Offer opportunities and support. • Give parents/guardians tools and education on how to get involved in their child's school work. Sample responses from the final questionnaire: • Design and implement more school-based encounters that wholly engage the whole family in a more intentional, creative way through the *charla* series, Peck Parents United in Action, and other school-wide activities, and that consistently underscore, model, and find ways to support reading at home. • We need to find ways to get more parents involved in college trips and other college-positive events (making sure to include monolingual Spanish speakers) • Create content-rich, but fun, family time that incorporates literacy into our programming.	6	9
Work to Increase Family Reading. Sample responses: • Develop a process/campaign to support reading at home. • Read with your children • Given the sheer number of hours that parents have volunteered at Peck, I as the parent volunteer coordinator need to reflect on and implement strategies that incorporate the importance of reading at home and offer support—through free reading materials in the Family Resource Room and library card sign-up • Have parents come to school and read (English or Spanish). Let them share their experiences, etc. about the reading.	0	4
Relationship-building, Outreach, and Communication. Sample responses: • Communicating with families: newsletter, visits, phone calls (positive) • Strengthen outreach (relationship-building) through experimenting and figuring out what works • Let parents know that we are working with them and value them and their support.	9	4
Strengthen Faculty Capacity in Relation to Family Engagement Response from the initial questionnaire: • Find ways to support faculty members to change their thinking about our families. Responses from the final questionnaire: • Create support and accountability mechanisms for teacher communication with families. • Support teachers in establishing meaningful relationships with students and their families, so that many more Peck families become aware	1	3

firsthand of some of the strategies teachers use to engage their children and to improve alignment between home & school academic expectations and structure • We need to think positively about parents, get over the stereotypes		
Strengthen the School Environment. Sample responses: • Provide a positive, caring, friendly atmosphere to families at school. • Continue with explicit, focused work to make the school more welcoming for families	3	2
Make family involvement more logistically feasible. Sample responses: • Have activities at different times (work schedules) so it is possible for them to attend. • Provide easy access for meetings, interactions through downtown or neighborhood locations.	3	0
Research & plan. Responses: • Develop a clear vision & strategic plan for Family Engagement. • Find out what interests the families—survey to ask what they would like.	1	1
Encourage parent presence in classrooms. Response: • Have parents come and visit in the classroom.	1	0
Total number of responses included	24	23*

*One of the final questionnaires included four responses rather than three. Two others each included a response that did not address the prompt (the responses were "Parent involvement" and "importance of education." This left a net total of 23 responses included in the categorization and analysis process for the final questionnaire.

addition, the quality and focus of the responses related to family engagement programming changed from primarily non-specific calls for programming (such as "Offer opportunities and support") to much more specific programming ideas grounded in the family strengths findings: seven of the nine responses in this category on the final questionnaire were specifically related to the findings in prescribing whole family activities, fun activities, college awareness activities for Spanish-speaking families, and activities that support reading within the family. Further, while there were no calls for work around family reading in the interviewees' responses to the initial questionnaire, there were six calls for such work in the final questionnaire responses (two were integrated into the "family education/engagement programming category"). In other words, key findings about family strengths appeared to have a definite influence on

interview team members' beliefs about family engagement programming at the time that they completed the post-questionnaire.

Second, the frequency with which some of the more "traditional" or "generic" ways of thinking about family engagement in schools were mentioned as high-priority needs for Peck appears to have decreased from the initial to the final questionnaire. For example, the proportion of responses identifying outreach, relationship-building, and/or communication as a needed top priority decreased by more than half from the initial questionnaire (where it accounted for 38% [9 of 24] of the responses) to the final questionnaire (where it accounted for 17% [4 of 23] of the responses). Similarly, the category "make family participation more logistically feasible," which accounted for 13% (3 of 24) responses on the initial questionnaire, disappeared on the final questionnaire, as did the category "encourage family presence in classrooms" (which accounted for just one response on the initial questionnaire).

There are, of course, many possible ways to interpret these declines in frequency of mention from initial to final questionnaires. One is that the participating faculty and staff members may have developed a more nuanced/sophisticated sense of what they believed the school needed to do as a result of their experiences with family engagement between the initial and final questionnaires (either independently, as a result of, and/or in conjunction with their participation in the family strengths study), i.e., that they "realized" that communication and easy logistical access are not enough for effective family engagement. Another possible, and not necessarily contradictory, interpretation is that interview team members felt at the end of the study period that the school had advanced significantly in its outreach/communication work and in making participation

opportunities more logistically feasible for families during the period since the initial questionnaires, and thus was ready to move on to a focus on family engagement work that reflected the family strengths identified through the parent interview process.

Summary: Findings from Interview Team Members' Initial and Final Questionnaire Responses

Research Question 3 asked: *What impact does implementation of a family strengths study using techniques of Appreciative Inquiry have on . . . school staff who participate in the study . . .?* Interviewer questionnaire responses suggest that participation in the study did not greatly impact interview team members' perceptions about either the importance of family involvement in children's education or the capacity and desire of Peck families to support their children's learning. Rather, interview team members reported on both the initial and the final questionnaire that family involvement is quite important, and that Peck parents/guardians have a relatively high level of capacity and desire to support their children's education. On the other hand, comparison of initial and final questionnaire responses supports a conclusion that interview team members' perceptions of what Peck students' families actually do to support their children's education changed, together with their perceptions about what they (interview team members) and the school more broadly should do to strengthen the school's engagement with its families. This can be seen by summarizing responses that relate to two of the three sub-questions that followed the general statement of research question 3.

Sub-question (a): How, if at all, will [interview team members] change their perceptions of and attitudes toward low-income Puerto Rican families and students? Interview team members expressed more positive perceptions of the role that Peck

students' families played in relation to their children's education at the end of the study than they did at the beginning. This was true in relation to every parent/guardian practice in relation to which interview team members' perceptions were gathered, and was especially pronounced in relation to interview team members' perceptions of the percentage of parents/guardians who consistently emphasize the importance of education as they raise their children. It is worth re-quoting the interview team member who wrote, "However differently defined, more Peck families do work hard to create a strong family life at home for their children than I originally thought. Because families may not actively collaborate with school staff to support their children's educational process, this doesn't mean that the families aren't involved in their children's learning."

Sub-question (b): What possible actions will [interview team members] identify that they can take to help families draw upon their own strengths to more effectively support their children's learning and performance? Interview team members reported in the final questionnaire that their current individual family engagement practices had remained relatively similar in most categories when compared to their reports in the initial surveys. However, there were three family engagement practices they reported that they were currently practicing more often at the time of the final questionnaire than at the time of the initial questionnaire: asking parents/guardians to visit their children's classrooms; involving parents as volunteers; and giving parents/guardians ideas to help with advocating for their children.

Research team members' responses on the final questionnaire regarding their plans for their own family engagement work appear to reflect substantial intention to utilize the family strengths findings identified through the parent interview process in

their practice. These intentions included work to: disseminate and/or use the findings; increase the frequency and quality of communication with families; develop whole-family activities focused on supporting family reading; increase participation by monolingual Spanish-speaking families in college awareness activities; and increase parent participation in a classroom.

Finally, comparison of interview team members' initial and final questionnaire responses resulted in identification of changes in their perceptions of what Peck school can and should do to help families strengthen their children's school performance. Interviewers articulated a greater sense of the importance of programs aimed at strengthening family engagement, and called in particular for programs designed to draw upon family strengths in order to do so, as well as for programs designed to address the limited amount of family reading that the interview results suggested was currently happening. At the same time, the interviewers' responses included fewer calls for "traditional" or "generic" approaches to family engagement such as outreach/communication and increasing logistical access to the family activities.

Sub-question (c): What possible actions will they identify that they may take with students or with their colleagues to more effectively support improvement of student learning and performance? Interview team members' initial and final questionnaires included limited mention of action steps associated with students and/or their colleagues. Students were mentioned primarily in calls for whole-family programming and programming supporting reading within the family. Colleagues were mentioned primarily in a small number of responses to the question about what the school should do to improve family engagement that focused on strengthening faculty capacity, such as a

response calling for the school to "Support teachers in establishing meaningful relationships with students and their families so that many more Peck families become aware firsthand of some of the strategies teachers use to engage their children and to improve alignment between home and school academic expectations and structure." The fact that interview team members mentioned work with families so much more than work with their colleagues in their questionnaire responses is most likely *not* because the interview team members did not see work with students and colleagues as critical to improving student learning and performance, but rather because the questionnaire, and the study itself, were so strongly focused on family engagement rather than on work with students (separately from their families) or with colleagues.

Faculty/Staff Findings: Teacher Questionnaire Results

In early October 2011 a faculty meeting was devoted to providing the Peck faculty and wider community partners with a presentation about the family strengths interview results that included an overview of the parent/guardian appreciative interview process and a summary of key findings related to family strengths, including a variety of parent quotes that illustrated various findings.[28] After the presentation and a brief question and answer period, teachers and wider school community members (staff members other than teachers as well as representatives of partner organizations) were asked to complete questionnaires in which they responded to a series of items related to the content of the family strengths presentation as well as to their own family engagement practices, their intentions related to family engagement going forward, and their sense of what the

[28] The handouts summarizing the research process and preliminary findings, including selected quotes from the parent interviews, that were shared at the time of this presentation are included as Appendix E.

school's priorities for its family engagement work should be in light of the family strengths findings. The questionnaire completed by teachers differed from the questionnaire completed by wider school community members in that the teacher questionnaire included an item within which teachers were asked to identify the frequency with which they practiced a series of family engagement tactics specific to teachers (this was the same series in relation to which interview team members identified frequencies of practice before and after participating in the research process), while this item was not included in the wider school community member questionnaire. 44 teachers returned completed questionnaires and gave consent for use of the questionnaire results in this dissertation; the findings from those questionnaires are presented in this section, with findings from the wider school community questionnaires included in the subsequent section.

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Teacher Responses to Direct Questions about the Family Strengths Findings

The first five items on the teacher questionnaire were open-ended questions aimed at identifying teachers' responses to the family strengths findings identified through the parent interview process:

1. *What do you perceive to be the **most important findings** of the Peck Family Strengths Study? What are the most significant things the study suggests about Peck families or our school?*

2. *Which, if any, of the findings presented today provided you with something you didn't already know?*

3. *Which, if any, of these findings **challenge or contradict** your understanding of our students' families and/or our school?*

4. *Based on your experience, with which (if any) of these findings do you **agree**? Why?*

5. *Based on your experience, with which (if any) of these findings do you **disagree**? Why?*

Teachers' responses to these five items were reviewed and organized into categories related to the various findings associated with the family strengths identified through the appreciative interview analysis. The results of this review and categorization, included in Table 5.8, provide a variety of insights into teachers' responses to the findings and their experiences and perceptions of Peck families.

First, the rate of responses varied significantly from item to item. For example, 100% of the questionnaires returned included responses to the first item (which asked teachers to identify what they considered to be the most important findings from the study), and many of the returned questionnaires returned contained multiple responses to this item, so that the 44 respondents generated 84 total responses. (However, 16 of these 84 responses were either unrelated to the findings, such as "Seeing/hearing what this school is about" or expressed an explicit misinterpretation of the findings, such as "Strong religious beliefs." Therefore the number of responses from which percentages were derived in relation to this question was 68.)

Beyond this 100% response to Item 1, response rates varied as follows:

- 30 of 44 respondents (68%) identified specific findings from the interviews that provided them with something that they didn't know already (Item 2);
- 20 of 44 respondents (45%) identified specific findings that challenged or contradicted their prior experiences (Item 3);
- 39 of 44 respondents (89%) either identified specific findings with which they agreed, or indicated that they agreed with all findings (Item 4); and
- 6 of 44 respondents (14%) identified specific findings with which they disagreed (Item 5).

Table 5.8: Summary of categorization of teacher questionnaire responses related to family strengths findings presented in October 2011 Peck faculty meeting.

Category of findings from the family strengths interviews	1. % of responses identifying this category as one of the **most important** findings	2. % of responses identifying this category as **something the respondent didn't know** about Peck families	3. % of responses identifying this category as **challenging or contradicting respondents' experiences**	4. % of responses stating explicit **agreement** with this category of findings	5. Number of teachers explicitly **disagreeing** with this category of findings
# responses to this question related to the interview findings	*68*	*32*	*21*	*45*	*6*
Parents' **caring, desire, and sense of responsbility for their children's success**	15%	6%	19%	27%	
The importance & types of **communication** within the family, including motivational talk	16%	13%	10%	7%	2
The importance of **whole family activities**	15%	0%	5%	4%	
Family unity as a strength	12 %	9%	5%	7%	
The emphasis (or lack of emphasis) on **college** as a goal for their children	10%	16%	5%		2
The apparently limited amount of **reading** happening in homes	10%	13%	5%	2%	
The **differences in practices** between Parents of High Performing students and Parents of Average/Low Performing Students	11%	15%	0%	17%	
The prevalence of structure and support for **learning at home**	3%	6%	19%	2%	1
Play & fun as central to family life	3%	0%	0%	4%	
The range of **barriers/ challenges** facing Peck parents	1%	0%	5%	2%	
The role of **extended family** in Peck students' lives	1%	16%	5%	4%	
The **limited mention of religion** as a family strength	1%	0%	10%	2%	1
The **lack of correlation** between parent participation at school and student success	0%	3%	0%	0%	
The concept of **teacher as parent while in school**	0%	3%	0%	0%	
That families did **not view the school as a primary resource** for help with problems	0%	0%	10%	0%	
All findings				18%	
# responses to this question unrelated to, or misinterpreting, the findings	16	8	4	4	2
# questionnaires with no response to this question	0	14	25	5	23

Because there were just six responses indicating explicit disagreement with specific findings, while teacher responses to the first four questions may be considered in terms of percentages for the sake of comparison, responses to Item 5 (the question about disagreement with specific findings) are presented in terms of numbers of responses. Further, care must be taken in general when using percentages to draw conclusions in light of the differing numbers of responses to different items.

With this caveat in mind, the first noteworthy aspect of the teachers' survey responses was the *overall attention paid to the finding that all of the parents interviewed cared about, and accepted personal responsibility for, their children's educational success*. This finding was among the three that teachers collectively identified as the most important findings of the study (along with the findings about family communication and whole-family activities as family strengths). It was also, by far, the finding with which teachers felt most compelled to state explicit agreement (27%). An interesting question in regard to the responses to this finding is *why* a finding that many people would consider simple and non-controversial—that parents cared about, and accepted responsibility for, their children's education—garnered such attention among Peck teachers. One possible, perhaps likely, explanation is that the teachers identifying this finding as most important, and something they explicitly agreed with, were aware that parents' *not* caring or taking responsibility for their children's learning has at times been identified in informal conversation as an explanation for low student achievement at Peck and in Holyoke. This explanation is supported by the fact that, while no teacher stated explicit disagreement with the finding about parent caring and responsibility, this

finding was one of two that multiple respondents indicated as challenging or contradicting their own experiences of Peck families. That is, four (19%) of the 21 responses in which respondents identified findings that challenged or contradicted their experiences —amounting to 9% of all teachers returning surveys—were related to this finding. Additionally, several of these responses were explicitly critical of the finding (and, by extension, Peck parents); for example, one response posed the question "If parents motivate their students so much to do well, how is that will and dedication not reflected in their academics?" Another put forward a more nuanced explanation: "I think the strong love of family tends to support teen pregnancy, which contradicts families having the long term goal of high school graduation and college." Finally, one response was explicitly negative and perhaps slightly hostile: "They [parents] say a lot of things but in real life they do the opposite."

It may therefore be that the teachers highlighting the finding that parents cared about, and took responsibility for, their children's learning wanted to make clear that they were aware of negative perceptions of students' families on the part of some of their colleagues, while they themselves did share such negative perceptions. This interpretation is supported by the specific language in some teachers' responses related to parents' caring and personal responsibility. For example, along with a variety of responses that indicated broad agreement with the notion that families cared about and were committed to their children, there were 11 responses across multiple questions that were quite explicit in this regard, such as "Our parents really care deeply about their children's education," and "Whenever I talk to my students' parents, I always get the

feeling that they love their children, and really want what is best for them; we have wonderful parents at Peck."

The other relatively "positive" findings about *family unity*, *communication within the family*, and the importance of *whole family activities* also figured prominently in teachers' responses to the questionnaire: 12%, 16%, and 15% of the responses identified, respectively, these three areas of the findings as most important. The findings about unity and whole-family activities appeared relatively non-controversial in light of few responses related to them on the items (#s 3 and 5) in which teachers were asked to identify specific findings that challenged or contradicted their experiences, or with which they disagreed. It is also noteworthy that a related finding about the role of the extended family in Peck students' lives was among the findings most frequently indicated as representing new learning on teachers' part (16% of responses to Item 2).

On the other hand, the findings related to communication within the family (that communication, and particularly motivational talk, were important strengths of both the families in general and how parents supported their children toward school success) received a wider range of responses than any other area of findings presented to the faculty. Along with being considered as among the <u>most important</u> findings in 16% of responses to Item 1, and <u>something with which the teacher explicitly agreed</u> in 7% of responses to Item 4, the findings related to family communication were identified as new learning in 13% of the responses to Item 2, which asked teachers to identify findings providing them with <u>something they didn't already know about Peck families</u>; a sample response was "In this study there was a lot of family communication!" Additionally, there were four responses indicating either that these findings challenged/contradicted the

teacher's prior understanding (such as "I always felt like families [parents-guardians] didn't spend much time talking to their children about the day and school and explaining things to their children in a way they could understand") or explicit disagreement on a teacher's part (e.g., "If there is so much talk at home with families in low-income settings, why do all of the studies say that there isn't talk in these homes?").

Another area of findings in relation to which teachers provided mixed responses was that associated with home learning practices—both the "positive" findings about the prevalence of, and structure for, learning at home (particularly in terms of structure for homework) and the somewhat concerning findings suggesting a low prevalence of reading at home. While a relatively small number of responses identified the "positive" findings about prevalence and structure for learning at home as most important or something teachers didn't already know, these findings were among those receiving the highest numbers of responses indicating that they challenged/contradicted the respondents' prior experiences. For example, one teacher responded, "I think many families have trouble providing organization and support for studies at home," and another responded "I've heard some of my students say that they don't do anything at home—play alone, watch TV, video games." With regard to the finding related to limited amounts of family reading at home, a subset of teachers' responses appeared to communicate concern: 13% identified it as a "most important finding," and the 13% of responses relating it as something they didn't already know (in response to Item 2) included comments such as "I didn't know how little reading is being done in the homes outside school." Similarly, the respondent who mentioned this finding as something s/he

explicitly agreed with stated, “It is evident in many families that reading doesn’t happen often. This is a huge problem for us.”

A number of teachers also appeared to be struck by, and indicated general agreement with, the findings suggesting differences in practices between parents of high-performing students and parents of average or low-performing students. 11% of responses to Item 1 indicated that the findings comparing the responses of these two sets of parents were among the most important; these findings were identified as new learning in 15% of responses to Item 2; and there was explicit agreement with these findings in 17% of responses to Item 4 (second only to explicit agreement with the finding that parents cared about and took responsibility for their children’s learning, as discussed above). Sample related responses included: “High performing students participated in after school and summer programs. Suggest more parents should have students participate in extracurricular activities” and “PHP [parents of high performers] are more likely to emphasize communication with teachers as a way of supporting their children. I have noted in my classroom that these parents who have HPs in my class are more communicative with me and will come to me with questions, concerns, etc.”

A final noteworthy pattern in teachers’ responses related to the findings about parents’ emphasis (or lack of emphasis) on college as an aspiration for their children in their interviews. Teachers’ responses indicated, overall, that they were troubled by these findings. For example, among the 10% of responses to Item 1 identifying this as among the most important areas of findings in the study, most of the responses were similar to one that read, “Monolingual Spanish speaking families didn’t mention college as a goal for their kids.” Similarly, among the 16% of responses to Item 2 identifying findings

related to college aspirations as something they didn't already know, all of the responses were along the lines of the one stating, "I didn't anticipate a difference in college goals depending on language dominance." Then in relationship to Item 3, which asked which findings challenged or contradicted teachers' experiences, a teacher made the broader statement that "I am surprised that so few families are looking to college as a realistic goal for their children. I know that everyone wants the best for their children, but why not aspire for them to go to college?" Finally, in relation to Item 5, one teacher wrote "I disagree that Spanish-speaking families don't hold college as a standard. It may not have been brought up here."

Teacher Responses to Items Related to their Own Recent and Current Family Engagement Practices

The next sections of the teacher questionnaire related to teachers' self-reports about how often they had practiced a variety of tactics related to family engagement during the past year. The responses of the teachers who returned questionnaires, which are compiled in Table 5.9, demonstrate considerable variation in terms of family engagement practice within the Peck faculty.

It is noteworthy, first, that there was no family engagement tactic that the majority of Peck teachers reported practicing weekly or more often. At the same time, there were several tactics that relatively high percentages of teachers reported practicing frequently, as can be discerned from Table 5.10, which involves a subset of the data included in Table 5.9 identifying the five tactics that more than a third of teachers reported practicing at least weekly (the frequency of the sixth most common practice was 26%). It is also

Table 5.9: Teacher Self-Reports of Frequency of Practice of a Series of Family Engagement Tactics.

	Less than monthly	At least once a month but less than weekly	About once a week	Averaging more than once a week
1) Have a conference with a parent/guardian.	39%	36%	18%	7%
2) Contact a parent/guardian if the child has problems or experiences failure.	7%	52%	23%	18%
3) Contact a parent/guardian if their child does something well or improves.	25%	39%	20%	16%
4) Involve a parent as a volunteer.	82%	9%	7%	2%
5) Tell a parent/guardian about the skills their child must learn in specific academic subjects.	45%	36%	7%	11%
6) Provide specific activities for a parent/guardian to do with their child in order to help the child be successful.	48%	30%	7%	16%
7) Assign homework that requires an adult family member to interact with their child.	42%	14%	21%	23%
8) Ask a parent/guardian to listen to their child read.	45%	13%	18%	23%
9) Ask a parent/guardian to help their child with homework.	45%	12%	26%	17%
10) Encourage a parent/guardian to ask their child about the school day.	56%	19%	14%	12%
11) Ask a parent/guardian to visit their child's classroom(s).	41%	45%	9%	5%
12) Ask a parent/guardian to take the child to the library or community events.	70%	20%	7%	2%
13) Give a parent/guardian ideas to help him or her become an effective advocate for their child.	48%	27%	18%	7%
14) Send home 'letters' telling parents/guardians what their children have been learning and doing in class.	51%	30%	5%	14%
15) Visited the home of one of your students.	98%	2%	0	0

noteworthy that three of the most common practices were associated with requests and/or assignments requesting interaction at home between parents/guardians and their children, and the other two related to making specific contacts with individual parents/guardians related either to problems/failure or success/improvement.

Table 5.10: Highest-Frequency Family Engagement Practices Reported by Peck Teachers.

Family Engagement Practice	Percent of teachers reporting practicing this tactic *at least weekly*
Assign homework that requires an adult family member to interact with their child.	44%
Ask a parent/guardian to help their child with homework.	43%
Ask a parent/guardian to listen to their child read.	41%
Contact a parent/guardian if the child has problems or experiences failure.	41%
Contact a parent/guardian if their child does something well or improves.	36%

At the other end of the spectrum, the family engagement tactics with the lowest levels of reported utilization by Peck teachers were *home visits* (essentially non-existent as a teacher practice) and *involving parents as volunteers*, which just 9% of teachers reported practicing weekly or more, and 82% reported practicing less than monthly.

Additional analysis that included looking at respondent's questionnaires holistically resulted in the following identified results:

- **11 of 44** (25%) of teachers responded "less than weekly" or "less than monthly" in relation to all 15 family engagement tactics.
- **9 of 44** (20%) responded that they practiced one or two of the tactics at least weekly.
- **9 of 44** (20%) responded that they practiced three or four of the tactics at least weekly.

- **15 of 44** (34%) responded that they practiced five or more of the tactics at least weekly.

In other words, it appears that about one of every three Peck teachers reported practicing a relatively wide variety of family engagement tactics at least weekly, about three out of four Peck teachers reported that they practiced *some* form of family engagement at least weekly, and about one of every four teachers reported less than weekly practice of any family engagement tactic included in the study.

Additional review of responses regarding tactics #2 and #3, which related to teacher initiative to contact individual parents about their children's performance (success/improvement and problems/failure, respectively) resulted in the following results:

- **2 of 44** (5% of) teachers responded "less than monthly" in relation to both tactics (contacting parents/guardians regarding problems/failure and contacting parents regarding successes/improvement);

- **20 of 44** (45% of) teachers responded "less than weekly" to both items (#2 and #3); and thus

- **22 of 44, or 50%** of teachers, reported contacting individual parents less than weekly to inform them about their children's progress.

On the other hand:

- **8 of 44** (18 %) reported contacting a parent about their child's success/ improvement or problems/failure at least weekly;

- **13 of 44** (30%) reported contacting parents at least weekly for both reasons; and thus

- **21 of 44, or 48%** of teachers, reported contacting individual parents at least weekly to inform them about their children's progress.

Further:

- **31 of 44 (70%)** of teachers reported contacting parents with positive feedback as least as often as they contacted parents with negative feedback;

- Put alternatively, **13 of 44 (30%)** reported a higher frequency of contacts reporting problems than of contacts reporting positives; and finally,
- **9 of 44 (20%)** of teachers only contacted individual parents in relation to problems/failure with any consistency.

Teacher Reports of Personal Intentions and Perceptions of Needed Steps at the School Level in Relation to Family Engagement

The last sections of the teacher questionnaire asked teachers two questions about the work of family engagement at Peck going forward:

- *What (if any) changes do you plan to make with regard to your work with students' families?*
- *What are the three most important things we need to do to improve family engagement at Peck?*

Teachers' responses to these questions are summarized in Table 5.11. As the table makes clear, teachers' statements of their personal intentions in relation to family engagement practices were strongly slanted toward increasing communication with families, with essentially half of their responses (23 of 47) stating intentions in this regard. These responses fell into several subcategories in terms of the purposes for communication that teachers identified, with the highest priorities being sharing more good news and generally increasing communication, as can be noted from Table 5.12.

In addition to focusing on communication, the other family engagement areas in relation to which teachers' responses in relation to their intentions were clustered included *targeting home learning* (17% of responses) and *inviting students' family members into the classroom* (13% of responses). With regard to the former, some teachers expressed intentions of working to increase learning at home via homework assignments.

Table 5.11: Peck teachers' questionnaire responses: what they planned to do personally, and what they perceived as the school's most important needs, in relation to family engagement

Change/improvement areas related to family engagement	% of teacher responses stating **personal intentions** in this area	% of teacher responses identifying this as a **school** need
	N (responses) = 46	N (responses) = 112
Pro-active communication with families (broadly construed)	50%	16%
Target home/family learning (including emphasizing the importance of reading at home)	17%	10%
Invite students' family members into the classroom	13%	7%
Whole-family activities	2%	17%
Parent education (broadly construed)	0%	10%

Personal intentions stated by one or two teachers:	**School-level needs identified by fewer than 10% of teachers (and reflected in ≤ 2 statements of personal teacher intention):**
• Work on family awareness of, and focus on, college as a goal for their students (2) • General statements of plans to engage more families (2) • Be more mindful/empathetic re: challenges families are facing • Address negative statements about parents made by others • Promote (via newsletter) home conversation about academic achievement • Inquire about students' extended families • To plan future work based in family strengths • Not sure. May try to do home visits	• College awareness and readiness (6%) • Support increased utilization of school/community resources (4%) • Increase parent volunteer & leader ranks (4%) • Increase utilization/rational distribution of Out of School Time programs (4%) • Increase (general) numbers of parents involved at school (3%) • Practice respect/Unconditional Positive Regard in relation to families (3%) • Draw on the strengths of families of high-performing students (2%)

Table 5.12: Teachers' stated purposes for increased communication with students' families.

Purpose	# of responses expressing this purpose	Sample quotes
To share good news about individual student performance	9 (20% of all responses to item)	• I hope to communicate more with parents, especially to promote positive outcomes of their children, through letters and phone calls.
To generally increase communication with families	7 (15% of all responses to item)	• To make more of an effort to be in contact with my students' families.
To share news about the classroom	4 (9% of all responses to item)	• I definitely need to make sure parents know what's going on in the classroom, i.e., through monthly newsletters, parent meetings, etc.
To promote home learning/reading	2 (4% of all responses to item)	• To make parent-teacher communication a priority. To give precise activities or suggestions to help their child at home.

Sample quotes related to integration of family involvement into homework included:

- I plan to incorporate math games into homework so parents/others can be involved.

- Making it clear that homework is not just paper and pencil, but reading is homework that is extremely beneficial.

Other teachers expressed intentions of communicating the importance of, and ideas for, learning/reading at home directly to parents; for example:

- Provide parents with activities they could do at home with their children (do this through the newsletter, or meeting). Definitely emphasize the importance of reading at home.

With regard to inviting family members into the classroom, five of the six responses involved expressions of general observation purposes for these efforts such as "I would like to have parents come into the classroom to see what their children are learning and

how they can help their child," and one teacher expressed the intention to "have some parents come in and share a talent/skill with the class this month."

In addition to the three areas of *communication*, *targeting/supporting home learning and reading*, and *inviting family members into the classroom*, a variety of teachers took specific parent interview findings into account in considering/identifying planned changes with regard to their work with students' families. First, 13% of teacher responses about their intentions focused on promoting reading at home in one form or another. Sample responses included one teacher's statement that s/he would find "more specific ways for families to connect with the learning in the class (I do a newsletter, but not frequently enough). More emphasis on reading together." Another teacher said that s/he would assign "interactive homework. . . 'go back to read aloud to your parents' assignments." Additionally, two teachers stated specific intentions related to promoting an aspiration for *college* among students and their families; one of these responses read, "I will talk with all parents and more importantly Spanish-speaking families about college." Finally, several individual teachers' responses to the question about intended changes in their family engagement practices demonstrated that exposure to the parent interview findings had impacted their thinking, as can be noted in the following responses:

- I find the quote about the complexity associated with low income families and the challenges they face thought-provoking. I think I need to maybe be more empathetic toward that issue. How can we help that/them?

- I plan never again to remain passive in a conversation that includes the statement, "These parents don't <u>(care, work hard, etc., etc., etc.).</u>"

- To <u>think</u> in terms of families' strengths when planning future family/school events . . . in other words, to think about/learn about what families are <u>already doing together</u> to build from there.

- Inquire about students' extended families as well.

Table 5.11 also demonstrates that teachers' perceptions of the most important things needed to improve family engagement at Peck—i.e., *what the school should be doing overall*—both shared similarities with *and* differed in some ways from what they expressed as their own intentions. That is, increased communication with families, targeting home learning, and inviting family members to classrooms appeared among the family engagement activities identified as important needs by teachers, receiving 16%, 10%, and 7% of teacher responses respectively. However, teachers' perceptions of school-level needs were substantially less focused on increased communication, and much more focused on whole-family activities and family education, than teachers' personal intentions. To be specific, about one in every six (16%) of teacher responses identified increased communication with families as a top-priority need for the school, as opposed to half of teacher responses (50%) identifying increased communication as a change they personally intended to make. At the same time, whole-family activities were identified as a school-level need in the highest percentage of teacher responses (17%), while just one teacher identified organizing whole-family activities as a personal intention. Similarly, parent education (broadly construed, as in the responses "Parent education—general & on parenting" and "Continue to provide workshops on how to help children in school") was identified as a school-level need in 10% of teacher responses, but no teacher expressed organization/facilitation of "general" parent education as a personal intention.

A final note in relation to teacher responses about school-level needs is that there were 15 "stand-alone" responses, many of which expressed fairly general thoughts such as "Make the school a more inviting place" and "Motivational talk regarding educational success." Some of the more specific and interesting stand-alone responses included:

- Professional development of teachers to help teachers better communicate with parents.
- Guide parents to take the students to special events.
- Seems as though it might be helpful to interview foster families/guardians who are not the natural parents. . . since there's a significant number of students here who do not live with their bio parents.

Lastly, a blanket question at the end of the teacher questionnaire solicited any "additional questions, comments, or ideas that [the teacher had] about the Peck Family Strengths Study and/or family engagement at Peck." There were six responses to this final item, each of which focused on a different matter:

- What kind of program a teacher will follow to accomplish the above suggestions?
- Family engagement activities may put a <u>positive</u> spin on the school to parents when they see their children's reaction. Finding family strengths could help them feel more a part of the school community.
- I am a little worried about space (availability) of some of the after-school programs. For example I have students on the waiting list for the Connections program.
- 7% of families enrolled seems like a small sampling to draw conclusions from.
- In my experience parents love to see their children perform—on the courts, on stage—more opportunities should be given to our students.
- Bring back agendas—parents can check it for homework.

Summary: Findings from Teacher Questionnaire Results

Research Question 3 asked, in relation to the wider faculty, the question: *What impact does implementation of a family strengths study using techniques of Appreciative Inquiry have on . . . school staff who . . . choose not to participate [in the active research process]?* The teacher questionnaire was designed to provide information for use in answering this question. Because, unlike the interview team member questionnaire process, teachers completed a single questionnaire after receiving a presentation about the preliminary family strengths findings—that is, there was no prior questionnaire with which to compare the results of the questionnaire each teacher completed—responses to Research Question 3 in relation to teachers who did not participate in the interview process need to be based on teacher self-reports about the impact of the study findings.

Sub-question (a): How, if at all, will [teachers who did not participate in the interview process] change their perceptions of and attitudes toward low-income Puerto Rican families and students? The most comprehensive response possible to this question, based on the results of the teacher questionnaire, comes from a comparative analysis of teacher responses to the five open-ended items soliciting direct feedback regarding the parent interview findings as well as teachers' stated intentions in relation to their personal family engagement practices and expressed opinions about directions the school should take in its family engagement work. To begin, as noted in the summary and discussion of questionnaire results above, 31 of 44 (70% of) teachers who completed post-questionnaires and consented to their use in this dissertation identified at least one finding providing them with new information about Peck families—information which,

presumably, would alter their perceptions of the low-income students and families of Puerto Rican descent who comprise the overwhelming majority of Peck families. The most common of these findings related to:

- the role of extended family in students' lives (16% of responses);
- information related to parents' holding college as an aspiration for their children—especially the apparent discrepancy between English-speaking and Spanish-dominant parents (16% of responses);
- the differences in a variety of practices between parents of high-performing students (PHP) and parents of average/low performing students (PALP) [15% of responses];
- the importance and types of communication within the family, including motivational talk (13%); and
- the apparently limited amount of reading happening within families/in homes (13%).

Teachers' responses to three of these findings appeared to express rather straightforward acceptance and integration into their thinking. For example, the findings about *differences in practices between parents of high performing students and parents of average/lower performing students* were identified as among the most important findings in 11% of teacher responses identifying the most important interview findings, and as a finding teachers explicitly agreed with in 17% of responses to the item soliciting specific agreement, and no teachers expressed either that these findings challenged/contradicted their experiences or that they disagreed with these findings. The findings about the *role of extended family members in Peck students' lives*, and the *apparently limited amount of reading at home*, appeared as similarly "non-controversial" in the sense of having low percentages of teachers report that these findings challenged/contradicted their experiences and no teachers express explicit disagreement with them.

While *family unity* and *the importance of whole-family activities* were not as highly reported as something teachers didn't already know (receiving, respectively, 9% and 0% of the responses to Question 2), these findings were identified as among the most important by teachers (receiving, respectively, 12% and 15% of the responses to Question 1). Further, teachers' responses to the penultimate item on the questionnaire—which asked them to identify the most important things needed to improve family engagement at Peck—included *whole-family activities* as a key need with the most frequency of any identified area (i.e., 17% of all responses called for whole-family activities). This suggests that while many teachers may not have perceived the importance of family unity and whole-family activities as something they didn't already know about in relation to their students' families, teachers did gain a new sense of the importance/potential of these strengths for the school to draw on. It thus may make sense to think of learning about the findings about the *differences between parents of high- vs. low/average performers*, the *role of extended family in students' lives*, the *limited amounts of reading happening at home*, and *the importance of family unity and whole-family activities* as *affecting and altering some teachers' perceptions and attitudes about Peck students and families*.

There were also two areas of findings that relatively high percentages of teachers identified as providing them with new information, but in relation to which teachers expressed noteworthy differences of opinion/experience. The first area related to *communication within the family, including motivational talk.* 13% of responses to Item 2 identified the findings in this area as providing them with new information, and 16% of responses to Item 1—the highest percentage for any area of the findings—identified this area as among the most important findings from the parent interviews. On the other

hand, the findings related to family communication were identified as contradicting/ challenging the experiences of teachers in 10% of the responses to Item 3, and two teachers explicitly disagreed with these findings. The second area related to *parents' aspirations for college for their students*—particularly the discrepancy between English-speaking and Spanish-speaking parents in this regard—which was one of the findings most identified as constituting new learning for teachers, but was also "contested" by teachers in responses to Items 3 and 5. It may therefore make sense to think of learning about the findings related to *family communication* and *parents' college aspirations for their students* as *altering some teachers' perceptions and attitudes about Peck families, while being contested by other teachers*.

Two additional areas of the family strengths findings that were contested by teachers at a relatively high rate were those related to *parents' caring about, and taking personal responsibility for, their children's school success* and the *prevalence of structure and support for learning at home*. Each of these areas of findings was reported as challenging/contradicting teachers' experiences in 19% of responses to Item 3 (by far the highest percentage among all areas of the findings), and one teacher directly questioned the latter finding area in a response to Item 5. At the same time, neither of these finding areas were identified as providing new learning to many teachers (each received just 6% of the responses to Item 2). However, the finding about parent caring and acceptance of responsibility was identified by teachers as an important finding at one of the highest rates (15% of responses to Item 1), and was by far the single finding with which most teachers expressed explicit agreement (receiving 27% of the responses to Item 4). It thus is likely to make sense to consider learning about the parent interview

findings related to *parent caring and acceptance of responsibility* and *the prevalence of structure and support for learning at home* as *bringing to light substantial differences in—but not necessarily altering—teachers' perceptions and attitudes about families*.

Sub-question (b): What possible actions will [teachers who did not participate in the interview process] identify that they can take to help families draw upon their own strengths to more effectively support their children's learning and performance? When asked what changes they planned to make in their own family engagement practices based on the findings of the Peck Family Strengths Study, 50% of the teachers who responded to the questionnaire stated intentions to increase and improve their communication with students' families, with specific focuses on sharing good news about student performance and sharing information about what was happening in their classrooms. Interestingly, increased/improved communication between teachers and families was not identified as a critical need through the family interview process. This is not to claim that teacher-family communication was not a critical need for the Peck School at the time the teachers completed their questionnaires, but rather to note that identifying such needs was not a priority goal for the parent interviews. One way to interpret this response pattern is that many teachers may have seen it as beyond their scope/ability to help families draw directly on their own strengths (while on the other hand, they saw the school as in a better position to do so, as evidenced by answers discussed below), but within their scope/ability to provide families with information—particularly positive news about their students' performance and, to a lesser degree, news about what is happening in the classroom—that families could draw upon in utilizing their own strengths to support their children's educational success.

In addition, 17% of the responses included directly-stated intentions to work to support home learning (via either assignments necessitating family involvement for completion or direct communication with students' family members). Further, in addition to appearing as a category in its own right, targeting home learning (including reading) appeared as a subcategory of the communication responses (where the intention to promote reading at home was stated in 4% of responses, and the intention to share news about the classroom—which could potentially be connected with learning at home—was stated in 9%). Additionally, 17% of teacher responses specifically identified the promotion of reading at home as an element of what the teacher intended to do in relation to family engagement. And finally in this regard, inviting family members into the classroom as a general activity (as opposed to for the purpose of having family members teach or help while in the classroom), which was identified as an intention in 13% of responses, can be interpreted as providing information that can be reinforced via home learning. Looked at in this way, questionnaire results suggest that nearly half of the teacher responses communicated an intention to work to support learning at home either directly or indirectly.

Lastly, as already noted, several individual teacher responses identified intentions related to, or questions about, findings from the parent interviews including promotion of college as an aspiration for Peck students, addressing/confronting negative generalizations about Peck parents/families, understanding and addressing the full range of issues and barriers facing the school's families, and looking for ways to build on family strengths overall. These responses make it clear that in completing the questionnaire, some of the teachers made a direct connection between the parent

interview findings and their own (actual and possible) family engagement practices. At the same time, the reality that such direct connections were both few in number and relatively tentative in nature suggests a need for additional exposure to, and reflection about, the family strengths identified through the interview process in order to facilitate substantial changes in teacher practice.

Sub-question (c): What possible actions will [teachers] identify that they may take with students or with their colleagues to more effectively support improvement of student learning and performance? The teacher questionnaire was focused specifically on family engagement practices, as opposed to other sorts of steps that teachers could take to support improved student performance. With this understanding in mind, a small number of teacher responses (4 of 46) to the question about individual plans in relation to family engagement specifically mentioned students (in the form of interactive assignments and games that students could share at home with their families), and no teacher responses identified plans to collaborate with colleagues to strengthen family engagement.

At the same time, after describing their plans to change their own family engagement practices, teachers were asked to identify the three things needed to improve family engagement at the school. Responses to this question suggest that while a substantial proportion of teachers clearly understood the family strengths findings, many teachers apparently believed that acting on these findings was less of a prerogative for them as individuals and more a prerogative of some set of colleagues (perhaps the staff members associated with Peck's work as a full service community school) and/or of "the school" more broadly defined. That is, 80% of teacher responses to the question about

how they *individually* planned to change their family engagement practices related to increased/improved communication with families, promoting home learning, and inviting families to visit classrooms. On the other hand, 33% of the same teachers' responses (i.e., a rate of well under half of that associated with teachers' individual plans) identified these three areas as top priority needs for the *school*, with most of the other two-thirds of the responses stating school-level needs associated with one or more of the findings from the family strengths interviews. Thus 17% of teacher responses to the question about school-level needs focused on whole-family activities, 10% focused on family education programming, and the remaining 40% were comprised of smaller numbers of responses primarily related to specific interview findings such as promoting college awareness among families and supporting families in making increased use of supports and resources available through the school and community.

Findings: Wider School Community Questionnaire Results

At the close of the October 2011 faculty meeting when Peck teachers completed the questionnaire discussed above, a questionnaire was also completed by faculty and staff members attending the presentation who were not teachers (i.e., administrators, a counselor, other school staff members) as well as representative of community partner organizations with which Peck works closely as a full service community school. This "wider school community member" questionnaire contained eight items identical to eight items on the teacher questionnaire, while not including the "frequency check" item specific to teacher practices associated with family communication. Seventeen (17) wider school community questionnaires were returned at the close of the faculty meeting.

Results were similar in many ways to the results from the teacher questionnaires, with a few notable differences. The results of the wider school community questionnaire are thus presented below in comparison to the teacher questionnaire results related to research question 3: *What impact does implementation of a family strengths study using techniques of Appreciative Inquiry have on . . . school staff who . . . choose not to participate [in the active research process]?*

In relation to sub-question (a) (*How, if at all, will [school staff and wider community members who did not participate in the interview process] change their perceptions of and attitudes toward low-income Puerto Rican families and students?*), the responses of the wider community members mirrored those of teachers in several ways. For example, in relation to questionnaire item 1, which asked respondents to identify the most important findings of the family strengths portion of the study, wider school community members identified several findings as most important at similar rates:

- Parents' caring and desire for their children's success was identified as a most important finding in 16% of wider community member responses (compared to 15% of teacher responses);
- Family unity and whole family activities were identified as most important findings in 32% of wider community member responses (compared to 27% of teacher responses); and
- The emphasis (or lack of emphasis) on college as an aspiration for interviewees' children was identified as a most important finding in 8% of wider community member responses (compared to 10% of teacher responses).

On the other hand, wider school community members' responses differed from those of teachers in relation to findings considered most important in several areas:

- While 16% of teacher responses identified *communication within the family* (including motivational talk) and 10% of teachers identified *the apparently limited amount of reading as a home learning practice* as among the most important findings from the interviews, no wider school community members identified either of these findings as among the most important; and

- A higher percentage of wider school community members identified the comparative findings about the differences in practice between parents of high-performing students and parents of average/low-performing students as among the most important (24% of wider community members vs. 11% of teachers).

In response to questionnaire item 2, which asked about findings from the family strengths interviews that provided respondents with something they didn't already know about Peck families, wider school community members' responses could not be separated into clear trends, in that for the most part the responses fell into individual categories. The only categories receiving more than one response were: the lack of correlation between parent participation at school and student success (three responses) and the comparative findings between practices of parents of high- vs. average/low-performing students (two responses). Similarly, responses to item 3, which asked respondents to identify findings that challenged or contradicted their own experiences, included a high number of responses (8) stating that none of the findings challenged or contradicted respondents' experiences, and that the responses received fell mostly into individual categories, with two categories (parents' caring about, and accepting responsibility for, their children's success *and* the prevalence of structure and support for learning at home) each receiving two responses. It may be noteworthy that these two findings categories also received the highest percentages of teacher responses in the same item (19% each), but the numbers of wider faculty member responses were small enough to make any generalizations questionable. This was also the case with wider community members' responses to questionnaire item 5, which asked respondents to identify interview findings with which they explicitly disagreed: only five wider community members identified specific findings in their responses, and with the exception of two responses related to the finding

about the prevalence of structure and support for learning at home, these responses fell into separate categories.

On the other hand, wider school community members' responses to questionnaire item 4, which asked them to identify findings with which they specifically *agreed*, showed patterns that were more definitive and differed somewhat from teachers' responses to the same item. First, almost half (8 of 17, or 47%) of wider school community member respondents stated that they agreed with all of the interview findings, as opposed to 18% of teachers. Second, among the responses articulating agreement with specific findings, four of seven (57 %) related to the findings comparing the practices of parents of high-performing students with those of parents of average or lower-performing students, as compared to 17% of teachers. Finally, and interestingly, while parents' caring, desire, and sense of responsibility for their children's success was the specific response category with which teacher responses expressed the highest rate of agreement (27% of responses), none (0%) of the wider school community members' responses focused on this specific category. While there is no way of knowing for sure why wider school community members did not emphasize this finding as something they agreed with in the same way that many teachers did, it may be that wider school community members are less consistently exposed to negative discourse about students' families than some teachers are, and therefore did not feel the need to "speak up" about a finding that many might find relatively non-controversial.

Overall, then, it can be suggested that wider school community members' responses related to their perceptions of Peck's students and families were broadly similar to those of teachers, with limited indication of changes in these perceptions as a

result of exposure to the family strengths interview findings. Wider community members' perceptions were, to some degree, less focused on family communication, the apparent lack of reading as a home practice, and supporting the notion that Peck parents cared about and took responsibility for their children's school success, and somewhat more focused on the differences in practices between parents of higher-performing students and those of students who were not performing as well.

Sub-question (b): What possible actions will [wider school community members who did not participate in the interview process] identify that they can take to help families draw upon their own strengths to more effectively support their children's learning and performance? Wider school community members were asked the same questions as teachers about how (if at all) they planned to change their own family engagement practices as a result of learning about the parent interview findings as well as about the three most important things the school needed to do to improve family engagement. 16 of the 17 wider school community members who returned questionnaires included specific statements of intention to change their own family engagement practices, and all but three (14 of 17) identified at least one school-level need related to improving family engagement, in their responses. These responses are summarized in Table 5.13.

As can be noted from a comparison of Table 5.13 with Table 5.11 (which summarized teacher responses to the same questionnaire items), wider school community members' responses shared commonalities with teachers' responses in many ways, but

Table 5.13: Wider school community members' questionnaire responses: what they planned to do personally, and what they perceived as the school's most important needs, in relation to family engagement.

Change/improvement areas related to family engagement	% of WSCM responses stating **personal intentions** in this area	% of WSCM responses identifying this as a **school** need
	N (responses) = 19	N (responses) = 32
Target home/family learning (including emphasizing the importance of reading at home)	3=16%	6=19%
Communicate about college	4=21%	3=9%
Whole-family activities	2=11%	4=13%
Strengthen staff capacity to work effectively with families	0	3=9%
Increase outreach/numbers of parents involved	0	3=9%

Personal intentions stated by single respondents:

- Continue to work on helping families access (and believe in) Peck resources when they perceive barriers to the child's success at school.
- Creating an atmosphere where parents feel comfortable in asking me questions about how to help with their child's academic achievement.
- I need to help <u>all</u> families, not only the ones who know how to use the resources that are available.
- Reference motivational talk—let's talk about it more! Do we, as a school community, do enough of it? Look for more info on creative approaches to learning.
- Support increased participation in classroom instructional partnerships.
- I will stay the course. Never underestimate a family. Hold respect and value.
- Bringing more involvement and emphasis on family.
- Keep these findings in the forefront of my mind when dealing with families <u>at all times</u>.
- I don't' work with students' families—but I would like to change that—involve families more in the after-school program.
- This is a valuable framework from which I can begin to shape some "best practices" for engaging families at [my] school.

School-level needs identified by one or two respondents:

- Family-based activities at school (broad)
- Parent education (broadly defined)
- Increase/distribute after-school program utilization
- Draw on strengths of families of high performing students
- Unconditional Positive Regard
- Not qualified to respond from experience with the community, but study results indicate more: family reading groups; play/fun; programs that indirectly and/or directly support college preparation
- Learn from this study and use it for future planning
- Find out how to help parents coach their children to find solutions to conflicts between them and their peers?
- Peck sports program with athletic director coordinating all aspects of games, gym time, practice, uniforms, etc.
- As a new partner I don't believe I have enough understanding of what is currently being practiced to recommend improvements.
- I could learn español

also differed substantially from those of teachers in that:

- Half (50%) of the teacher responses regarding personal intentions, and 16% of teacher responses regarding school-level needs, related to pro-active communication with families (broadly construed, i.e., providing news about student performance and/or what is happening at school). However, none of the wider school community member responses explicitly identified increasing pro-active family communication as either a personal intention or a school-level need.

- On the other hand, 21% of wider school community member responses included a personal intention to communicate with students' families specifically about college as an aspiration for their children, as opposed to a much smaller proportion of teachers (4% of responses).

Summary: Major Findings Related to Peck Faculty and Staff Perceptions of Families and of Actions Needed to Improve Family Engagement

Taken together, the findings from the interview team initial and final questionnaires together with the teacher and wider school community questionnaires, provided the following "big ideas."

1. The processes of interviewing parents about their families' strengths, arriving at a series of findings related to family strengths, and presenting the findings from these interviews to the research team and then to the wider faculty and school community created greater awareness of both the concepts associated with strengths-based family engagement and the specific strengths identified in the interview findings. Both the interview team members and the faculty and staff members who responded to the presentation of interview findings overwhelmingly demonstrated an understanding of those findings in their questionnaire responses. Specifically, the responses of all 8 of the interview team members, as well as 36 of 44 teachers and 16 of 17 wider school community members, to questionnaire items about the interview findings and about what

the school needed to do to improve family engagement included clear references to specific findings about family strengths from the interviews. This suggests that focusing attention on family strengths at Peck resulted, at least at the time of the presentations, in heightened awareness and understanding of those strengths, and that faculty and staff members saw the existence of these strengths as a basis for enhancing the school's family engagement work.

2. The interview team members' perceptions about Peck parents' involvement with their children's education improved from the time they completed their initial questionnaires (before participating in the research process) to the time they completed their final questionnaires (after completing interviews and learning about the overall findings). As noted earlier, when asked to identify the percentage of students' parents/guardians that they believed engaged in a series of seven practices associated with involvement in their children's education, interview team members reported perceiving substantially higher mean percentages of parents who engaged in every one of the seven practices on the final questionnaire than on the initial questionnaire; the range in growth per practice was from 10% to 27%. The elapsed time between interview team members' completion of the initial and final questionnaires was approximately 18 months, and no interview team member had access to her or his initial questionnaire responses when completing the final questionnaire.

3. Peck teachers who did not participate in the interview project communicated mixed responses in terms of their perceptions of Peck families upon being presented with the interview findings. As noted earlier in this chapter, teacher questionnaire responses

indicated that, to varying degrees, teacher perceptions of Peck students' families were altered by the findings related to:

- the role of the extended family in Peck students' lives;
- the importance of family unity and whole-family activities in the family lives of Peck students;
- the differences in practices between parents of high-performing students and those of average- or lower-performing students; and
- the apparently limited degree to which Peck parents/guardians engage their children in reading at home.

There were also two areas of the interview findings that could be fairly reported as altering the perceptions of some teachers, while being contested by others:

- the findings associated with communication within the family, including motivational talk as a key parent strategy for supporting their children's educational success; and
- those associated with college as a parent aspiration for their children.

Finally, there were two areas of the interview findings that brought to light substantial differences in perceptions among teachers without indication of much change in those perceptions as a result of being presented with the parent interview findings:

- parents' caring about, and accepting personal responsibility for, their children's education; and
- the prevalence of structure and support for learning at home.

4. *Peck faculty and staff members' perceptions about what the school needed to do to improve family engagement were impacted by learning about the parent interview findings.* Interview team members as well as teachers and wider school community members who did not participate in the interview process were all asked what they believed, based on their experiences and understanding at the time they completed the

questionnaire, to be the three most important things the school needed to do to improve family engagement. All eight (100%) of the interview team members completing final questionnaires, as well as 25 of 44 (57%) of the teachers and 12 of 17 (71%) of the wider school community members responding to the faculty/community presentation, referenced at least one specific finding from the parent interviews in their responses to this item.

5. *Peck teachers reported substantial variations in family engagement practice.* As noted earlier, teacher questionnaire responses revealed the following:

- About one third of Peck teachers reported practicing a wide variety of family engagement tactics (five or more from a list of 15 possible tactics) at least weekly;
- About 40% of Peck teachers reported practicing some form of family engagement at least weekly; and
- About one fourth (24%) of responding teachers reported that they did not practice any family engagement tactic at least weekly.

The family engagement tactics Peck teachers reported practicing most frequently (at least weekly) were:

- Assigning interactive homework assignments (46%) and requests to parents to help their children with homework (44%) and/or to listen to their children read (42%); and
- Contacting parents/guardians to report either problems/failure (40%) or success/ improvement on their children's part (36%).

On the other end of the spectrum, few teachers reported involving parents as volunteers (18% reported doing so at least monthly and just 9% at least weekly) and no teacher reported visiting students' homes with any frequency.

6. *The research and presentation processes resulted in faculty and staff members' stating the intention to strengthen their own family engagement practices.* Interview team members, as well as teachers and wider school community members who did not participate in the interview process, were all asked the question "Based on the findings of the Peck Family Strengths Study, what (if any) changes do you plan to make with regard to your work with student families?" While both the specificity and the content of their intentions varied substantially, all eight (100%) of the interview team members who completed final questionnaires, as well as 38 of 44 (86%) of the teachers and 14 of 17 (82%) of the wider school community members returning questionnaires after the faculty/community presentation, responded to this question with statements about what they planned and/or hoped to do to strengthen their personal family engagement practice.

7. *While their assertions about the most important school-level needs in relation to family engagement clearly reflected a perception that the parent interview findings were important, Peck teachers' personal intentions in relation to family engagement were more oriented toward increased (general) communication with families than toward action steps associated with the parent interview findings.* As noted above, exposure to the parent interview findings appears to have had a substantial impact on faculty and staff members' perceptions about the most important things needed at the school level to strengthen family engagement, and to have prompted intentions to strengthen personal family engagement practice on the part of school faculty and staff members. However, faculty members' questionnaire responses indicate lesser levels of intention on teachers' part to put the interview findings to use in their individual family engagement practices.

Rather, as noted earlier in this chapter, teachers' individual intentions were substantially weighted toward increased *communication* with students' families. To wit, all four of the interview team members completing the final questionnaire who were teachers stated intentions related to increasing their communication with families, and 22 of 44 (50% of) teachers returning questionnaires after the faculty stated this intention, while as can be noted from a review of Table 5.11, just 29% of teacher responses about intentions related to family engagement were specifically related to the family interview findings. On the other hand, just one of the interview team members who were not classroom teachers stated increased family communication as an intention, and none of the wider school community members who returned questionnaires after the faculty and community presentation of the interview findings identified communication with families as a specific intention. As noted earlier, it is possible that many teachers may have seen the ability to strengthen their communication with students' families as within both their capacity and their scope of responsibilities, while seeing the ability to act on the parent interview findings as beyond their capacity and/or their scope of responsibilities. Whatever the reason, this discrepancy raises for Peck, and other schools that might engage in strengths-based family engagement projects, interesting and important questions as to expectations and support for teachers' participation.

Executive Summary of Findings

The Peck Family Strengths Study was grounded in three research questions, two of which related to the strengths and patterns of action of low-income Puerto Rican families and one of which related to the impact on school staff of the process of

identifying and publicly sharing these strengths and patterns of action. This final section of Chapter 5 presents a summary of the overall findings of the study.

Research Question 1: What strengths of low-income Puerto Rican families—including strengths not widely known or acknowledged by educators at present—might schools draw upon in order to collaborate more effectively with family members in support of their children's learning and performance? Findings related to this question were identified through individual and research team analysis of the results of 18 appreciative interviews carried out with 19 parents of low-income children of Puerto Rican descent who attended the Peck Full Service Community School at the time of the interviews. The following six key areas of family strength were identified as common to the families in the study as described by parents:

- A strong sense of, and commitment to, **family unity** (where 'family' often refers to members beyond the nuclear unit, particularly grandparents and aunts/uncles)
- A great love of **whole-family activities**, most often at an informal or spontaneous level
- **Communication** within the family, including **motivational talk** toward educational success, as a key process
- Providing **organization and structure for learning at home**
- Finding **creative approaches to help their children learn**
- Parents' **joy in their children** and **love of play**

While there is no way to determine the degree to which educators are presently aware of and/or acknowledge these strengths, one conclusion of this study is that schools that serve substantial numbers of low-income children of Puerto Rican descent and are interested in collaborating with these families in order to support their children to be successful in

school would be well-advised to take these strengths into account in planning and implementing family engagement programming. (*Please see Chapter 6 for related recommendations.*)

It is additionally worth noting that, while the following findings do not constitute strengths, they provide important considerations for family engagement programming in schools with high proportions of low-income children of Puerto Rican descent:

- Only English-speaking parents who participated in the study expressed, for their children, a specific aspiration of attending college.
- A quite small proportion (just two of 18) of the parents interviewed emphasized reading with their children as a consistent home learning practice.
- While the parents in the study were generally quite positively disposed toward school staff and community resources, in addressing challenges and problems associated with supporting their children they tended toward relying on themselves and their own resource networks, rather than starting by seeking out support or resources from the school.
- When asked about their most significant challenges in supporting their children's educational success, parents mentioned a wide range of challenges (from neighborhood dangers, to struggling with basic needs, to not knowing how best to help their children with their school work), highlighting the tremendous complexity associated with parenting for children's educational success in low-income neighborhoods.

Research Question 2. Which (if any) actions and patterns of action on the parts of low-income Puerto Rican families are more prevalent among families whose students meet school expectations and state standards than among families whose students do not meet expectations and standards? Findings related to this question were identified by comparing the responses to appreciative interview questions of parents in the study whose children were meeting or exceeding school expectations and state standards related to academic achievement, attendance, and behavior (Parents of High Performers,

or PHP) with the responses of parents in the study whose children were not meeting expectations/standards (Parents of Average/Low Performers, or PALP). The following findings were identified through this comparison:

1. *Communication* (talking with their children, including motivational talk) was an overall strength of the families interviewed, but this strength was magnified among the PHP as they described how they build strong family lives for their children and how they support their children to be successful in school.

2. A higher proportion of PHP specifically mentioned *college/career aspirations* for their students, and almost every PHP explicitly mentioned the hope/aspiration that their children would outperform them.

3. *Home engagement with academic learning:* While a high proportion of the families in the study identified ways in which they supported their children's learning at home, the PHPs all talked about home learning and generally provided descriptions of the structure and organization they provided for this learning that were more extensive and detailed than those of many of the PALPs.

4. While half of the PALPs said that *communication with teachers* was the main way that they worked together with the school to support their children, **all** of the PHPs said that this communication was the primary (and in many cases the only) way that they worked together with school staff.

5. Five of the six PHPs, as compared to just three of the 12 PALPs, reported that their children participated in *after-school and/or summer programs offered via community partners.*

6. *Supporting independent problem-solving:* When asked for an example of a problem that a child had had in school and how they had helped their child with it, five of six PHP mentioned problems between their children and other students (as compared to three of 12 PALP). All five of these PHP emphasized that their efforts to address the problem focused on advising their children about how to handle it (rather than on the parent's going to school and handling it themselves, which two of the 3 PALP mentioned).

Research Question 3. What impact does implementation of a family strengths study using techniques of Appreciative Inquiry have on both school staff who participate in the study and those who choose not to participate? In particular:

- *How, if at all, will they change their perceptions of and attitudes toward low-income Puerto Rican families and students?*

- *What possible actions will they identify that they can take to help families draw upon their own strengths to more effectively support their children's learning and performance?*
- *What possible actions will they identify that they may take with* students *or with their* colleagues *to more effectively support improvement of student learning and performance?*

Findings related to this question were identified through comparative analysis of initial and final questionnaires completed by school staff members who participated in the research process (carrying out appreciative interviews with parents and, in most cases, participating in a meeting to collectively analyze the interview results), as well as analysis of questionnaires completed by teachers and wider school staff and community members after a presentation of the family interview findings at a Peck School staff meeting. As noted at the close of Chapter 5, the following big ideas emerged from the findings related to Research Question 3.

i. The processes of interviewing parents about their families, arriving at a series of findings related to family strengths, and presenting the findings from these interviews to the research team and then to the wider faculty and school community created greater awareness on the part of school faculty and staff of both the concept of strengths-based family engagement and the specific strengths identified in the interview findings.

ii. Interviewers' perceptions about the proportions of parents who were involved with their children's education in a variety of ways increased substantially from before until after they participated in the interview process.

iii. The impact of the study on the perceptions of, and attitudes about, students' families on the part of teachers who did not participate in the interview project appeared to be mixed. Specifically:

- Several of the family interview findings were identified as new learning for multiple teachers and appeared to be received without much contest, including those related to: the role of the extended family; the importance of family unity and whole-family activities; the differences in practices between parents of high-performing students and those of average- or lower-performing students; and the apparently limited degree to which the parents/guardians engaged their children in reading at home.

- Two areas of the interview findings could be fairly reported as altering the perceptions of some teachers, while being contested by others: the findings associated with communication within the family, including motivational talk as a key parent strategy for supporting their children's educational success; and the findings associated with college as a parent aspiration for their children (especially the finding related to the difference between this aspiration on the part of English-speaking vs. Spanish-dominant parents).

- Two areas of the interviews brought to light substantial differences in perceptions among teachers, without indication of much change in those perceptions as a result of being presented with the parent interview findings: the overall finding about parents' caring about, and accepting personal responsibility for, their children's education; and the finding that parents described a fairly high prevalence of structure and support for learning (especially homework completion) in students' homes.

iv. High levels of references to the findings in faculty and staff members' responses to questionnaire items asking what the school needed to do to improve family engagement demonstrated that Peck faculty and staff members' perceptions about directions the school should take in its work to engage families were strongly impacted by learning about the parent interview findings.

v. Peck teachers reported substantial variations in their own family engagement practices at the time they completed the post-questionnaire.

vi. The research and presentation processes resulted in faculty and staff members' stating the intention to strengthen their own family engagement practices.

vii. Faculty and staff members' intentions in this regard were less oriented toward action steps associated with the parent interview findings, and more oriented

toward increased (general) communication with families, than were their stated beliefs about what the school should do to strengthen family engagement.

CHAPTER 6

IMPLICATIONS OF THIS STUDY, AND RELATED RECOMMENDATIONS, FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT THEORY AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND PRACTICE

Implications of This Study and Related Recommendations for Family Engagement Theory and Practice at the Broadest Levels

This dissertation is grounded in the conviction that family engagement is a matter of critical importance for schools serving low-income children of Puerto Rican descent (and, most likely, other low-income populations) working to close the achievement gap—both within the school and in comparison to other schools—between these children and their peers who come from more affluent and less socially distressed circumstances. This conviction is in no way contradictory to the conviction that continuously improved instructional quality is of critical importance for such schools; rather, it is an expression of a "both/and" way of thinking about what schools need to do to improve achievement on the part of poor children.[29] At the same time, it is grounded in the understanding that, as Lareau (1989) termed things, the children of middle class families have a powerful "home advantage" over their lower-income counterparts in that there tends to be much stronger alignment between middle class families and schools. That is, schools tend to

[29] "Both/and" thinking appeared to be gaining increased traction at the time of completion of this dissertation, in light of growing awareness of and support for approaches to school development variously titled "community schools," "full service community schools" (as in Peck's case), "wraparound zone schools," etc. An example of promotion of this approach to school development in the popular press was found in the web logs of Martin Blank in the *Huffington Post* internet newspaper; see http://www.huffingtonpost.com/martin-j-blank/education-is-a-bothand-is_b_1373849.html (retrieved 3/24/12) as an example.

celebrate and reinforce middle class values and behavior patterns, and to fail to acknowledge and value—and in some cases operate in conflict with—some of the values and behavior patterns of low-income families, particularly families of color.

Not coincidentally, low-income children—particularly those of color—continue to achieve (in the aggregate) at levels far below those of middle and upper middle class children (particularly those who are White). Thus it would appear incumbent upon schools serving low-income children, including those of Puerto Rican descent, to work to increase alignment between these schools and the families they serve in order to improve achievement on the part of these children. This increase in alignment almost certainly needs to involve changes in both the school *and* the family, and it almost certainly needs to involve substantial initiative on the part of the school.

With this understanding in mind, both the methods and the findings of the Peck Family Strengths Study have important implications for the ways in which educators and researchers frame our thinking about the relationships between families and schools, as well as for ways in which school leaders approach planning and carrying out family engagement programming. To begin, while many schools have lists (often found on their websites) of family engagement programs and activities, it is relatively rare to come across a school that has a clearly-articulated strategic plan related to family engagement, and extremely difficult to find schools that have clearly identifiable theoretical frameworks (or theories of action) for the work of family engagement. That is, while it is much more common to find schools that work to base their classroom practices in sound and consistent pedagogical theory (grounded, often, in research)—for example, the workshop model of instruction as an approach to effectively organizing learning for

students consistently across all classrooms, or explicit reading comprehension instruction grounded in an understanding of the seven habits of proficient readers—schools whose leaders and faculty/staff members can articulate the theory grounding the school's family engagement work are quite uncommon. Thus one implication of the Peck Family Strengths Study is that more work is needed to support systematic thinking about family engagement—alternatively put, to support the dissemination of family engagement theory—among school leaders and staff.

Second, the prior work related to family engagement and involvement reviewed in Chapter 2 demonstrates that there is a variety of theoretical frameworks—often supported by empirical research—that can aid in identifying parent/family practices that support children's success in school (e.g., regularly reading with children from a young age, creating structure and support for learning at home, etc.). There is also a relative abundance of thinking and research identifying different forms of parent/family involvement and different actions and programs that schools and related organizations can and do take to attempt to increase their engagement with their students' families and/or their students' parents/guardians' involvement with their children's education. However, there is much less development of theoretical and/or research frameworks for family engagement that are grounded in *systematic exploration of the attributes and practices of the families whose students attend schools*. In other words, the starting points for family engagement theory, research and practice currently tend, most often, to be either *what schools want to accomplish* (such as getting parents to attend certain sorts of activities, or to read with their children every day) or *what theorists and researchers want to know about the relationships between parent practices and school success (or*

lack of it), rather than *what parents and guardians actually think, and what the families schools work with actually do, in relation to their children's learning.* Another way to think about this distinction is that while much—and much if not all of the best—pedagogical theory and practice tend to take *how people learn* (rather than what teachers want to teach) as the starting point, the majority of the theory, research, and practice related to family involvement in children's learning starts with what schools want parents to do rather than with *how families function*.

Two important exceptions to the prevailing spirit of family engagement theory and practice in this regard are, as noted in Chapter 2, Moll & Gonzalez's work over the past 20 years in relation to families' "funds of knowledge", and Edwards's (1999) call for "learning to listen to parents," each making the case for training individual teachers to develop the skills needed to identify what parents (and by extension other family members) know and do in relation to their children's learning. While these approaches provide powerful models for the development of individual teacher skills and practices supporting family engagement, one key implication of the Peck Family Strengths Study is that, beyond these researchers' (proposed and actual) work with individual teachers, it is possible and desirable—and perhaps critical—for schools (or, where districts share similar student populations across multiple schools, as is the case in Holyoke) that want to strengthen family engagement to engage in a systematic process of listening to students' family members. Such a process can provide the core information *and* the core relational basis from which a school (or district) can generate its own theoretical framework (or at least a theory of action) and related plan of action for engaging its families in ways that maximize support for student learning.

Implications of This Study and Related Recommendations for Family Engagement Practice at Schools and Districts Serving Low-Income Puerto Rican Children

As suggested immediately above, one of the strongest recommendations to be made to schools and districts aiming to strengthen their engagement with their students' families is to begin with a process of structured listening to the adults who are central to the students' lives (parents/guardians and, where appropriate, other key family members)—not to initially "survey" them about the types of programs that they want and the best ways, times, and locations to carry out such programs, but rather to learn more about what they do, and perhaps what they struggle with, to provide their children with a strong family life and support their children's learning. While the appreciative interviews carried out by faculty via the Peck Family Strengths Study provide one potential model for such a structured listening process, there are certainly other processes and tools that could be used and/or developed for this purpose.

This broad recommendation holds for schools and districts serving students and families similar to those of the Peck Full Service Community School, i.e., those serving high percentages of students of Puerto Rican backgrounds whose families have quite limited economic means at their disposal. At the same time, the Peck Family Strengths Study also provided some information about low income Puerto Rican families that may be of use to schools and districts with demographics similar to Holyoke's. However, while the low-income families of children of Puerto Rican descent who participated in this study are likely to share some important characteristics with low-income families from other ethnic contexts, *any* generalizations made about low-income families on the

basis of this study need to be considered with substantial skepticism. This is particularly true in relation to the somewhat common practice in educational research of lumping Puerto Rican families into a broader "Latino" or "Hispanic" category that fails to fully acknowledge and take into account the differences—based in both differing cultures of origin *and* differing experiences of immigration/migration and citizenship status in the US—between Puerto Rican people and other U.S. Latinos. With this caveat in mind, here are several recommendations regarding family engagement practice on the part of schools and families with large proportions of low-income children of Puerto Rican descent.

A. Schools serving low-income Puerto Rican children should consider developing family engagement programming that takes the family strengths and needs identified in this study into account. While the exact structure and content of such programs needs to be developed at both Peck and at other schools, the findings of the Peck Family Strengths Study suggest that family engagement programming at schools with substantial proportions of low-income students of Puerto Rican descent should consider family engagement program development along the following lines.

i. In light of the importance of family unity, whole-family activities, and fun/play in the Puerto Rican family structure, rather than (or perhaps along with) providing "parent involvement" programming targeted specifically and only toward parents/guardians (and, perhaps, providing child care in separate spaces), schools should consider organizing *family involvement* and *family learning* activities in which parents/guardians and their children—including younger and older siblings

of the children who attend a given school—can participate together. While perhaps challenging in terms of logistics, it is quite possible that well-run whole-family activities that celebrate family unity and are fun and engaging for the entire family would attract higher levels of participation, and higher-quality participation and satisfaction, than more traditional parent meetings or workshops. (It is in fact at least anecdotally true that activities in which the whole family can participate have consistently generated substantially higher levels of parent turnout at Peck, and in Holyoke, than activities aimed just at parents, even if—in the latter case—child care is included in a separate room during a parent activity.)

ii. In light of the findings that suggest that the parents of higher-performing students utilized out-of-school-time (after-school and summer) learning programs offered in the community at a much higher rate than the parents of students who were not performing as well, schools serving high proportions of low-income Puerto Rican students should consider campaigns supporting parents in enrolling their children in out-of-school-time programs. Needed elements of such programming are likely to include systematically building parent awareness of the existence of such programs, of their importance in supporting student achievement, and of how to enroll their children (including addressing any potential financial barriers).

iii. Schools should consider communication and educational programming for families that focuses heavily on promoting reading at home. Because doing so is likely to be challenging—involving what would appear to be a substantial shift in home culture for many families—attention needs to be paid to both:

- helping parents/guardians understand *why* regularly reading at home with their children is so critical; *and*

- providing support for the changes in home behaviors needed in order for reading with children to become a consistent practice.

Such support could include supplying appropriate reading materials to families and—equally or more importantly—identifying ways in which reading at home can be promoted so as to build upon family strengths, for example by engaging parents in learning to make reading a fun activity for the whole family. It is important to include the message that home reading in Spanish is absolutely valued and appreciated as a way of developing the habit and love of reading, authentic literacy skills, and an affirmation of bilingualism—a message that may not be obvious to families in the context of current language policy within which the overwhelming focus at school for English Language Learners is on the development of English language and literacy skills.

iv. Schools should consider developing programming specifically focused on supporting parents/guardians—particularly those who are Spanish-dominant—in identifying college as both a possibility and an aspiration for their children. Because such programming is likely to take parents/guardians out of their comfort zones in both linguistic terms (in light of the fact that college-related materials and staff of both colleges and college awareness programs often tend to be fairly "English only" in practice) and cultural terms (in light of the reality of fairly limited experience with college on the part of Spanish-dominant Puerto Rican parents living in the U.S.), it seems particularly critical not just that college awareness and readiness programs be offered in Spanish, but also planned and implemented in ways that resonate with families—ideally being oriented toward

the whole family and fun as well as highly focused on being inclusive/welcoming and reducing all elements that can be experienced as intimidating.

B. In order to strengthen family engagement, schools serving low-income Puerto Rican children not only need to develop programs for families, but also need to enhance faculty and staff capacity to effectively engage students' family members. As noted in the findings related to Peck faculty and staff members' responses to the presentation of findings from the family strengths interviews, most faculty and staff members clearly understood many if not all of the interview findings and could identify steps that they believed the school should take to strengthen family engagement, and most also expressed intentions to strengthen their own family engagement practices. However, far fewer faculty and staff members expressed intentions to put the interview findings into practice in specific ways—rather, their intentions were primarily oriented toward increasing communication, especially positive feedback about their children's performance, with parents/guardians. Additionally, a small but clearly identifiable subset of faculty and staff members expressed, in their questionnaire responses, more negative perceptions and lower expectations of students' families than the interview findings would appear to merit. This suggests that at Peck, and most likely at schools with similar populations, work with faculty and staff members is needed in at least two areas in order to strengthen schools' engagement with students' families.

i. School staff members' perceptions of students' families need to be identified and, where appropriate, challenged. That is, school leaders are likely to need to

systematically identify what faculty and staff members think about students' families' parenting practices, involvement with their children's learning, etc., and determine which faculty/staff perceptions need to be tested and where focused work to challenge or change those perceptions is needed. An ideal strategy would be to require, and provide release time for, all faculty/staff members to carry out appreciative interviews with their students' parents/guardians, then share and analyze the results with their peers. Of course it may not be possible for many schools to do so in light of time and resource constraints, in which case a more feasible strategy might be to utilize a process similar to the one used at Peck in which a smaller number of school community members interview parents/guardians, followed by a structured presentation about what their students' families have to say about their own practices, and subsequent decisions about how to move forward with the school's work of family engagement based in part on faculty and staff members' responses.

ii. School staff should be trained in both strategies for communicating effectively with low-income Puerto Rican parents/guardians and the kinds of motivational talk that parents/guardians use to effectively support their children. While, as noted above, it appeared quite natural for many Peck teachers to respond to a presentation about their students' families' strengths with the intention to communicate more often with their children's parents/guardians, the expression of this intention in no way guaranteed either that they would in fact follow through on this intention or that this communication would be effective in helping to

strengthen the school's engagement with its families and/or parents' ability to support their children to be successful in school. This seems especially true in light of the culture and class gap between the majority of Peck faculty/staff members and the vast majority of Peck families. One key step in this regard is, then, to provide professional development to faculty and staff in communication strategies that are likely to be effective in developing and strengthening relationships with low-income Puerto Rican parents.[30] For example, while some of their specific messages may need to be "tweaked" in light of the development of their framework in a different cultural context (working with Mexican rather than Puerto Rican families), Scribner, Young, & Pedroza (1999) provide useful insights into communication strategies in relation to which faculty and staff members could be trained, such as engaging with the whole family (rather than focusing only on parents/guardians), taking the role of the extended family into account, establishing a warm and welcoming context via small talk and inquiry into the well-being of family members, and consistently demonstrating empathy in relation to both parents/guardians' good intentions and the challenges they face in raising and educating their children in highly distressed neighborhoods.

Similarly, in light of the fact that *motivational talk* appeared as an important strategy for essentially all of the parents interviewed for the Peck study in relation to how they supported their children through difficult times at school, and that

[30] It is worth noting here that the ability to speak in Spanish is extremely helpful in developing and strengthening relationships with the parents and guardians of low-income children of Puerto Rican descent, which is of course why one teacher responded "I could learn *español*" to the questionnaire item about steps the school could take to strengthen family engagement. However, getting a large number of busy faculty and staff members who currently only speak English to learn enough Spanish to be able to communicate effectively with Spanish-dominant parents/guardians is, quite frankly, an essentially impossible task within the confines of most public school systems.

motivational talk appeared to be an especially critical "go-to" strategy for parents of higher-performing students, it would make sense for faculty and staff members of schools serving similar populations to learn more about the kinds of motivational talk in which parents—especially parents of higher-performing students—engage with their children. If they understand the features of parent motivational talk, faculty and staff members might be able to replicate this talk at school and thus increase their own effectiveness in motivating students who are struggling with feelings of failure, of being overwhelmed, and the like. One potential strategy for such learning might be to invite parents of high-performing students whom school leaders identify as particularly effective communicators to share with faculty and staff members, either in a full-faculty setting or (perhaps less intimidating) at the level of grade-level teams, the specific approaches to talking with their children that they have found to be most effective.

Implications of This Study and Related Recommendations for Educational Policy

As noted in Chapter 1, while research repeatedly identifies strong correlations between parent involvement in children's learning and student achievement, educational policy tends to pay relatively limited attention, if not simply lip service, to family engagement as a systematic practice of schools. That is, while Federal policy mandates that at least 1% of Title I funds allocated to districts and schools serving low-income students be spent on family engagement initiatives, this 1% is generally not enough money to support structured and systematic family engagement work in schools, and there are no accountability or quality control mechanisms for this work at the level of

schools. Similarly, while Massachusetts law mandates school councils with parent representation at each school, there are no clear mandates for what schools are expected to accomplish in terms of family engagement via either school councils or other mechanisms. Further, while there are some small and poorly-resourced organizations dedicated to family engagement (such as the federally-funded Parent Information and Resource Centers that exist in Massachusetts and other states with a handful of staff members who share the mandate of strengthening family engagement in all districts and schools across an entire state), and occasional professional development opportunities related to family engagement such as workshops at conferences or mini-conferences sponsored by state Title I offices, most schools operate in a policy environment without specific expectations, dedicated resources, professional development, and/or accountability for family engagement.[31]

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[31] Examples from educational policy in Massachusetts demonstrated that this dearth of focus on family engagement continued to be the case at the time of writing this final dissertation chapter. First, in Spring 2011 the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education utilized Federal funds associated with President Obama's Race To The Top initiative to establish a "Wraparound Zone" initiative aimed at supporting the ability of schools serving low-income populations to "address non-academic and out-of-school learning barriers, while maximizing teaching and learning time" via work to improve school culture and climate and to " (1) implement a proactive system of identifying student needs in key academic and non-academic areas leading to both schoolwide supports and targeted student services; (2) customize interventions for high-risk students by integrating a range of resources, including prevention, enrichment, early intervention, and intensive/crisis response services, to tailor the student services from both within the school and the larger community; and (3) monitor school program effectiveness, integrate in-school social workers with schoolwide practices, and connect families to services by convening relevant agencies and organizations." (cf. http://www.doe.mass.edu/news/news.aspx?id=6259). While the Peck School was very lucky to benefit, along with two other schools in Holyoke, from funds associated with this initiative in order to expand its programming as a Full Service Community School, the Wraparound Zone initiative is a classic example of a policy initiative aimed at supporting low-income students that both misses the opportunity to specifically establish expectations and supports for family engagement and is grounded in a fundamentally deficit-based approach to working with low-income students and families.

Second, in November 2011 Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick announced a major policy initiative for his second term in office aimed at closing the achievement gaps associated with low achievement among "immigrants, low-income students, English Language Learners, and others. . ." The specific goals associated with this initiative include (1) getting every child to reading proficiency by the third grade; (2) providing every child with a healthy platform for education; (3) creating a differentiated education system that meets each student, particularly English Language Learners, where they are; and (4) preparing all students for college and career success. It is first worth noting that strengthening schools' engagement with the families of students affected by the achievement gap might have been considered a

At the broadest level, then, my most significant implication and recommendation for policy is that *educational policymakers should establish family engagement policy that includes clear goals and expectations, evaluation measures and strategies, and personnel and professional development resources aimed at strengthening family engagement in schools, particularly schools serving low-income communities.* Such policy should start at the Federal level in that the Elementary and Secondary Education Act should not just mandate that school districts allocate resources for family engagement, but also that states establish clear goals and expectations, and allocate resources for technical assistance and professional development, for the development and implementation of strategic family engagement plans in schools and districts serving large proportions of low-income children. This recommendation raises the question of where resources for large-scale policy initiatives related to family engagement would come from, but it is instructive to note that, as identified in Footnote 31, at the time of completion of this dissertation substantial new resources were being invested in efforts to address the gaps between the achievement of students in low-income communities and that of their more affluent peers. Additionally, Massachusetts was in the process of developing a proposal for a waiver associated with a variety of provisions associated with the current iteration of ESEA (the "No Child Left Behind" Act), and in doing so would presumably free up resources (such as those associated with "Supplemental Educational

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viable policy goal in its own right for this initiative, but was not considered. Second, while goal #2 (providing children with healthy platforms for education) might provide room for specific family engagement expectations, it is in fact framed in terms of typically deficit-oriented thinking about low-income students and families, calling for "Student Support Councils in all Gateway Cities . . . consist[ing] of local human and social service providers focusing their efforts on connecting with students and families in each city's predominantly low-income schools. Support Counselors will work to connect families and students with service providers who can help them mitigate the problems that impede school attendance and effort." (http://www.mass.gov/governor/pressoffice/pressreleases/2011/111109-education-summit-2011.html).

Services" under NCLB) that could be dedicated to supporting new family engagement policy.

Within the context of this broader recommendation, here are several more specific recommendations. The first, following the distinction made in Chapter 1, is that policy at all levels should focus on *family engagement on the part of schools* rather than "parent involvement." This follows the basic understanding that most—and the most important—work that adult family members do to support their children's school success is invisible to schools and is thus extremely difficult if not impossible to measure. On the other hand, *what schools do (or do not do) to engage their students' families, and how engaged schools are with their families*, can be identified and measured—and strengthened over time. In other words, while there is in general a dearth of educational policy related to family engagement overall, the policy that does exist has generally referenced "parent involvement" and been vague about both what counts as parent involvement, what schools are expected to do to enhance parent involvement, and how goals should be set, and progress measured, in relation to these expectations. With this understanding in mind, all policy—whether at the Federal, state, or local level—in this area should be grounded in a focus on family engagement by schools and specific definitions for what counts as family engagement as well as goals and targets for strengthening it. For example, and in tribute to the old adage "What's counted is what counts," in addition to collecting and measuring data related to attendance and achievement as part of school accountability requirements, policymakers should consider including family engagement measures such as the percentage of parents/guardians of a

given school that the school is successful in engaging in at least two conferences (structured conversations) each year related to their children's progress in school.

Second, family engagement policy at the Federal and state levels should mandate that family engagement initiatives be implemented via strategic action plans that are generated out of theories of action grounded in both a working knowledge of programs and approaches that have proven effective in strengthening schools' engagement with families *and* a systematic understanding of the families served by the schools who will be carrying them out. As they develop strategic plans for family engagement, districts and schools should consider adopting strengths-based frameworks based in order to develop theories of action, and strategic plans for family engagement, that go beyond the deficits that educators perceive in the families their schools serve to identify strengths upon which to build in working to engage families more effectively.

Finally, it is worth noting that family engagement/"parent involvement" work is currently not valued and supported as professional work in anything like the way it needs to be. That is, "parent involvement" in most schools serving low-income communities is either assumed to be the province of educators "on top of their day jobs,"—i.e., something that teachers, counselors, and administrators do in addition to the other core functions of their work with students—or assigned to (often part-time) poorly paid and non-professional staff members with titles such as "Parent Liaison" and "Outreach Worker" who share the ethnic and class background of the families served by schools. While there is no question that both faculty members (teachers, administrators, and counselors) and (where available) non-professional staff who come from the same community as students can play critical roles in effective family engagement work on

schools' part, it is equally clear that family engagement work is both sufficiently complex and sufficiently important that investments need to be made in professionalizing this work. For example, it was only after establishing a professional Family Access and Engagement Coordinator position, and hiring a highly educated, knowledgeable, and culturally competent staff member into this position, that the Peck Full Service Community School began to see strong growth in the numbers of families with which the school was engaged and the quality of that engagement. Further, the establishment of a professional family engagement position provides the infrastructure for ongoing planning and implementation of key family engagement initiatives at Peck. To sum up, educational policy at all levels needs to reflect the reality that, if schools serving low-income communities are going to strengthen family engagement as a core element of their efforts to improve student achievement, the work of family engagement needs to be acknowledged as complex and demanding professional work and given attention and resources according to this acknowledgement.

Recommendations for Additional Research

This study raises a variety of questions in relation to which further research would make a valuable contribution. One important next step would be to test the family strengths findings identified through this study—both those associated with the families overall and the findings comparing families of higher-performing students with those of students who were not performing as well—with larger samples of low-income Puerto Rican families. While the logistics of doing so might be challenging if the process involved conducting and then analyzing the results of in-depth appreciative interviews

like those utilized in this study, it is likely to be possible to utilize either an interview protocol that is briefer and allows for a less broad range of responses than the protocol used in the Peck study or, perhaps, a more quantitatively-oriented survey process for the purposes of verifying (or challenging) the findings of this study.

A second area for additional research is associated with the process of faculty and staff members' carrying out appreciative interviews with the family members of low-income students. In the Peck study it turned out that interviewers' perceptions of the proportions of Peck parents/guardians that engaged in actions and patterns of action considered to constitute involvement in their children's education grew from before until after they (the interviewers) participated in the research process; that is, interviewers expressed more positive perceptions of Peck parents' collective involvement in their children's education after carrying out appreciative interviews and learning about the overall findings from these interviews. It would be useful to replicate the process of engaging faculty/staff members from other schools in carrying out, analyzing, and reviewing the results of appreciative interviews of parents to whether this finding holds true with different faculty/staff members and, potentially, a larger sample size.

Finally, it would be interesting and valuable to see similar research projects carried out in the contexts of schools serving low-income student populations other than those of predominantly Puerto Rican descent. That is, how would the findings of a Family Strengths Study carried out by a school serving primarily low-income Chinese families, or one serving rural families that are predominantly White/Anglo, cohere with and differ from the findings of the Peck study about low-income Puerto Rican families? Such findings would be likely to be interesting and important at the "macro" level, i.e., in

terms of how the family strengths inventories developed through studies of families from other populations would compare with the inventory developed in this study. Additionally, comparative study of specific findings might also be useful. For example, are whole-family activities an important mode of interaction among low-income families from other ethnic groups? If so (or if not), what implications does such a finding have for the family engagement work of schools serving these ethnic groups? Similarly, do the differing patterns of response when their children had problems with peers, or of utilization of out of school time programs, between the families of higher-achieving and lower-achieving students identified in this study hold true as patterns among families in other school contexts—and if so (or if not), what are the implications for those schools?

APPENDIX A

APPRECIATIVE INTERVIEW TOOL

Introduction to Interview: My name is _____, and I work as a _____ at Peck. We're glad to have your child at our school!

We at Peck want to become more effective in working with our students' families, and we know that in order to do so we need to understand more about these families. We are especially interested in learning about how families support their children to be successful in school. We think that a better understanding of families' strengths will help us think about how best to build on these strengths in our work with students and families. So I have some questions to ask you. You will see that after some basic questions, all of the questions are focused on learning about good things about your family.

Before we begin, I want to ask for your help with two things.

1. Signing a permission form that describes what we'll do with the information you share with us, and how we will protect your privacy.

> ***Please review and discuss the information the permission form, ask if the parent/guardian understands it, explain anything that is not clear, and ask the parent/guardian to sign it.***

2. May I tape this interview? ***Assuming the answer is "yes", please turn on the tape recorder at this point and say (on tape): "I have just received your permission to record this interview. Could you please say "yes" again to indicate that I do have your permission to tape our talk?***

Basic and "warm-up" questions:

What is your name? _____

Where were you born? _____

How long have you lived in Holyoke? _____

What are the names and grades of all the children you have at Peck School?

Name of child	Grade
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

How many other children are in your family, and how old are they?

Name of child	Age
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

We know that 'family' means different things to different people, and that there many different kinds of adults who play important roles in children's lives. For example, grandparents, step-parents, aunts/uncles, older brothers/sisters, and even close friends and neighbors can be important adult family members for a child. Besides you, who are the most important adult family members in your child(ren)'s life, and what is their relationship to the child(ren)?

Name (**first name only is fine**)	Relationship to child
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

INTERVIEWER, PLEASE REMEMBER: **Starting here, after you ask a question, please count in your head "one one thousand, two one thousand . . ." up to at least 15 before saying anything; then ask if the interviewee needs you to repeat or clarify the question. If you end up clarifying, please *don't use examples that give the interviewee the message that you are looking for a certain answer or kind of answer.***

1. Can you tell me how your family got to Holyoke?

_____

_____

_____

_____

2. Do you have any favorite family memories that you're willing to share with me?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

3. What do you like best about your family?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

4. What are your hopes for your children's future?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Specific Questions: Supporting our children's success in school

Lead-in: All parents want their children to be successful in school, and when families are at their best they help their children with school success in many different ways.

5. Tell me about some of the things you teach your child(ren) about how to be successful in school.

_____

_____

_____

_____

6. Now can you tell me a time when one of your children was successful in school and you were proud of her/him? It could be any kind of success—academic, artistic, social, leadership, etc.

_____

_____

_____

_____

What role(s) did you and other family members play in your child's success at that time?

_____

_____

_____

_____

7. Now I'd like you to think and tell me about a time when one of your children was having a problem in school—it could be any kind of problem—and you were able to help her/him solve this problem. What was the problem, and what were the most important things you and/or other family members did to help your child with this problem?

_____

_____

_____

8. We all know that one thing that parents and families do to help their children is to develop a strong family life. What are some of the things you and other family members do with your kids to give them a strong family life?

_____

_____

_____

9. Another way in which families support their children's school success is through emphasizing the importance of education. How do you help your child(ren) understand that school is important?

_____

_____

_____

10. One of the most important aspects of being successful in school (or anything!) is being able to persevere—to keep going when we are upset or discouraged. What do you do to help your child(ren) when they are upset or discouraged about school? Feel free to talk about any specific example that comes to mind.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

11. Families also support their children's school success by helping at home with their academic learning. Tell me about some of the ways in which your family helps your child(ren) with their academic learning.

_____

_____

_____

12. Now I'd like to talk about another way that families support their children's education: by working directly with the school. Can you tell me about any ways in which you have worked together with teachers or other school staff to support your children's education?

_____

_____

_____

13. One last way in which some families support their children's education is by working with people and organizations in the community—that is, outside both the family and the school. Can you tell me about any ways in which you have made use of community resources to support your children's education?

_____

_____

_____

14. What would you say is, for you and your family, the most difficult aspect of helping your child(ren) be successful in school?

_____

_____

_____

How do you and other members of your family work on this area of difficulty?

_____

_____

_____

_____

15. Now that I have asked you all of these questions, I just have one more. When you think about your family in general, what are three of the things you are most proud of?

A. _____

_____

B. _____

_____

C. _____

_____

Exit question: Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me about your family. Before I go, do you have any other comments or questions about what we've been talking about?

_____

_____

_____

_____

I want to let you know that we are in process of asking the same questions to other Peck parents and guardians. Once we have completed the interviews, the school staff involved are going to meet together to share and analyze what we learned. Our principal, Mr. Hyry, is also going to write a report to share what we have learned with the school staff and interested families.

Once that report is ready, we will be contacting you to invite you to a meeting to hear about what we have learned, make any additional comments or ask any questions, and

give us advice about what we should do at Peck in order to make use of this learning. I hope you will join us!

In the meantime, don't hesitate to call me or anyone at Peck with any comments or questions—about what we've been discussing today or any other topic that is important to you.

Thank you again for your time; I really enjoyed the chance to learn about your family.

Interviewer follow-up form

Interviewers: please respond briefly to the questions below as soon as possible after completing the interview documented above.

Interview date _____ Interviewee name _____

What was/were the most important thing(s) that you learned through this interview?

_____

_____

What (if anything) did the parent/guardian say that *confirmed* the perceptions of this family (and/or Peck families in general) that you had before carrying out this interview?

_____

_____

What (if anything) did the parent/guardian say that *altered* the perceptions of this family (and/or Peck families in general) that you had before carrying out this interview?

_____

_____

How (if at all) do you think you might approach your work differently as a result of what you learned during this meeting with this family?

_____

_____

APPENDIX B

LETTER TO PECK FACULTY/STAFF INVITING PARTICIPATION IN INTERVIEW PROCESS

Dear Peck Faculty and Staff:

I am writing to invite you to join me on **January 17 after school in the Family Resource Room** to discuss a Peck "**family strengths project**", which I believe can be useful for our school. I need to note up front that this project is central to my dissertation research (see the end of this letter for a bit of related discussion). Below you will find more information.

Background: While family involvement in our students' education is a matter of great importance to all of us, I believe we have all felt concerned about low levels of parent "turnout" at one point or another. At the same time, I also worry that I (and others) too often tend to focus our thinking about parent/family involvement primarily on the negative—what parents *don't* do—and that we fail to have much understanding of what many of our students' parents *do* in order to support their children toward school success.

This is why I am proposing that we work to learn together to **identify our students' families' *strengths***—what they do well—in relation to their children's education. Specifically, I hope to work with those of you who are interested to **interview parents/guardians and analyze the results of these interviews together**. The idea is that if we get to know families' strengths, we can work over time to *build on the positive* to involve families.

Project information. I would like to invite those of you who are interested to do an "appreciative interview" of one of more of our students' parents/guardians about their families. (I will tell you more about the "Appreciative Inquiry" approach, which has been used in a variety of community and educational contexts, when we meet.) The commitment involves the following (you will note that estimated time commitments are attached to each element).

Activity	Estimated time commitment
Participate in one or two initial meetings to: • discuss the project in more detail; • fill out a pre-questionnaire regarding some of your perceptions of our students, their families, and our school; • review and recommend revisions to a draft family interview tool; • learn about specific interview protocols; and • identify a set of students whose families we would like to interview	Maximum 3 hours (two meetings of no more than 90 minutes each, and probably less)
Carry out interviews with two or more families, including: • Traveling, if necessary, to the homes of the families involved; • Establishing a context for the formal interviews, including reviewing informed consent documents with the parents/guardians involved; and • Writing up notes from your interviews (using the interview tool) in a common format that we can use to compare interview results.	Maximum of 2 hours per interview including all activities
Participate in one or more follow-up meetings to: • Summarize the results of your interviews, listen to others' summaries, collectively analyze what parents/guardians have told us, and draw whatever conclusions we believe make sense from this information; and • Complete a post-questionnaire that I will use for comparison to pre-questionnaire results.	Minimum of 1.5 hours; interested team members may elect additional participation
Total estimated time commitment	6 hours for members doing 2 interviews

My work from that point forward will include writing up the outcomes of the interviews and our analysis for use in both my dissertation and a report to the faculty and families involved, and ultimately to the full faculty (and ideally the wider District) for use in ongoing planning and school improvement efforts (including, of course, family involvement work).

One area for consideration. I hope that everyone who is interested will join us on the 17th. At the same time, I think it is important to acknowledge some possible concerns related to such an invitation (to be part of the boss's dissertation research). For example, you might feel pressure to participate in this project in order to (in your mind) satisfy me, even if you didn't feel you had the time to participate or simply weren't interested. Or if you did participate, you might feel uncomfortable expressing a different interpretation from mine of some of the information we collect.

I am aware of such possible concerns, and see them as legitimate; in fact, they are actually a fairly normal part of action research, which is the research category into which this project falls. So I want to make the following clear:

- I understand that many Peck staff members will choose not to participate in this project, for any of a variety of good reasons. I am committed to assuring that no Peck staff member is advantaged or disadvantaged in any way related to their regular employment as a result of the decision not to participate; and

- For those Peck staff members who *do* decide to participate, I am committed to avoid connecting any aspect of anyone's participation in this action research project with my evaluation of that person's job performance, and to assure that no staff member is advantaged or disadvantaged in any way related their regular employment as a result of their participation. Also, any staff member who initially decides to participate can withdraw from the project without any fear of retaliation of any kind from me.

Of course the above commitments will be, in your minds, only as good as your assessment of my honesty, character, and ability to separate out our "regular work" from this project. I think that the best thing for me to do is to encourage anyone with doubts in this regard to speak to me, so that I can hear your concerns and consider how best to address them.

In case of any concerns you may have related to how the District may see this project, I want to let you know that I informed Dr. Carballo about this project some time back and he indicated that there are no objections at the District level.

So: If you think that you might like to contribute to this "family strengths" project, please come to discuss it on the _____ after school in Room ___. If you are interested but cannot make that date, please contact me so that we can make alternative arrangements for getting together.

Thanks for reading this long missive, and for your consideration. ☺
Respectfully,
[Paul]

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEWER INITIAL AND FINAL QUESTIONNAIRES

Initial Questionnaire

Part 1. There are many differences among students and their families, as well as their teachers and schools, that may contribute to student learning (how successfully a student achieves deep understanding of assigned material).

When you think at this time about some of the factors that may impact student learning, which do you perceive as most and least important? In order to show this, please distribute 100 points across the factors listed below (entering a number in the points column); you can put as many or as few points as you believe appropriate as long as the total adds up to 100 (please check to see that the total is 100 before going on to the next section).

	Factor	**Impact on learning (points out of 100)**
A.	The child's **natural talent**/intelligence/ability.	
B.	The **quality of the teaching** the child receives at school.	
C.	Steps parents/guardians take to **emphasize the importance of education** in rais their children.	
D.	Steps parents/guardians take to create a **strong family life** outside of school.	
E.	Steps parents/guardians take to **help the child with homework (or reading) at home.**	
F.	Steps parents/guardians take to **create a consistent structure for homework/ reading at home** (even if they don't/can't directly help with homework or read	
G.	Steps parents/guardians take to **actively collaborate with school staff** to suppo their children's education (attending conferences, volunteering at school, etc.)	
H.	Steps parents/guardians take to **access support and opportunities for their children in the wider community** (outside home and school)	
	Total	***100***

Part II. In this section, please give your best estimate, based on your experience, of the **percentage** of Peck parents/guardians who do each of the actions/activities, or have the feelings/experiences, named below.

1. Work hard to create a strong family life at home for their children. % _____
2. Consistently emphasize the importance of education in raising their children. % _____
3. Regularly help their children with schoolwork (or reading) at home. % _____

4. Create a consistent structure for homework/ learning in the home (even if they don't or can't actually help with homework or reading). % _____

5. Actively collaborate with school staff to support their children's educational process. % _____

6. Access support for their children in the wider community (outside home and school). % _____

7. Make a significant, positive educational difference in their children's lives. % _____

8. Do very little to support their children's educational process. % _____

Part III. *In this section, please indicate HOW MUCH YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE with each of the statements.*

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Family involvement is important for student success in school.	1	2	3	4
2. If our students' parents/guardians try really hard, they can help their children learn even when the children are unmotivated.	1	2	3	4
3. All parents/guardians could learn ways to help their children with schoolwork at home, if shown how.	1	2	3	4
4. Parents of children at Peck want to be involved more than they already are.	1	2	3	4
5. Peck School staff view parents as important partners in their children's educational process.	1	2	3	4
6. We need to improve family involvement at Peck.	1	2	3	4

Part IV. *In this section, please indicate HOW OFTEN YOU have done each of the following over the course of the last school year that you've taught.*

	Less than monthly	At least once a month but less than weekly	About once a week	Averaging more than once a week
1. Have a conference with a parent/guardian.	1	2	3	4
2. Contact a parent/guardian if the child has problems or experiences failure.	1	2	3	4
3. Contact a parent/guardian if their child does something well or improves.	1	2	3	4

4.	Involve a parent as a volunteer.	1	2	3	4
5.	Tell a parent/guardian about the skills their child must learn in specific academic subjects.	1	2	3	4
6.	Provide specific activities for a parent/guardian to do with their child in order to help the child be successful.	1	2	3	4
7.	Assign homework that requires an adult family member to interact with their child.	1	2	3	4
8.	Ask a parent/guardian to listen to their child read.	1	2	3	4
9.	Ask a parent/guardian to help their child with homework.	1	2	3	4
10.	Encourage a parent/guardian to ask their child about the school day.	1	2	3	4
11.	Ask a parent/guardian to visit their child's classroom(s).	1	2	3	4
12.	Ask a parent/guardian to take the child to the library or community events.	1	2	3	4
13.	Give a parent/guardian ideas to help him or her become an effective advocate for their child.	1	2	3	4
14.	Send home 'letters' telling parents/guardians what their children have been learning and doing in class.	1	2	3	4
15.	Visited the home of one of your students.	1	2	3	4

Based on my experience and understanding, the **<u>three most important</u>** things that we need to do to improve family involvement at Peck are:

1.

2.

3.

Final Questionnaire for Research Team Members

Part 1. There are many differences among students and their families, as well as their teachers and schools, that may contribute to student learning (how successfully a student achieves deep understanding of assigned material).

When you think at this time about some of the factors that may impact student learning, which do you perceive as most and least important? In order to show this, please distribute 100 points across the factors listed below (entering a number in the points column); you can put as many or as few points as you believe appropriate as long as the total adds up to 100 (please check to see that the total is 100 before going on to the next section).

	Factor	**Impact on learning (points out of 100)**
A.	The child's **natural talent**/intelligence/ability.	
B.	The **quality of the teaching** the child receives at school.	
C.	Steps parents/guardians take to **emphasize the importance of education** in raising their children.	
D.	Steps parents/guardians take to create a **strong family life** outside of school.	
E.	Steps parents/guardians take to **help the child with homework (or reading) at home.**	
F.	Steps parents/guardians take to **create a consistent structure for homework/ reading at home** (even if they don't/can't directly help with homework or reading).	
G.	Steps parents/guardians take to **actively collaborate with school staff** to support their children's education (attending conferences, volunteering at school, etc.)	
H.	Steps parents/guardians take to **access support and opportunities for their children in the wider community** (outside home and school)	
	Total	***100***

Have you noticed any changes in your perceptions of the relative importance of the above factors, or have you identified any other key factors contributing to student effort, learning, and achievement, since you began participating in this research project? If so, please share these (changes in your perceptions and/or other factors you have identified as essential to student effort, learning, and achievement) below.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Part II. In this section, please give your best estimate at this time (based on your experience), of the **percentage** of Peck parents/guardians who do each of the actions/activities, or have the feelings/experiences, named below.

1) Work hard to create a strong family life at home for their children. % _____
2) In the process of raising their children, consistently emphasize the importance of education. % _____
3) Regularly help their children with schoolwork (or reading) at home. % _____
4) Create a consistent structure for homework/ learning in the home (even if they don't or can't actually help with homework or reading). % _____
5) Actively collaborate with school staff to support their children's educational process. % _____
6) Access support for their children in the wider community (outside home and school). % _____
7) Make a significant, positive educational difference in their children's lives. % _____
8) Do very little to support their children's educational process. % _____
9) Feel successful about helping their children learn. % _____

A. *Have you noticed any changes in your perceptions of Peck parents/guardians as a result of your participation in this research project?*
B. *Beyond the ways in which parents/guardians might contribute to their children's education that are listed above (e.g. helping their children with schoolwork, accessing support for their children in the wider community, etc.), are their other ways in which Peck parents/guardians support their children's education that you have learned about through participating in this research project?*

If your answer to either A or B is "yes", please share some specifics (about changes in your perceptions and/or ways that Peck parents/guardians support their children's education) below:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Part III. *In this section, please indicate HOW MUCH YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE with each of the statements below at this time.*

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Family involvement is important for student success in school.	1	2	3	4
2. If our students' parents/guardians try really hard, they can help their children learn even when the children are unmotivated.	1	2	3	4
3. All parents/guardians could learn ways to help their children with schoolwork at home, if shown how.	1	2	3	4
4. Parents of children at Peck want to be involved more than they already are.	1	2	3	4
5. Peck School staff view parents as important partners in their children's educational process.	1	2	3	4
6. We need to improve family involvement at Peck.	1	2	3	4

Part IV. *In this section, please indicate HOW OFTEN YOU have done each of the following since you began participating in this research project.*

	Less than monthly	At least once a month but less than weekly	About once a week	Averaging more than once a week
1) Have a conference with a parent/guardian.	1	2	3	4
2) Contact a parent/guardian if the child has problems or experiences failure.	1	2	3	4
3) Contact a parent/guardian if their child does something well or improves.	1	2	3	4
4) Involve a parent as a volunteer.	1	2	3	4
5) Tell a parent/guardian about the skills their child must learn in specific academic subjects.	1	2	3	4
6) Provide specific activities for a parent/guardian to do with their child in order to help the child be successful.	1	2	3	4

7) Assign homework that requires an adult family member to interact with their child.	1	2	3	4
8) Ask a parent/guardian to listen to their child read.	1	2	3	4
9) Ask a parent/guardian to help their child with homework.	1	2	3	4
10) Encourage a parent/guardian to ask their child about the school day.	1	2	3	4
11) Ask a parent/guardian to visit their child's classroom(s).	1	2	3	4
12) Ask a parent/guardian to take the child to the library or community events.	1	2	3	4
13) Give a parent/guardian ideas to help him or her become and effective advocate for their child.	1	2	3	4
14) Send home 'letters' telling parents/guardians what their children have been learning and doing in class.	1	2	3	4
15) Visited the home of one of your students.	1	2	3	4

In reflecting on what you have learned through participating in this research project, what (if any) are the most important changes you have already made with regard to your work with students' families?

_____

_____

Based on what you have learned through participating in this research project, what (if any) are the most important changes you plan to make with regard to your work with students' families?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Based on my experience and understanding at this time, the **<u>three most important</u>** things that we need to do to improve family involvement at Peck are:

1.

2.

3.

APPENDIX D

TEACHER AND WIDER SCHOOL COMMUNITY QUESTIONNAIRES

Peck Family Strengths Study: Teacher Questionnaire 10/3/11

1. What do you perceive to be the ***most important findings*** *of the Peck Family Strengths Study? What are the most significant things the study suggests about Peck families and/or our school?*

_____

_____

_____

_____

2. Which, if any, of the findings presented today provided you with something that you didn't already know?

_____

_____

_____

_____

3. Which, if any, of these findings ***challenge or contradict*** *your understanding of our students' families and/or our school?*

_____

_____

_____

_____

4. Based on your experience, with which (if any) of the findings do you ***agree****? Why?*

_____

_____

_____

_____

5. Based on your experience, with which (if any) of the findings do you ***disagree****? Why?*

_____

_____

_____

Part IV. *In this section, please indicate HOW OFTEN YOU have done each of the following during the 2010-11 school year and September 2011.*

	Less than monthly	At least once a month but less than weekly	About once a week	Averaging more than once a week
1) Have a conference with a parent/guardian.	1	2	3	4
2) Contact a parent/guardian if the child has problems or experiences failure.	1	2	3	4
3) Contact a parent/guardian if their child does something well or improves.	1	2	3	4
4) Involve a parent as a volunteer.	1	2	3	4
5) Tell a parent/guardian about the skills their child must learn in specific academic subjects.	1	2	3	4
6) Provide specific activities for a parent/guardian to do with their child in order to help the child be successful.	1	2	3	4
7) Assign homework that requires an adult family member to interact with their child.	1	2	3	4
8) Ask a parent/guardian to listen to their child read.	1	2	3	4
9) Ask a parent/guardian to help their child with homework.	1	2	3	4
10) Encourage a parent/guardian to ask their child about the school day.	1	2	3	4
11) Ask a parent/guardian to visit their child's classroom(s).	1	2	3	4
12) Ask a parent/guardian to take the child to the library or community events.	1	2	3	4
13) Give a parent/guardian ideas to help him or her become an effective advocate for their child.	1	2	3	4
14) Send home letters telling parents/guardians what their children have been learning and doing in class.	1	2	3	4
15) Visited the home of one of your students.	1	2	3	4

Based on the findings of the Peck Family Strengths Study, what (if any) changes do you plan to make with regard to your work with students' families?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Based on your experience and understanding at this time, what are the **three most important** things that we need to do to improve family engagement at Peck?

1.

2.

3.

Please use the space below to jot down any **additional questions, comments, or ideas** that you have about the Peck Family Strengths Study and/or family engagement work at Peck.

Peck Family Strengths Study
School Community Member (Non-Teacher) Questionnaire 10/3/11

1. What do you perceive to be the ***most important findings*** *of the Peck Family Strengths Study? What are the most significant things the study suggests about Peck families and/or Peck School?*

_____

_____

_____

_____

2. Which, if any, of the findings presented today provided you with something that you didn't already know?

_____

_____

_____

_____

3. Which, if any, of these findings ***challenge or contradict*** *your understanding of Peck families and/or the Peck School?*

_____

_____

_____

4. Based on your experience, with which (if any) of the findings from the study do you ***agree****? Why?*

_____

_____

_____

_____

*5. Based on your experience, with which (if any) of the findings do you **disagree**? Why?*

_____

_____

_____

_____

Based on your experience and understanding at this time, what the **<u>three most important</u>** things needed to do to improve family engagement at Peck?

1.

2.

3.

Please use the space below to jot down any **additional questions, comments, or ideas** that you have about the Peck Family Strengths Study and/or family engagement work at Peck.

APPENDIX E

SUMMARY HANDOUTS SHARED AT FACULTY PRESENTATION

Peck Family Strengths Identification: Research Framework & Methods

Research questions related to family strengths identification:

1. *What strengths of low-income Puerto Rican families—including strengths not widely known or acknowledged by educators at present—might schools draw upon in order to collaborate more effectively with family members in support of their children's learning and performance?*

2. *Which (if any) actions and patterns of action on the parts of low-income Puerto Rican families are more prevalent among families whose students meet school expectations and state standards than among families whose students do not meet expectations and standards?*

Research framework:

1. **Action Research (AR):** *An approach to research that engages teams consisting of (or at least including) "insiders" in a given organization or situation in a process of studying and working to positively transform—based on their shared conviction about the need for improvement—some aspect(s) of that organization or situation.* In Peck's case, the focus is on strengthening our efforts to engage our students' families in order to mutually support academic achievement among our students. One result of the study will be a set of guidelines for future work on family engagement at Peck, based on what we are learning about the strengths of our students' families through this study.

2. **Appreciative Inquiry (AI):** *Originally utilized in the business world, AI works to strengthen organizations NOT via strategies focused on problems/what is wrong with an organization, but rather via strategies that* ***affirm and build on the competence*** *of the people who make up the organization, as identified through those people's own memories and stories. At the heart of the AI data-gathering process is the* ***appreciative interview****, through which research team members, including organizational insiders, ask other insiders a series of open-ended, affirmatively-framed questions about their experiences in order to identify the positive core of the organization's work.* Some basic features of the appreciative interviews associated with this study:

   - **10** Peck faculty/staff members (four teachers, two counselors, and 3 FSCS team members, and the principal) carried out **18** in-depth Appreciative Interviews of parents of Peck students from January 2010 to May 2011.
   - **Six** parents were selected by interview team members as especially interesting; remaining **12** parents identified via random selection.
   - All parents were asked the same questions; all questions aimed at eliciting information about family strengths (see other side). Eight interviews were in Spanish, 10 in English.
   - Interviews were carried out in homes, at school, and in community, and lasted 20 to 90 minutes.

3. **Grounded Theory Analysis:** *Use of multiple individual and team data reviews to generate and test hypotheses about trends and patterns in the interview responses in order to arrive at valid conclusions.*

   A. Transcriptions/write-ups of all responses to all interview questions.
   B. Hyry-Dermith (H-D) independent review of responses to identify trends and patterns
   C. Three-hour interview team meeting: collective review of responses and identification of patterns
   D. H-D comparison of independent & team reviews to identify overall strengths of families in the study
   E. H-D intensive analysis comparing responses of six parents of 10 high-performing students with 12 parents of 28 students who were not performing as strongly
   F. Interview team member review of preliminary results
   G. Faculty & community review of preliminary results
   H. Parent review of preliminary results (upcoming)
   I. Finalization of results in dissertation document

More detailed descriptions of the analysis process will be available in the dissertation document (forthcoming).

Peck Family Strengths Study: Appreciative Interview Questions

Basic and "warm-up" questions:

A. What is your name?
B. Where were you born?
C. How long have you lived in Holyoke?
D. What are the names and grades of all the children you have at Peck School?
E. How many other children are in your family, and how old are they?
F. We know that 'family' means different things to different people, and that there many different kinds of adults who play important roles in children's lives. For example, grandparents, step-parents, aunts/uncles, older brothers/sisters, and even close friends and neighbors can be important adult family members for a child. Besides you, who are the most important adult family members in your child(ren)'s life, and what is their relationship to the child(ren)?

General Questions about Families

1. Can you tell me how your family got to Holyoke?
2. Do you have any favorite family memories that you're willing to share with me?
3. What do you like best about your family?
4. What are your hopes for your children's future?

Specific Questions: **Supporting our children's success in school**

Lead-in: All parents want their children to be successful in school, and when families are at their best they help their children with school success in many different ways.

5. Tell me about some of the things you teach your child(ren) about how to be successful in school.
6. Now can you tell me a time when one of your children was successful in school and you were proud of her/him? It could be any kind of success—academic, artistic, social, leadership, etc. What role(s) did you and other family members play in your child's success at that time?
7. Now I'd like you to think and tell me about a time when one of your children was having a problem in school—it could be any kind of problem—and you were able to help her/him solve this problem. What was the problem, and what were the most important things you and/or other family members did to help your child with this problem?
8. We all know that one thing that parents and families do to help their children is to develop a strong family life. What are some of the things you and other family members do with your kids to give them a strong family life?
9. Another way in which families support their children's school success is through emphasizing the importance of education. How do you help your child(ren) understand that school is important?
10. One of the most important aspects of being successful in school (or anything!) is being able to persevere—to keep going when we are upset or discouraged. What do you do to help your child(ren) when they are upset or discouraged about school? Feel free to talk about any specific example that comes to mind.
11. Families also support their children's school success by helping at home with their academic learning. Tell me about some of the ways in which your family helps your child(ren) with their academic learning.
12. Now I'd like to talk about another way that families support their children's education: by working directly with the school. Can you tell me about any ways in which you have worked together with teachers or other school staff to support your children's education?
13. One last way in which some families support their children's education is by working with people and organizations in the community—that is, outside both the family and the school. Can you tell me about any ways in which you have made use of community resources to support your children's education?
14. What would you say is, for you and your family, the most difficult aspect of helping your child(ren) be successful in school? How do you and other members of your family work on this area of difficulty?

Final Questions

- Now that I have asked you all of these questions, I just have one more. When you think about your family in general, what are three of the things you are most proud of?
- Before I go, do you have any other comments or questions about what we've been talking about?

Peck Family Strengths Study:
Summary of Preliminary Findings about Family Strengths

The interview process resulted in identification of the following **overall strengths** on the part of the Peck families participating in the parent interviews:

- A strong sense of, and commitment to, **family unity**
- A great love of **whole-family activities**
- **Communication** within the family, including **motivational talk** toward educational success, as a key process
- Providing **organization and structure for learning at home**
- Finding **creative approaches to help their children learn**
- Parents' **joy in their children** and **love of play**

When the **responses of parents of high-performing students** were compared to those of parents whose children were not performing as strongly, the data suggested that:

- **Communication and motivational talk** are critical in the family lives of high performers;
- Parents of high performers are more likely to emphasize **communication with teachers** as a way of supporting their children to be successful in school;
- Parents of high performers were more likely to place their kids in **out of school-time activities offered by community-based organizations** for supplemental learning activities;
- Parents of high performers emphasized **advising/counseling their kids about how to solve problems with other children***,* rather than attempting (as parents) to solve the problem directly;
- Parents of high performers emphasized **college and/or a good career**, and the **desire for their kids to go further than they (parents) had**, as specific hopes for their children;
- Parents of high performers all emphasized **providing structure and activities for learning at home** as central to helping their kids be successful in school.

Finally, there were some additional points of interest worth highlighting in the findings.

- **Only** English-speaking parents expressed specific hopes for college for their children.
- Just **two** of the parents interviewed **emphasized reading** with their children as a consistent home learning practice.
- While the parents in the study were generally quite positively disposed toward school staff and community resources, they **tended toward self-reliance (rather than seeking out support or resources from us)** in addressing challenges and problems with their children.
- When asked about their most significant challenges in supporting their children's educational success, parents mentioned a wide range of challenges (from neighborhood dangers, to struggling with basic needs, to not knowing how best to help their children with their school work), highlighting the **tremendous complexity associated with parenting for children's educational success in low-income neighborhoods**.

Peck Family Strengths Study: Some Selected Quotes

On their **hopes for their children's futures**:

- *[I hope they]* graduate from college. *(Blanca)*
- That they can become professionals. That is the greatest hope that one has as a mother. *(Concepción)*
- *[That they will]* prepare for a better future, so that they become good women. *(Anita)*
- . . . not have children at a young age, like I did. *(Ana)*
- Whatever makes them happy, I'll be there. *(Juan)*

On **family unity, communication, whole-family activities, and play:**

- We are always together as a family, our favorite thing to do is to share as a family. *(Leo)*
- We are very united. We have the most respect for each other. We could actually sit down at a table and talk and put everything on the table without feeling like we're going to be judged. So I think our family is very close. *(Mariana)*
- Anyone can ask for a family meeting, like if someone is bothering them, they're like, 'Ma, it's time for a family meeting,' and we all have to respect that and come downstairs and listen to what the next person has to say. Nobody can say anything until that person gets it off their chest. *(Brenda)*
- We are always together. If we go out, we go out together. (*Miriam)*
- Like on Tuesdays on my days off, we just like to jump in the car and drive, go and eat, and have some fun. (*Juan)*
- I love to dance with my two kids, to put on the radio and dance. *(Barbara)*

On **motivational talk**, **teaching the importance of education,** and **helping their kids when discouraged:**

- I always tell them to try their hardest, always give it all they have and more if they can. Even if, let's say, they don't pass a test, just to try harder for them at the time. *(Laura)*
- I give them examples, like 'What do you want to do with your life? You can't let somebody else mess that up; you've got to keep on going. You can't just give up—not to be a quitter.'" *(Brenda)*
- I tell them that school is important because they need to have a career in the future . . . not just for them, but for their families. (*Lillian)*
- Sometimes I share with them the example of their parents. We both left school early, and I came and finished my GED last year, which was one of my priorities. . . . both could see that I did finish and feel proud of their mother for finishing school. Their dad also left school at a young age, but he hasn't been able to finish. Sometimes he says to them, "You have to study hard so that you don't end up like me, having to have a job in which you depend on a very small amount of money that they pay you; if you want to be successful, you have to stay in school and study. *(Miriam)*

On **learning at home:**

- *[I make sure they know that]* they should be studying every day, all the time—doing their homework and making sure it is ready on time, and handing it in in a way that is correct, clean, and organized. *(Concepción)*
- . . . make them do their homework right in front of me, and get it right back into their book bags. I help my kids stay organized. *(Gloria)*
- So if it's, "Mami, I don't know how to do the math, I don't like it," then I look for ways to do things—maybe with drawing or construction paper—and we'll practice, for example, writing numbers. . . we sit down at the table, and my son helps her too. . . she loves it when he sits down with her to help. . . because the playing helps them to stop thinking "I have to do this" and think, instead, "It's a game and we're going to play!" *(Barbara)*

On **supporting children with problems at school**:

- . . . I don't tell my children, "When someone hits you, hit them back" . . . because when I was growing up, I heard [that] from a lot of my family members. . . and I realized that only makes the problem bigger. . . We told Felipe, "Ignore the situation; if you feel that it's getting out of hand, speak to an adult; adults always know best." *(Laura)*

On **parenting in general,** and **what they're most proud of about their families**:

- More than anything, give them much, much love. Build trust and make it so they communicate everything. *(Teresa)*
- Caring. Advice. Materially, we give them what they need, especially things related to studies and education. *(Beatriz)*

- I would say that I'm most proud of how my mom loved me enough that now I know how to love my children. *(Laura)*
- *[I am proud when]* they come home and tell me, "Oh Mommy, I did good in school." *(Blanca)*
- *[I am most proud of]* My three daughters—they're everything for me. *(Juan)*

<u>From the overall findings</u>: ". . . interview team members noted that, taken collectively and at the broadest levels, the data showed that. . .***every*** **parent interviewed cared deeply about, and accepted personal responsibility for, their children's learning.**"

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