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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL RESOURCES AND
LEVELS OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN ILLINOIS EARLY CHILDHOOD
PROGRAMS: A PROGRAM-LEVEL PERSPECTIVE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN SOCIAL WORK

BY

AIMEE VICTORIA HILADO

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

AUGUST 2010

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AD MAJOREM DEI GLORIAM

To my parents, Edgardo and Fe
and
To my sister, Cristina

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between the number of resources and levels of parent involvement across state-funded preschool programs in Illinois. This dissertation presented a mixed methods study using survey data from the *Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation FY09* ($n=843$) and interviews with ten preschool administrators who completed the survey ($n=10$). Based on the survey data for Illinois state-funded preschools, the number of social resources provided by a program was positively associated with levels of parent involvement. The correlation analysis ($r = -0.22, p=.0001$) and analysis of variance (ANOVA) $F(2,708) = 23.19, p = .0001$ findings both demonstrated a positive relationships wherein high numbers of social resources were associated with higher levels of parent involvement in programs. The administrator interviews revealed further depth to the role of early childhood programs, the social resources they provide, and levels of parent involvement in addition to confirming survey responses. Administrators spoke to the barriers for providing resources, barriers to families using the resources, and successes and challenges in engaging parents in programs. The mixed methods findings together illustrated the complexity between level of social resources and levels of parent involvement in Illinois preschool programs. Research, practice, and policy implications are presented in the concluding chapter.

CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

There is a classic African quote that states: *It takes a village to raise a child*. It is a subtle yet powerful statement that highlights the importance of collaborative effort in child development. Raising children who are healthy, happy, and ready to engage in their changing environment requires more than just the parents. For parents who face numerous challenges such as unemployment, physical or mental illness, those who are victims of domestic violence, or parents who are new immigrants/refugees to this country, sometimes it does take “a village” to help raise their child.

Early childhood programs and the social resources they provide can be a valuable support to children and families facing challenging circumstances. Early childhood programs provide children with a safe, enriching environment to support their learning and development, which may not be present otherwise. At the same time, parents who require or request social resources and referrals have access to information, resources, and services that may enable them to help themselves and their families as well. Ultimately, when there is a goal to support the healthy development of young children, critical supports like early childhood programs, social resources, and parent involvement are valuable tools that can help parents support the developmental agenda of their children. These forces together were the focus of this dissertation.

Rationale

Research provides evidence supporting the importance of early relationships and early experiences in child development (Ritchie & Willer, 2008a; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Although the early childhood years can be defined as the period of birth to three years, birth to five years, and in some cases birth to eight years, it is generally understood that development within these periods sets the foundation for future development throughout the lifespan (Urdang, 2008; Davies, 1999; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). How a child develops depends on the interactions and influences that occur in his environment. As an infant matures into her toddler through school-age years, this developing child will begin interacting with a world that extends beyond the arms of her parents and the comforts of her own home (Urdang, 2008; Berk & Winsler, 1995). Through the early years, a child's environment grows dramatically from one-on-one interactions with a primary caregiver within a familiar setting (e.g., the home) to a more varied environment (e.g., schools and neighborhood communities) with a variety of initially unfamiliar faces (e.g., peers and teachers). The social structure becomes more complex and elaborate as the context extends to school, day-care centers, and a network of neighborhood and community friends (Bjorklund, 2000; Greenspan, 1993a; Greenspan, 1993b). This shift into a broader social environment and context places more demands on the child; demands that, if met, will enable her to succeed more readily within the novel social structures to come.

Early childhood settings like preschool become an entrée for young children into a new world of interaction with peers, teachers, and academic learning. But before that

learning even begins, a child needs to be ready to engage in this new environment.

“Learning does not necessarily occur in schools or as a result of instruction; it occurs in the split-second initiatives that children take with others as they try to attend, engage, interact, communicate and reason” (Greenspan & Lodish, 1991, p. 1). More importantly, “before children can learn reading, writing, and arithmetic, they must possess “school literacy” – that is, they need to know *how to learn*” (Greenspan & Lodish, 1991, p 2).

According to Greenspan and Lodish, school literacy consists of four elements: 1) attending and focusing – the ability to take in information and focus attention on the acquired information while remaining relatively stable, 2) establishing positive relationships – the ability to relate to others in a warm and trusting way that helps foster a learning relationship, 3) communicating – the ability to share information, express and read cues, learn to think and verbally express thoughts in more logical terms and 4), being able to observe and monitor oneself – the ability to observe oneself in the process of doing a task and being able to evaluate one’s thoughts and actions (Greenspan & Lodish, 1991). Each element is a capacity every child has the potential to acquire, and taken together, they are characteristics a child needs to develop in order to be successful at school and in life. According to Child Mental Health Foundations and Agencies Network (FAN report, 2000), learning involves a series of social interactions with peers and adults but it cannot happen without the social-emotional competence to engage. For these reasons, learning how to learn is an important agenda for the preschooler as it sets the foundation for future success when she enters her school-aged years and beyond. If the preschooler is able to demonstrate relative mastery of these “school literacy” abilities,

she will more likely thrive when she enters the school environment (Greenspan & Lodish, 1991). These are but a few of the skills and benefits for children who participate in high-quality early childhood programs.

When children are not able to engage because they have not yet learned how to learn and appropriately engage, these children are at risk for a variety of challenges including poor early school outcomes, social-emotional or cognitive delays, and difficulty developing a sense of self and relationships with others (Laible, Carolo & Roesch, 2004; Zhou et al., 2002; Garbarino & Ganzel, 2000; Shonkoff & Marshall, 2000; Bjorklund, 2000). The idea of risk and its impact on developing children, however, is not always clearly defined or understood. Biological and environmental contributions can all have influences that are both promoting and detrimental to developmental outcomes. Clearly defined characteristics such as autism, developmental disabilities, and maltreatment are factors that are more likely to put children at-risk for a myriad of challenges (Garbarino & Ganzel, 2000; Garcia-Coll & Magnuson, 2000; Denham, 1998). Other factors like temperament, socioeconomic status, or minority status are not so definite and generally, such relative risks are not final or cannot be equated with failure (Garbarino & Ganzel, 2000; Garcia-Coll & Magnuson, 2000). A variety of converging circumstances can contribute to the idea of risk – biological and environmental – that will ultimately impact a child's development and ability to thrive in school settings.

According to the Child Mental Health Foundations and Agencies Network (FAN report, 2000), biological and environmental factors such as low birth weight and neurological delays, difficult temperament and personality, low level of maternal

education, immigrant status, minority status, low-socio-economic status, maltreatment, insecure attachments, psychophysiological markers, and even home, classroom and community settings are considered potential risk factors that predispose a child to greater challenges in reaching his/her developmental milestones. Conversely, protective factors such as high cognitive functioning of the child, easy temperament of the child, emotional availability of caregivers, high maternal education, stable, predictable home environment, secure attachments, and social support can all buffer the negative affects of risk (FAN report, 2000; Werner, 2000; Osofsky & Thompson, 2000; Davies, 1999). There is, however, no substantiated research indicating that risk and protective factors necessarily translate into a child's success or failure (FAN report, 2000). The main idea is that the presence of each factor in the child's life has the capacity to shape and influence her developmental agenda as she matures from early childhood onward. In turn, the child who is more at-risk will inevitably meet more challenges to surmount as she continues to develop (Garbarino & Ganzel, 2000; Shonkoff & Marshall, 2000; Davies, 1999).

While each child and family is unique, and each unique context will determine the balance between risk and protective factors, the prevalence of risk and its negative impact on child development must still be considered. Moreover, research does suggest that consistent, warm, and nurturing care from mothers or primary caregiver and quality experiences in early childhood produces preschoolers and school-age children who are more likely to engage in positive and supportive relationships with peers. These are young children who will learn the social skills and emotional competence needed to thrive in school settings, and who will continue to effectively build on their overall

development, which will further assist them as they mature into adulthood (Urdang, 2008; Werner, 2000; FAN report, 2000; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Davies, 1999; Denham, 1998).

For children considered at-risk for developmental delays or poor academic outcomes, early childhood programs could be a potential solution (Ritchie & Willer, 2008a; Olds, Sadler & Kitzman, 2007; Kirp, 2007; Schweinhart, 2004). These are the characteristics of children you will likely find in Illinois PreK and PFA programs. Early childhood programs are intended to support early development and are used to help ameliorate risks that may be present. This is achieved by providing a safe, engaging environment that can help children get back on the trajectory for positive development (Olds et al., 2007; Bjorklund, 2000; Werner, 2000). Legislative leaders, advocates, policy-makers and early childhood professionals share a common understanding of what research tells us; the early years are critical and investing in early childhood is an investment for the future (Kirp, 2007; Meisels & Shonkoff, 2000).

But knowing the value of early years and having early childhood programs is not sufficient to supporting child development. Parent involvement inside and outside the classroom setting is also critical. It has been designated as a cornerstone of Illinois early childhood programs so that what is learned in the program is further supported and reaffirmed in the home. Unfortunately, some parents are so overwhelmed by their own personal circumstances – whether unemployment, financial worries, or illness – that supporting their child's development is less likely due to the other stresses present (Growing in Poverty Project, 2000; Garcia-Coll & Magnuson, 2000; Garbarino &

Ganzel, 2000). When resources are made available to support the parents, it is possible to posit that these parents may be more attuned to the needs of the child, more engaged in programs, and better able to support their child's developmental agenda. This dissertation looked at three areas in the literature: 1) best practices in early childhood programs, 2) the role of parents and parent involvement, and 3) the role of social support and social support networks. The literature supported these ideas wherein there were benefits to parent involvement and social resources yet there were few studies looking at the association between the two. This relationship was the focus of this dissertation.

Statement of the Study Issue

It was plausible to suggest the existence of a relationship between early childhood programs, parent involvement levels, and the provision of social resources/referrals for families participating in Illinois PreK and PFA programs. This idea was based on what was available in the literature as well as discussions occurring in the early childhood field. Thus, if there was an association between social resources and levels of parent involvement, one can posit a change in levels of parent involvement depending on the number of resources available to the child and family. This study hypothesized a modest increase in parent involvement levels when more resources were available in a PreK/PFA program.

Purpose of the Study

This dissertation presented a descriptive study that examined the relationship between early childhood programs, social resources, and levels of parent involvement in early childhood programs. The rationale suggested each of the elements influenced child

development to some degree. The study focused on state-funded early child programs in Illinois – *PreKindergarten Programs for Children at Risk of Academic Failure (PreK)* and *Preschool for All (PFA)* – targeting at-risk children and their families across the state. The relationship between levels of parent involvement and the number of social resources offered was studied within these two types of preschool programs.

A mixed methods design was used to analyze program-level data from the *Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation (Evaluation)* and interviews with PreK/PFA administrators who completed the survey. The details of the design will be discussed in greater detail in *Chapter 3: Methodology*, and the results and summary of the findings will be discussed in *Chapter 4: Results* and *Chapter 5: Summary* respectively. Ultimately, the study provided greater understanding of the barriers for providing resources to program participants, barriers to families using the resources, and successes and challenges in engaging parents across PreK/PFA programs. Implications for the field of social work and early childhood are discussed along with policy implications for both fields in the Summary chapter.

Significance of the Study

Illinois PreK and PFA programs serve thousands of at-risk children and families across the state by providing high-quality learning environments and a variety of social resources aimed at meeting the overall needs of children and families (Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation FY09 Final Report, 2009). The proposed study gave greater insight into the role social resources play for participants in early childhood programs. Using secondary survey data from the *Evaluation* and administrator interviews, this study

examined whether or not there was a relationship between levels of parent involvement and the number of resources in a program, a perspective that hadn't been studied at the scale that was possible with the statewide data used.

The findings informed on the promoters and barriers in providing resources to families, factors in getting families to use resources, and successes and challenges in engaging parents that is relevant to Illinois PreK/PFA programs statewide. The findings also gave better understanding of the characteristics of families and levels of parent involvement in programs. This study provided insight into the areas of parent involvement and focus on the non-educational needs of participants in high quality early childhood settings thereby adding to the discussion on best practice considerations in early childhood settings.

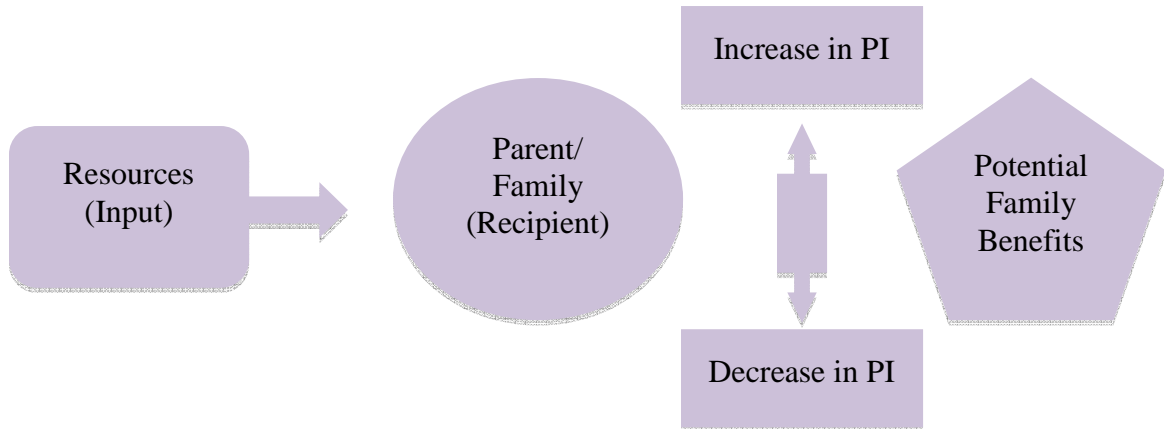
Taken together, this study provided valuable information for PreK/PFA programs in the state as well as early childhood programs nationwide that may face similar challenges as in Illinois. Moreover, this study produced findings that can have an impact both in direct practice and in the policy arena. Findings may highlight other best practices that have not been considered, enabling administrators and policy-makers to make better-informed decisions about early childhood programs. Lastly, implications linked to funding needs, program infrastructure development, and training may also bear greater significance given the outcomes of this study. The potential to contribute to knowledge in the fields of social work and early childhood was evident, and will be illustrated with the next chapters of this dissertation that delve into the literature, the theoretical basis for the study, and the methodological design for the study.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE & THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Working in the Service of At-Risk Children and Families: Review of the Literature

It does indeed take a village when working in the service of young children. That ‘village’ becomes more dynamic and complex as the circumstances and context of at-risk children become more complex as discussed in Chapter 1. The current study provided a unique opportunity to examine a relationship between social support and parent involvement. These are two concepts that are not exclusively related to the fields of social work or early childhood education, although they are prominent components of the two fields. Early childhood settings, medical settings, community settings and even home environments are all systems that touch the lives of children and families and for which one needs to consider the role of social support and parent involvement, and its ultimate impact on the family system. As stated, this study focused on the relationship between the provision of resources and the levels of parent involvement in Illinois PreK/PFA programs that, in turn, may have an impact on child outcomes.



(Community System) => (Family System) => (Early Childhood) => (Family system) System

Figure 1: Systems interactions within early childhood programs

The above diagram illustrates a basic logic model for this study. The model suggests that when resources are inputted into the family system, there is potential for a change in parent involvement levels within and early childhood setting. The subsequent result is a potential impact on the child as well as the family. Although this study did not focus on child outcomes directly, it highlighted the interplay of systems and concepts that are involved when one focuses on serving young at-risk children and their families in preschool learning environments.

To begin, the current study was rooted in the several tenets of the social work profession described by Dubois & Miley (2008):

- Establish linkages between people and societal resources to further social functioning and enhance the quality of life.
- Develop cooperative networks within the institution resource system.
- Facilitate the responsiveness of the institutional resource systems to meet health and human needs.

- Contribute to the development of knowledge for the social work profession through research and evaluation.
- Encourage an information exchange in those institutional systems in which both problems and resource opportunities are produced.
- Embrace a worldview of human issues and solutions to problems.

In pursuit of these efforts, this dissertation also aimed to inform social work practice with young children and families in collaboration with early childhood programs.

Often times in the social work field, there are discussions around its focus on the person-in-environment meaning that in order to understand those we work with, we must focus on the individual and her environment simultaneously (Urdang, 2008). There is a reciprocal interaction between the two and in social work practice, the person cannot be understood without consideration of the environment and vice versa. Moreover, the social work profession has remained attentive to improving the quality of life for all individuals by focusing on the interplay between the two as social work is seen as the bridge between the person and environment (Dubois & Miley, 2008). These qualities are valuable characteristics of the social work field that complement other helping professions. Moreover, these social work qualities afford greater capacity to improve the lives of others through systems-building, collaboration, and interdisciplinary learning.

Early childhood programs are systems that intersect with the social work profession on a variety of fronts. This study illustrated the ways in which early childhood and social work professionals could potentially encounter the same families in need of resources and referrals within their respective settings. The potential for overlap was especially true for state-funded early education programs in Illinois that specifically targeted children and families considered high risk. Illinois children are admitted into

state-funded, tuition-free preschool programs based on meeting eligibility requirements that denote the children (or their families) are considered most at-risk for school failure. Such at-risk factors include academic and developmental challenges for the child, the socio-economic status of the family, the parents' level of education, physiological needs of the child and/or parent, or immigrant status to name a few (Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation FY09 Final Report, 2009; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (DHHS-ACF), 2005). Only those considered most at-risk for school failure due to diverse challenges are admitted into the limited number of preschool slots throughout the state at no costs to the parents. Given this demographic, the fields of social work and early childhood can overlap and intersect while serving the same population. This was evident in the data collected for this study.

In Illinois, early childhood programs collaborated with a variety of organizations in order to address the educational and non-educational needs of enrolled children and their families. Early childhood programs were connected to social service agencies, organizations that provided job training and English-language lessons, and even organizations that provide counseling support to both children and their parents; just a few of resources that were being offered to participants (Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation FY09 Final Report, 2009). These early learning centers were a critical access point for families in need of a variety of social resources and referrals. At the same time, social work professionals can refer a child and family to PreK/PFA programs when they see them in settings like hospitals, community agencies, and private practice presenting

needs. This is important when there is a recognized need for educational supports for a client who is a young child.

The following sections discussing early childhood programs, the role of parents and parent involvement, and the role of social support in early childhood programs explore the relevant literature for this study.

Early Childhood Programs

Early childhood programs have been associated with short-term and long-term benefits for children. For instance, high-quality programs have been statistically proven to influence early development and promote long-term prevention against risk factors that can inhibit successful social-emotional, cognitive, and language developmental, and academic outcomes (Kirp, 2007; Olds et al., 2007; Henry, Henderson, Ponder, Gordon, Mashburn, & Rickman, 2003). Early childhood programs have also been linked to closing the academic gap between children of low-income and high-income families (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Kirp, 2007; DHHS-ACF, 2005).

Additionally, social benefits can be gained for enrolled children and these include reduced risks of educational disability, crime, unemployment, school drop-out, and even dependence on welfare assistance (Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart, 1993). There was consensus that early childhood programs aim to support children in a way that gives the greatest chance of success in school and beyond although the nuances of programs may vary based on the local needs of the populations served, available funding, and the leadership (Arnold, Zeliyo & Doctoroff, 2008; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Such goals were achieved through thoughtful consideration of the child's developmental needs and providing a rich environment early on to cultivate skills that prepare a child for continued

learning during the school-age years (Ritchie & Willer, 2008a; Duch, 2005; Schweinhart, 2004).

What are best practices for early childhood programs?

Early childhood programs endeavor to meet the diverse needs of enrolled children and their families as a best practice policy (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; DHHS-ACF, 2005; Schweinhart, 2004). Supporting young learners requires efforts both inside and outside the classroom and program administrators, teachers, and parents are partnering to achieve better outcomes for all parties (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Epstein, 2006). Best practices and best outcomes for early childhood programs, however, cannot be realized without a framework to guide it. Schweinhart (2004) provided such a framework that outlined the components of what constitutes a high-quality early childhood program so that administrators could have a reference for goal-setting within their respective settings.

Coincidentally, many of the items that denote characteristics of a quality programs are very much in-line with what we would expect as best practices for supporting young children and families in such programs.

Schweinhart provides the following table:

Table 1. Schweinhart (2004) Components of early childhood programs

COMPONENTS OF HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS
A child development educational model
Low enrollment limits, with a teaching/care-giving team assigned to each group of children
Staff trained in early childhood development
Supervisory support and in-service training for a child development educational model
<i>Involvement of parents as partners with program staff</i>
<i>Sensitivity to the non-educational needs of the child and family</i>
Developmentally appropriate evaluation procedures.

Schweinhart, L. (2004). A school administrator's guide to early childhood programs, 2nd Ed. High/Scope Educational Research Foundation. (p.15).

Each component was considered essential if an early childhood program was to achieve the goals and reap the benefits described in early childhood literature. The current study focused on two of the referenced components: 1) the involvement of parents and 2) sensitivity to the non-educational needs of children and families. These components were the basis of discussion throughout this dissertation.

The involvement of parents as partners with program staff

High-quality early childhood programs want to involve parents and encourage staff to engage parents as much as possible (Gonzales-Mena, 2010; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Schweinhart, 2004). The research suggested that the parent-child relationship was critical to positive developmental outcomes for children and parent engagement in programs was a valuable method of further supporting child development both inside and outside academic settings (Arnold et al., 2008; Driessen, Smit & Slegers, 2005; Duch, 2005). The key phrase was *partnership* between parents and

programs. As a team, parent, administrators and program staff together can work towards supporting the overall needs and goals for the child (Gonzalez-Mena, 2010; Ritchie & Willer, 2008a; Schweinhart, 2004). Research has also shown children have higher academic success rates in schools when their families are engaged in their program and when the family promotes school learning and social activities in the home (DHHS-ACF, 2005; Ramey & Ramey, 1999).

At the same time, there are benefits to parents who are more involved in programs. Involved parents have greater access to information that can support their family's needs (Epstein, 2006). Families are also becoming empowered to be involved in advocacy and governance in schools and parent organizations as a result, adding to increased involvement overall (Gonzales-Mena, 2010; Epstein, 2006; Ramey & Ramey, 1999).

Sensitivity to the non-educational needs of the child and family

Many families deal with other challenges that extend beyond the classroom walls. Families in early childhood programs were dealing with issues around poverty, child care needs, transportation, unemployment, lack of education, new immigrants, and English-language learners, or being a single- or teen-parent (Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation FY09 Final Report, 2009; DHHS-ACF, 2005). As programs aim to support children and families, administrators and teachers found themselves connecting with resources and agencies outside the early childhood program as they worked towards meeting the diverse needs presented in the classroom (Administrator Interviews-various, Chapter 4). As a former preschool teacher, it was not uncommon for parents to ask the researcher for

information that was outside the sphere of their child's progress in the class. Ultimately, this focus on the non-education needs could better enable families in getting the most out of early childhood programs. This dissertation saw the meeting of these non-educational needs through the provision of social resources¹ described in subsequent sections.

Addressing the separate needs of the family may have benefits to families that can go beyond just school success. According to NAEYC program standards, early childhood programs need to be aware of the families being served and this includes knowledge of the family's socioeconomic status, language, racial and cultural backgrounds and connecting these families with needed resources available in their respective communities (Ritchie & Willer, 2008a). The rationale was cited as the following:

Young children's learning and development are integrally connected to their families. Consequently, to support and promote children's optimal learning and development, programs need to recognize the primary role of children's families, establish relationships with families based on mutual trust and respect, support and involve families in their children's educational growth, and invite families to fully participate in the program. (Ritchie & Willer, 2008a, p.14).

These ideas were congruent with the research questions in this study, which suggested the provision of resources helps to support the parents in a way that allows them to be more actively engaged in early childhood settings. There was the potential that this increased engagement may in turn, have a level of impact on the child's overall development. The impact on child development was a component not included in the current study but the findings support further inquiry in these areas.

¹ Social resources described in this study will refer to those noted in the *Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation* survey and the administrator interviews.

The general benefits of addressing the non-educational needs go beyond the classroom walls and impacts the parents themselves. Such benefits can include enhanced literacy skills, positive parenting behaviors, and self-empowerment (Epstein, 2006; DHHS-ACF, 2005). While these are ideal outcomes, there must be caution when looking at the benefits early childhood programs can afford at-risk populations. Schweinhart (2004) noted early childhood programs “cannot be all things to all people.” Generally, there will always be challenges in funding, infrastructures, adapting and implementing programs, and management that will need to be re-evaluated and considered in all programs.

That being said, however; administrators, staff, and programs themselves are in a unique position in which they are working with families and they can identify needs of participating families and can act accordingly. The action can be in the form of offering a specific resource such as WIC or food subsidies or it can be a referral for other services such as one-on-one counseling or English-language lessons available in the community. The responses on the *Evaluation* survey confirmed programs across Illinois PreK/PFA classrooms were giving diverse social resources to address needs presented by program participants.

The task of observing, recognizing, and being open to addressing needs that go beyond the child and classroom was critical to participants – child and family – success in the program because the effects of early childhood programs and addressing social circumstances impact all members in the family – child, parent, and siblings. The effects may also be seen with other participating families in the program. In programs with

mixed income children, research showed benefits because of the exposure and scaffolding that happens in the classroom (Schechter & Bye, 2007). Subsequently, meeting diverse needs of children and families could have both the academic and social benefits for all participants, which are ultimately the goals of early childhood programs. These are areas that were addressed in the qualitative component which sought to identify the extent to which the administrator interview remarks mimicked these topics from the literature.

What are administrators doing to support best practices in early childhood?

“The job of an early childhood program administrator is complex and demanding. It requires a remarkable combination of skills and talents to organize, direct, guide, and manage an early childhood program” (Ritchie & Willer, 2008b, p.12). Administrators are charged with a variety of responsibilities including leading the program, ensuring the fiscal accountability of the program, maintaining a healthy and safe environment, developing positive relationships with staff and families, and continuously reassessing of how to improve quality within a program setting (Ritchie & Willer, 2008b). Additionally, school administrators and teachers who want to assist parents in rearing their children do so by providing children and families with the types of early childhood programs that are needed (Houston, 2004). Those that support social-emotional development and engage preschoolers support preschoolers in a way that will allow them to better enter kindergarten ready to learn.

In order to support best practices, administrators and principals must be able to adhere to strong educational models that support the over-arching goals of the program,

share work with staff to accomplish goals, and then share those goals with the parents (Ritchie & Willer, 2008b; Schweinhart, 2004; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). At the helm of these programs, administrators can see what is going on at a programmatic level and can ensure that high-quality standards are enacted in the program. NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards require a focus on building and maintaining relationships with families and the community to support the children and families within the program (Ritchie & Willer, 2008b).

At the same time NAEYC standards for the leadership and management was cited as follows: “The program effectively implements policies, procedures, and systems that support stable staff and strong personnel, fiscal, and program management so all children, families, and staff have high-quality experiences (Ritchie & Willers, 2008b). These standards fall under the direction of the administrators. In sum, administrators can determine where professional development training is needed, areas in which funds need to be allocated, and can take steps towards building a system that effectively addresses some of the academic and non-academic needs that are presented by participants. The qualitative interviews with administrators demonstrated further support that Illinois PreK/PFA programs were addressing such issues.

Using social resources and engaging parents in early childhood programs

One critical caveat of this discussion is that the short-term and long-term benefits of early childhood programs are *only* associated when the programs are high-quality (Schweinhart, 2004). Children who would benefit most from these programs, particularly low-income children, typically do not have access to high-quality preschools or well

trained teachers (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Despite the disparities on who does or does not access quality early childhood programs, the benefits are apparent. When an early childhood program is “characterized by a child development educational model, trained teaching staff, administrative leadership and curriculum support, small classes with a teacher and a teaching assistant, and systematic efforts to involve parents as partners[,]” it is a program that can expect some of the benefits we’ve discussed (Schweinhart, 2004, p.7). Moreover, the definition of ‘high quality’ expands if we are to further discuss the role of parents and attendance to the non-educational needs of children and families. What does it take to involve and engage parents? What is the impact of involvement? How do we address the non-educational needs of children and families, and what are those needs?

These are questions addressed in the literature and a concern on the minds of many administrators as realized in conducting the current study. In an effort to not get ahead of the data analysis sections, the study suggested there was diversity in the strategies programs use to engage parents. That engagement, in turn, had implications for child development (Ritchie & Willer, 2008a; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2005). And the non-educational needs for at-risk children and families in Illinois were diverse and complex, but providing resources and referrals did matter. It was linked to greater participation, greater compliance, and general well-being in the family (see *Chapter 5: Summary*). Illinois programs are touted as providing high-quality environments for at-risk children and their attendance to parent involvement and

the non-educational needs of participants were evident in the administrator interviews to be discussed in Chapter 4.

The critical point here is early childhood programs can serve a dual purpose for children and families. The programs can be settings to address the academic and social-emotional needs of young children *and* it can be a hub for accessing a variety of resources. This dual role requires that early childhood programs maintain the standards for a high-quality program. At the same time, the programs must maintain on-going relationships with social services and other health agencies so that all are ready to meet the diverse needs presented in the classroom (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Schweinhart, 2004). Simultaneously, the parents need to continue playing a visible and active role in programs with two-way relationships with program staff to ensure that all parties are working in the best interest of the child.

While such high-quality programs tend to be expensive to operationalize, there was believed to be high return on the investment among preschool administrators. The Early Childhood Division of the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) has made extensive efforts to ensure high-quality programming for young children birth-to-five years of age yet the challenges of supporting best practices is still an area of focus needed in the state (Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation FY09 Final Report, 2009). The benefits of a preschool experience were noted as high because children enter the schools ready to learn (Kirp, 2007; DHHS-ACF, 2005; various administrator interviews, 2009).

Illinois is well aware of the importance particularly to parents and the provision of resources to meet non-educational needs. Illinois state-funded programs have

requirements that build such components into the protocol (Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation FY09 Final Report, 2009). That being said, both areas – engaging parents and meeting the non-educational needs of children and families – were understood to have an impact on child outcomes and the extent to which Illinois PreK/PFA programs address these areas were well reflected in the administrator interviews.

The Role of Parents in Early Childhood Programs

The importance of the parents and parent-child relationships

Levine (1988) provided the classic outline of the three basic goals of parenting: survival, economic welfare, and self-actualization. Survival is the most essential goal and parents have the primary responsibility of ensuring their child will remain alive, healthy, and able to mature into adulthood herself. When survival is considered likely, Levine says parents can help their child develop the skills necessary for economic self-sufficiency through adulthood (1988). This goal is followed by helping the child develop more sophisticated skills that are culture-specific and can bring about a sense of self-fulfillment (Levine, 1988).

The role of culture is equally important and omitted by Levine. The transmission of culture is a critical goal of parenting as parents have a particular role in transmitting values, norms, and perceptions of given culture that will shape the worldview of their child and subsequently, the interactions that child will have with her environment (Rogoff, 2003). Copple & Bredekamp (2009) describe culture as “the customary beliefs and patterns of behavior, both explicit and implicit, that are inculcated by the society – or by a social, religious, or ethnic group within the society – in its members” (p.13). In terms of early development, the ways in which children and families operate are

constantly influenced by the sociocultural context that shapes how they understand learning, developmental milestones, and developmental and academic achievement (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Furthermore, the social and cultural context within which children develop is imperative to understanding children's development within early learning programs, in the home and throughout the community (Rogoff, 2003; Ritchie & Willer, 2008a; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

Thus, it is imperative for all professionals working with children and families to consider the cultural context, as it will shape the nature of the interactions and can guide intervention efforts. As noted by Gonzales-Mena (2010), families come to the program from all backgrounds, structures and circumstances and it is the program's responsibility to equally address the diverse needs that are presented inside and outside the classroom environment in a culturally sensitive, responsive manner.

The role of the parent, and the related goals of parenthood, is therefore imperative from birth onward. In child development literature, early parent-child relationships have been cited as invaluable in supporting children as they work towards meeting their individual developmental agendas, which has implications throughout the lifespan (Urdang, 2008; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Davies, 1999). The quality of parent-child relationships during those early years are critical because the presence of a warm, nurtured, responsive care-giving will ensure the appropriate skills are developed with the idea of supporting self sufficiency (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). A strong, secure attachment during the early years has been highly correlated with greater skills in development relationships throughout adolescence and young adulthood (Nells & Rae,

2008; Urdang, 2008; Laible, 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Bjorklund, 2000). It has also been tied to developing better coping skills and a more secure sense of self and others that can help navigate the changing environment through the lifespan (Simmons, Gooty, Nelson & Little, 2009; Urdang, 2008; Laible, Carlo & Roesch, 2004).

Moving forward and in the context of promoting development, parents are significant because they are the immediate source of social interaction after a child's birth. They are the primary caregivers who attend to the physiological needs of the child, who foster social-emotional development, who help an infant strengthen his cognitive capacities, and who will nurture other skills that will support the child's growth and learning (Urdang, 2008; Shonkoff & Philips, 2000; Zhou et al, 2002). If this holds true, one must consider the personal history, experiences, and actions of a parent because these aspects will inevitably affects how that parent raises his or her child (Zhou et al., 2002; Gerhold, Laucht, Texdorf & Shmidt, 2002).

Those circumstances, in turn, will shape the on-going perceptions the child will develop about himself, his relationships, and his surroundings (Shonkoff & Philips, 2000). The nature of influence and learning is cyclical, and this is why greater consideration of the parent and his/her circumstances is necessary when thinking about child outcomes. The nature of the parent's experiences and her relationship with her child will affect how the child develops and relates to other aspects of his environment (Urdang 2008; Shonkoff & Philips, 2000).

It is also worthwhile to discuss the challenges of understanding parent involvement especially in the context of educational settings. Despite its generally

accepted importance, parent involvement is quite difficult to define. It has been termed parent engagement, parent volunteerism, parent participation, or even referenced as parent-school relationships. The types of activities and the level of participation characteristic of parent involvement are also distinct.

Driessen, Smit & Slegers (2005) attempt to understand the different kinds of parents and types of parent involvement by outlining four types of parent groups with four different levels of involvement; partners, participants, delegators, and invisible parents – in order from most involved to least. These definitions outline parent involvement within a learning setting and the characteristics range in socio-economic status (high SES to low), level of engagement (high/low) and other general characteristics such as ethnic background. This is just one example that illustrates the challenges in understanding parent involvement, what it really means to be an “involved parent,” and how much “involvement” is necessary for it to be considered adequate or have an impact. Although the survey data does not reflect the complexity of defining parent involvement with so many different characterizations, the administrator interviews of this study resonated the challenges of defining parent involvement evident in the literature.

What influences levels of parent involvement?

Parent involvement levels can be influenced by a number of factors that will be discussed in this section. The literature reviewed here will present a number of variables that have been associated with parent engagement, paying particular attention to education and achievement in early learning settings.

The role of ethnic background and language

There are a number of studies available that suggest disparities in academic outcomes based on racial-ethnic backgrounds. Rates of retention, suspension, expulsion as well as academic excellence vary depending on the student's ethnicity (Wong & Hughes, 2006). According to a study by Wong & Hughes (2006) looking at the relationship between ethnicity and language on the dimension of parent involvement, Black parents reported higher levels of involvement with schools as compared to White, Hispanic-English speaking and Hispanic-Spanish speaking parents. Hispanic parents tended to show more deferential involvement in their child's education and were less comfortable with the teachers and/or schools.

Additionally, findings show that Hispanic families tends to have very low levels of communication with the school, low sense of responsibility in their child's learning, and are less involved in their child's learning in the home and school (Wong & Hughes, 2006). Because parenting involvement is critical in predicting achievement, lack of parent involvement can be a huge disadvantage directly related with ethnic background.

Some parents cite linguistic and cultural barriers as a challenge for greater involvement in their child's school (Sohn & Wang, 2006). Parents from diverse cultural backgrounds also cited feelings of discrimination and limited school support. In such cases, the importance of building strong relationships with the teacher and school is evident wherein the teacher/school needs to reach out to ethnically diverse parents. At the same time, parents need to more actively engage in the school and educate about cultural differences (Sohn & Wang, 2006). This discussion returns us to the importance

of understanding the context and environment within which children and families live. It requires that administrators and professionals diminish the barriers tied to language and culture because it produces possible challenges for positive developmental and academic outcomes for ethnically diverse students.

One study also suggests that there is a correlate between social-ethnic background and student achievement. The gaps are more pronounced for low-income, minority students who demonstrated lower academic achievement levels as compared to higher-income, non-minority students (Driessen et al., 2005). Again, the diversity of influence and environment are all considerations for why such outcomes are possible. In a proactive effort, schools cited in the study as having larger percentages of ethnic minority students devoted more attention to parent involvement activities within the school as a potential strategy to lessen the gap (Driessen et al., 2005). The strategies resulted in modest gains but challenges due to feelings of discrimination, limited support, and family dynamics continued to serve as barriers for engaging parent.

The role of income and employment

Desimone (1999) used data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 that involved a sample of 24,599 8th-graders, 1,035 schools and parent surveys from almost 21,000 students. Her work showed a statistically significant relationship between parent involvement and student achievement records based on the students' race-ethnicity and family income with a similar premise to the previously noted study. Her work also showed that parent-school involvement was predictive of grades across all racial-ethnic

and income lines suggesting that parent involvement positively influences overall grades above individual test scores (Desimone, 1999).

Brooks-Gunn, Han & Waldfogel (2002) discussed the relevance of maternal employment on child cognitive outcomes wherein child outcomes were higher when the mothers did have some level of employment. Weiss and her colleagues took a different perspective on employment and used it as a measure of parent involvement specifically in children's elementary education (Weiss, Mayer, Kreider, Vaughan, Dearing, Hencke & Pinto, 2003). Their study shows that mothers working full-time or attending school full-time were less involved in their child's school. The participants were all low-income earners who communicated the challenges of maintaining employment, reaching personal education goals, and balancing involvement in the classroom (Weiss et al., 2003). Both studies suggest that environmental circumstances like employment and income are valid factors that affect levels of parent involvement even if the desire to participate and the importance of parent involvement is understood.

The role of parent perceptions

Parent's perception and rationale for making decisions is related to levels of parent involvement and this is particularly true in education settings. Knopf and Swick (2006) note that levels of parent involvement are affected by the parents' perception of their relationship with their child's teacher. The authors further cite a number of influences including personal views, values, and previous relationship experiences that will impact their perceptions of the parent-teacher relationship to some degree (Knopf &

Swick, 2006). Previous relationships with teachers, whether positive or negative, could also impact the current parent-teacher-school relationship.

This is important for early childhood programs because parents have certain expectations in their relationship with early childhood professionals. Thus, professionals would benefit from understanding those expectations, correcting any misconceptions of expectations (such as the parents do not care or they are not interested because a form was not returned), and building relationships that render more positive perceptions towards the teacher and program. This could then influence levels of parent involvement in the program, which is a general goal of high-quality early learning settings. Researchers suggests that incorporating relationship-building strategies into the parent-teacher-school relationship can result in greater involvement of parents in the program, which is what the literature cites as valuable for early development (Knopf & Swick, 2006; Gonzales-Mena, 2010).

Anderson & Minke (2007) provide an alternate perspective as to why parents decide to get involved by looking at the rationale behind why parents decide to make decisions about involvement in their children's education in the first place. The authors looked at four variables – role construction, sense of efficacy, resources, and perceptions of teacher invitations – as reasons why parent decide to get involved at home and in the schools. The findings were complex yet the data overwhelming showed perceptions of teacher invitations were the strongest influence for parent involvement followed by the other variables. This suggests that parents will decide to participate when they perceive that their involvement is wanted and necessary, and the teacher generally communicates

this explicitly (Anderson & Minke, 2007). Again, this demonstrates the role of perception and relationships with schools that will be discussed further in the next section.

Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1995) also provide a model for why parents get involved. In the authors' perspective, involvement happens partly because parents may see it as part of the role as parent to be involved in their child's education. Whatever the reason for their engagement, Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1995) suggest that parents will engage to the extent to which their time and skills enable them through reinforcement, modeling or instruction with their children in manners that are developmentally appropriate, and by what is proscribed by the school. This model suggests that the desire comes from the parents and the school is a supportive partner congruent with the idea of partnership discussed by researchers (Arnold et al., 2008; Duch, 2005; Gonzales-Mena, 2010). This idea is slightly contrasted with discussions in the next section that emphasis the collaborative nature between parent and educator in supporting a child's developmental agenda, which is in-line with general best practice models for early childhood programs.

The role of parent-school relationships

Cultivating cooperative relationships between schools and parents has been cited as a cornerstone for increasing parent involvement in their child's learning in school settings. One Dutch study aimed to understand the impact of school-initiated parent involvement activities, parent-initiated involvement activities, child characteristics and outcomes (Driessen et al., 2005). Although the findings showed no statistically

significant effect of parent involvement on student achievement, findings did illustrate a number of strong qualities between the school and parent that had a positive correlation. Many of the schools in the study placed an emphasis on being available to parents, taking their concerns into consideration extensively, and providing information and communicating often (Driessen et al., 2005). For those schools that did consider parent-relationships as important, those schools had better contact with the parents as a result of the relationship-building efforts (Driessen et al., 2005).

Teacher's attitudes and the strategies teachers use to engage parents are equally important in influencing parent involvement levels in the school and home. Epstein and Dauber (1991) note that teachers who have more positive attitudes towards parent involvement are more likely to communicate more regularly with parents about student performance and programs and had greater success in collaborating with "hard-to-reach" parents. Teachers also cited that the climate of the school is important for fostering and sustaining parent engagement in the schools (Gonzalez-Mena, 2010; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Moreover, A school that values and supports strong parent involvement will have standards that require teachers and programs to follow a similar agenda (DHHS-ACF, 2005; Ritchie & Willer, 2008a; Epstein & Dauber, 1991).

Cultural differences in cultivating parent-teacher-school relationships should also be considered. Different ethnic groups may respond to the teacher/school environment differently which will impact involvement levels in the school and in their child's development. One study suggests that teachers related less with Black parents than White

or Hispanic parents which can have a negative impact on engagement under the research stated above (Wong & Hughes, 2006). Again, the importance of cultural context remains relevant and impact perceptions and relationships that may ultimately impact child outcomes because it is a salient element of the environment.

What do levels of parent involvement influence?

In the same way that parent involvement levels are influenced by a variety of factors, levels of parent involvement can be equally influential. This section will discuss several areas that are influenced by parent involvement.

Academic achievement outcomes

Arnold and his colleagues provide an excellent overview of the ways in which parent involvement in school environments has been positively related to children's academic learning for school-age children (Arnold et al., 2008). They go one step further, however, to discuss the relationship as it affects preschool children and the results are equally compelling. For preschoolers from low-income families, greater parent involvement was positively associated with stronger preliteracy skills (Arnold et al., 2008; DHHS-ACF, 2005; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

Studies have also shown that supportive parent involvement has shown positive associations with mathematics achievement scores wherein practices that encouraged parents and families to support mathematics learning in the home had children who scored at or above proficiency levels on standardized math achievement tests (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). Jimerson, Egeland & Teo (1999) further cited findings in which parent involved in their child's first three years of formal schooling could predict upward

trajectories in academic achievement through the 6th grade. Similar findings were found in the Head Start Impact Study (DHHS-ACF, 2005). These are all promising findings that speak to the beneficial impact of parent involvement in academic outcomes for children.

Despite the general consensus that parent involvement supports academic achievement (Sheldon et al., 2005; Arnold et al., 2008), however, there are some who make a distinction between parent involvement in schools-settings and in the home arguing that it is involvement in academics in the *home* that causes the greatest impact (DePlanty, Coulter-Kern & Duchane, 2007). One study showed that teachers and students felt parent involvement in the school was less of an indicator for higher grades. Parents who were more involved in academics in the home, who provided a good structure for homework, and who provide a supportive home environment were more likely to show positive indicator effects on academic achievement (DePlanty et al., 2007). This suggests that parent involvement is not bound by the location. Instead, parent involvement is more bound by the intention. When the intention is to support a child in school – and that support can come either in the school, home, or through activities that engage the child and parent in ways that promote learning – the same positive outcomes are plausible.

Student engagement, motivation, and academic socialization

The importance and benefits of the parent-child relationship and parent involvement in schools go far beyond just high test scores and academic outcomes. Parent involvement can influence the desire and underlying motivation that results in high academic outcomes. According to Mo & Singh (2008), parent involvement

encompasses more than engaging activities in the school. It also includes the relationship the parent has with her child and educational aspirations for her child that she shares inside and outside the school setting. Mo & Singh (2008) further conclude that this type of parent behavior and involvement will enhance the student's behavior, emotional, and cognitive engagement in schools, which will then impact school involvement.

Student motivation is also linked to parent involvement. Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Holbein (2005) reviewed parent involvement and motivation literature finding that students reported interest in learning, feeling greater competence in their work, increased efforts and greater attention when their parents were involved with their academic endeavors. Parental monitoring was helpful, as was encouragement and praise (Gonzalez-DeHass et al., 2005). Additionally, their findings further suggest that parent involvement lead to greater responsibility for learning on the part of the student and more goal setting (Gonzalez-DeHass et al., 2005). Parent involvement, thus provides valuable supports for social-emotional and academic developments that will resonate as young students move towards adulthood.

The parent component in early childhood programs

In early childhood programs, there is evidence suggesting parent involvement is a critical component to positive child outcomes (Epstein, 2001). Researchers believe that understanding the important role of parents and families, respecting them, and sharing information is a valuable method of enhancing a child's experience in an early childhood program (Ritchie & Willer, 2008a; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2005). The importance of parents has sufficient evidence that programs will include parent participation as a key

area of evaluation for program effectiveness (Prekindergarten Program Product Evaluation Report, 2000). Other programs require parent representation in advisory councils throughout the district and actively develop parent network, host workshops, and provide services to support parents and the community members in an effort to support students (Gonzales-Mena, 2010; Washington, 2001).

Again, the parent component is an integral element in the infrastructure of early childhood programs. It is one that is gaining more attention for its impact on child outcomes because parents play such an inter-related role with programs (Ritchie & Willer, 2008; Schweinhart, 2004). Parents have a great responsibility to share information about their child, the family's culture, language, and goals that will influence what happens in the programs. In return, programs need parents who are responsive to suggestions that will further support the child's learning and growth. Ritchie & Willer (2008a) said it best saying, "because the family and the program staff have a common interest in the child's well-being and because they share the task of care and education, it is important to establish positive relationships through communication, cooperation, and collaboration." (p.12). Doing so can only support positive developmental outcomes and overall needs for children and families, which goes back to best practice standards for high-quality early childhood programs.

The benefits of parent involvements are readily recognizable in school settings but research has shown the benefit to extend beyond the students as well. Impacts on the parents are evident in the literature. Involvement, specifically in school settings, has been seen to have positive effects on the parent, leading to better relationships between parent

and child, parent and school, and a greater sense of self-confidence in parenting abilities (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000; Fantuzzo, Perry & Childs, 2006). Thus, the relationship between parent involvement and early childhood programs is one that is mutually beneficial and complimentary, and is a relationship that is recognized in the field (Ritchie & Willers, 2008; Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta, 2005).

As scholarship in this area of study increases, the field still faces challenges in succinctly defining and understanding parent involvement, what it really means to be an “involved parent,” and how much “involvement” is necessary for it to be considered adequate or have an impact. Attempts are being made to clearly define the term yet there continues to be very little collective agreement because parent involvement is multidimensional, complex, and involves and influences so many other parties.

Although there are numerous definitions for parent involvement in the literature, extra caution will be taken when studying parent involvement in the context of the current study. For the purpose of this study, parent involvement is defined as any type of voluntary involvement on the part of the parent in support of the child’s academic success in school and in support of the child’s overall social-emotional development. For the parent, this can include attending parent-teacher conferences, volunteering in the classroom, using resources or referrals offered by the program, and the on-going interactions with teacher and staff. In turn and based on the literature, these parent involvement activities may have some degree of impact on a child including potential influence on the child’s ability to thrive in school settings. This working definition will be used to ground the methodology and for analyzing the data in this study

The Role of Social Support Resources and Referrals in Programs

What is social support?

Humans are social beings. We exist within a realm of relationships that develop through interactions with one another and this social quality manifests itself in the human desire to make connections with others. It is most evident in the help-seeking behaviors people use to meet individual needs. Social support or developing a social support network are two terms are often used interchangeably when discussing the process of locating, procuring, or providing diverse forms of support through relationships with others. This concept of social support is the basis of the discussion in this section.

The literature suggests that many turn to social support and creating networks because it *is* an effective way for people to cope and adjust to life's stressful situations (Kim, Sherman & Taylor, 2008). *Social networks* are defined as “the web of identified social relationships that surround an individual and include the characteristics of those relationships” (Kumar & Oakley Browne, 2008, p.440). Social support networks vary in size, density i.e. the degree of connectedness between members, the level of social engagement involved, and the level of access to resources and material goods (Berkman & Glass, 2000). Social support is then a provision of these networks and can include people who are close contacts or a group tied by a special bond (Berkman & Glass, 2000).

According to Keel & Drew (2004), *social support* is described as social relationships that afford provisions in order to meet individual needs. It can be a set of individuals, groups, organization, communities, or nations, tied together by both formal and informal relationships and who are able to lend some form of support (Balaji,

Claussen, Smith, Visser, Morales & Perou, 2007; Thompson & Peebles-Wilkins, 1992).

Social support can also be characterized as providing some form of emotional or tangible support via social networks and it is through these relationships that resources – material, emotional, physical – are made available. Some have gone so far as to divide the concept of social support into categories based on the purpose behind the support. The distinctions can include the type of support provided, the perceptions attributed to the support by the recipient, and the intentions of the support by the provider (Hupcey, 1998).

Despite the distinctions, the value of social support and social support networks lies in what is afforded to the individual and family. Stewart, Anderson, Beiser, Mwakarima, Neufeld, Simich & Spitzer (2008) said language difficulties, issues around employment, adjusting to disrupted family dynamics, and discrimination are major challenges that require support. To address such diverse needs, social networks are developed by family and close relatives, joining religious groups, making friends with community who may have first-hand experience and knowledge to share (Crocker & Canevello, 2008; Stewart et al., 2008). School and workmates who were outside their own ethnic community and participating in community programs or volunteer work were also accessed for help (Stewart et al., 2008). Additionally, the need for informational support i.e. advice or assistance in the decision-making process or emotional support, seemed most needed over tangible support such as home-cooked meals and clothing (Berkman et al., 2000). And the use of formal institutions such as agencies and schools were only used when new immigrants became comfortable and had exhausted supports

from close family and friends (Crocker & Canevello, 2008; Stewart et al., 2008). Social support is thus accessed through a variety of sources to meet diverse needs.

There are existing barriers that keep people from accessing its benefits although the value of social support is generally accepted. Such barriers can be tied to fear of perceived stigma when accessing support, embarrassment, language barriers, or even the reactions of others in the network or in the wider community (Ahmed, Steward, Teng, Wahoush & Gagnon, 2008). Most notably, newcomers seek support from people and agencies that speak their own language, which speaks to potential strategies for reaching those seeking support (Stewart et al., 2008). Furthermore, there is a cultural element to the use of social support and social support networks, and the role of culture cannot be underestimated. Both terms are culturally-derived constructs.

According to Kim et al. (2008), “as social support inherently involves relationships among individuals, how it is practiced should be viewed within the context of culturally specific patterns of social relationships. People from different cultural backgrounds may utilize and be affected by support from close others differently even if they possess equally supportive social networks” (p. 518). The authors further suggest that the norms and expectations attributed to relationships and the use of social support within the specific cultural framework dictates how social support is used, whether or not it is used, and influences help-seeking behavior (Kim et al., 2008). The study emphasizes the relevance of cultural context and the ways in which it influences how one studies and understands the role of social support networks used by populations served by the social work profession.

This discussion helps to support the rationale for why the current study reviewed the use and provision of social resources in Illinois PreK/PFA programs. The literature points to the various benefits linked to social resources and having a social support network. Understanding the resources afforded to these participants through early childhood settings is essential for participants of PreK/PFA programs who are considered at considerable risk for academic failure and who are identified with a variety of non-educational needs to be met by the programs. Early childhood programs like PreK/PFA are hubs for providing social resources (support) as well as serving as a valuable support network for some of its participants.

What influences social support?

The qualities and characteristics attributed to social support and social support networks are important considerations when discussing the utility and the use these resources. The type of support, its purpose, and the structure of networks all have implications on the extent to which individuals will seek or actively use social support. These qualities may also have implications for quality and effectiveness of the support and related networks. This section provides a brief discussion of such characteristics that are relevant influences for the context of this study.

The rationale for seeking social support and membership in social support networks can be influenced by cultural practices and norms, one's gender, education levels, socioeconomic status, or the perceived quality of the support and/or network (Payne, 2005; Olstad, Sexton, & Sogaard, 2001; Griffith, 1985; Thompson & Peebles-Wilkins, 1992). The structure of the social support is a consideration as well. *Informal*

support networks can refer to support received from family and friends while *formal support* groups are typically organized institutions such as social service/community organizations, churches, schools, and the workplace. Willingness to seek help and participate may depend on such structures. Generally, the literature suggests relatives and close friends as the primary social support contacts (Thompson & Peebles-Wilkins, 1992). Social institutions such as schools, workplace, church, and social service agencies were the next source of support contacts (Payne, 2005; Thompson & Peebles-Wilkins, 1992).

Social support type is sometimes discussed in terms of functional or structural; another quality that influences the use and utility of social support. *Functional support* is defined in terms of quality, availability and the perceived or actual receipt of assistance from another (Brown & Riley, 2005). *Structural support* is defined as a quantitative measure that looks at the number of individuals in a network, the number of ties, the density and size of a network (Brown & Riley, 2005). Again, the qualities mentioned – culture, gender, education, socio-economic status, and perception – will influence which type of support is sought and the goodness of fit for that support. Hupcey (1998) further stresses that the recipients' perceptions of the support and the intentions of the provider are equally important in understanding the importance and value of social support networks. These factors, too play a role in social support.

Moreover, some suggest that it is the quality and not the size or type of the network that matters most (Somhlaba, & Wait, 2008). Networks with greater members can create more opportunity to get resources, information, support, however if not stable,

such networks may not be as effective. Informal networks of acquaintances or problematic social ties have also been correlated with negative outcomes related to emotional and psychological health (Balaji et al., 2007). Ultimately, it is the close connections and the availability of emotional support that seem to show greater benefits to recipients irrespective of group size (Somhlaba, & Wait, 2008).

What does social support influence?

Social support and social support networks are concepts that depict a bi-directional relationship and that are mutually influential. On one hand, the utility and use of social support is influenced by a number of factors/areas. On the other hand, the use of social support and social support networks can be influence other areas. To be explicit, this section discusses some of those areas that are influenced by the use of social support. These areas include mental health, physical health, economic stability, academic achievement and interpersonal competencies.

Implications for mental health

The mental health arena is giving greater attention to social support networks because it is believed to play a role in mediating personal stressors, buffer against psychological distress symptomatology, influence help-seeking behavior, and supports positive mental health (Kumar & Oakley Browne, 2008; Griffith, 1985; Olstad et al., 2001). According to Balaji et al. (2007), “larger and more supportive networks have been associated with lower stress, increased personal wellbeing, and greater personal self-efficacy” (p.1388). Social support has also been studied in victims of trauma and PTSD. The positive outcomes have been linked to social networks that provide on-going support

for trauma/PTSD patients while in treatment and thereafter (Laffaye, Cavella, Drescher, & Rosen, 2008). Social support from intimate relationships is further cited as the “single-most important factor facilitating psychological adjustment following spousal death” (Somhalaba & Wait, 2008, p.342). Conversely, there is research to suggest that without a network and its buffering benefits, “an individual’s vulnerability to mental disorder may increase” and seeking services may be necessary (Somhalaba & Wait, 2008, p. 440).

Studies also show that social support networks can influence the ways in which people with mental illnesses use mental health services (Kumar & Oakley Browne, 2008). Kumar & Oakley Browne notes the influence social support networks is manifested in the help-seeking behavior people use to get more information about mental illnesses, the way they mobilize resources to meet mental health needs, and seeking early identification. Networks can facilitate access to services and can further prevent feelings of isolation in and outside of treatment facilities (Kumar & Oakley Browne 2008). In turn, mental health service providers may provide a new network of support equally valuable to the individual.

The extent to which social support impacts mental health, however, is determined by the cultural context that defines mental health. Some cultures do not have a term to translate mental health and for others, the term is attached to stigma connoting mental illness (Somhlaba & Wait, 2008). Other studies have found certain cultures (e.g. Asian Americans) underutilize mental health services partly because of distrust of mainstream American models because of a concern that practitioners will not be culturally responsive to the cultural norms of ethnic minorities or that western practitioners may focus on

disclosure, which is not always desired in this population (Kim et al., 2008). Again mental health needs are indeed impacted by social support, but there are cultural considerations that will impact the extent to which social supports are used or viewed as useful.

Implications for physical health

Social support is also tied to a number of physical health benefits including positive adjustment to chronic illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes, lung disease, arthritis, and cancer (Holahan, Moos, Holahan & Brennan, 1997). Some also suggest a reduction in recovery time from illness and a reduction in mortality rates on the account of social support and networks (Kim et al., 2008). Its presence has been tied to emotional and other supports that aid beyond attendance to physical needs. Research also shows a correlation between social support networks and drug use in which one's network can either discourage or promote substance abuse (Brown & Riley, 2005). Furthermore, the quality of social support networks is also associated with fewer relapses for addicts and better outcomes as well. (Brown & Riley, 2005). Lastly, social support and networks has been one factor found to increase physical activity, as it is a form of encouragement and accountability among group members. This is particularly important for middle-aged women who are at higher risk for cardiovascular disease because they are not physically active (Peterson, Yates & Hertzog, 2008).

Implications for economic stability

Economic adaptation is assessed by a number of indicators including employment status, income, earnings, and welfare utilization (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002). The most

important factors for adaptation include household composition, various acculturation indicators, gender, and human capital such as networks, competencies, shared norms, and social trust that facilitate and are coordinated for mutual benefits (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002). As such, economic adaptation is dynamic and complex, presenting the potential for diverse challenges for those seeking economic stability. Social support outlets can support those transitioning between cultures and countries as well as support economic adaptation.

Economic pursuit and stability is a valuable desire particularly in the current economic climate in the United States. Employment is a direct avenue for such gain yet finding that job can be difficult and may require a level of support that can be gained through the presence of social support networks. In a study focusing on immigrant welfare recipients, the presence of social support along with psychosocial empowerment – efforts to encourage critical reflection and action to promote a greater degree of control over relevant resources and opportunities in one's life – helped to improve immigrants' employment status (Garcia-Ramirez et al., 2005). Thus, immigrant participants were better able to secure a job when they had access to support networks connecting them with opportunities along with a mental state that seeks to use those networks to the fullest extent. This finding could potentially be related to any population of individuals seeking employment opportunities.

Subsequently, employment has been seen as a common link between social support, economic pursuit, and economic stability. Again, social support plays a valuable role in the process. The ability to depend on a support network for advice and

information was cited as a significant support in an active job search, development of a positive self-concept, and identifying the importance of employment as well (Garcia-Ramirez et al., 2005). Those who had a positive self-concept about their professional competence, those who held internal attributions about their employment, and those who engaged in an active job search were more likely to be working (Garcia-Ramirez et al., 2005).

For new immigrants specifically, there is research that suggests this population does indeed access and use social support networks, and there are related benefits to those connections. Interestingly, there is research showing greater use of informal social networks versus formal social networks, which one is more likely to find among new immigrant groups. Informal networks have several advantages including greater accessibility when help is mobilized among interpersonal relationships, shared norms and understanding related to help-seeking behavior and needs, and multiple forms of support can be given simultaneously (emotional, material, resources) (Hernandez-Plaza, Alonso-Morillo, & Pozo-Munoz, 2006).

Additionally, informal networks are characterized as having greater stability since the networks are among peers and provide greater flexibility in comparison to formal social networks (Hernandez-Plaza et al., 2006). Accessing informal networks may also be easier than formal networks due to some level of rigidity around language and cultural understanding, and accessibility of the program e.g. location and hours (Hernandez-Plaza et al., 2006). Issues around trust and confidence also come into play with a formal network when an immigrant has an undocumented status (Hernandez-Plaza et al., 2006).

The extent to which social support is sought can be influenced by these considerations.

As early childhood programs are serving more and more immigrants, this may be an area to address in the program since parents may be seeking information to gain economic stability for their families.

Other implications

Social support has been tied to academic achievement and interpersonal competencies (Bost, Vaughn, Boston, Kazura & O'Neal, 2004; Lopez, Ehly & Garcia-Vazquez, 2002; Thompson & Peebles-Wilkins, 1992). Students with stable social support were found to have higher academic outcome scores, self-esteem, and greater relationship building skills (Bost et al., 2004). Social support deemed adequate and positive can also play an important role in parenting as it is seen to provide a buffer against the stresses that occur within the family (Hardy & Darlington, 2008). Conversely, negative supports or a lack thereof, coupled with the prevalence of negative relationships in general, contribute to poor family functioning and inadequate coping skills. These attributes have been linked to increased risks of child abuse in the home (Hardy & Darlington, 2008).

What does social support look like in early childhood programs and does it matter?

The bi-directional influence of social support and social support networks has direct implications for early childhood programs because the two are a primary means of addressing the non-educational needs of children and families in early learning settings; one of the best practice components of high-quality early childhood programs. When supporting families is policy for early childhood programs, the provision of social

resources and referrals is just want strategy for reaching such goals. Social support can come in the types and availability of resources that can help children and families who participate in such programs.

The provision of social support can be invaluable for at-risk children and families in early childhood programs. Early childhood programs in Illinois are able to provide a variety of social resources and referrals such as parent education, counseling, home-visiting as well as connecting families with a variety of human services and resources in the community; all resources that can fall under the categories of social support (*Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation* FY09 Final Report, 2009). Simultaneously, early childhood programs are a type of social support network and the benefits of a good support system with resources can be just what at-risk families need.

Taken together and as alluded to previously, an early childhood program can be the hub for connecting families with much need resources. One can argue that the provision of resources can, in turn, potentially have an impact on the overall functioning of that family with effects on both the parents and the children. The social service agencies that serve similar families may also connect with early childhood programs to ensure that the transmission of resources and support are provided efficiently and without duplication or confusion. Subsequently, the provision of resources can have potential implications for parent involvement if parents are supported and some of the non-educational needs that serve as barriers for participation are addressed. Parents may feel better apt to participate in such cases. This is a relationship between social support and levels of parent involvement in early childhood programs will be studied in this

dissertation because all of these connections matter when within the purview of supporting child development.

Theoretical Foundations

Understanding the potential significance of social support on parent involvement in early childhood programs is an ideal area of study but it can only be fully understood when based on theoretical foundations that help to explain why a relationship may exist in the first place. Two theories, derived from General Systems Theory developed by Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1901-1972), guided my understanding of this topic and have been the basis for the research questions in this study. In its most basic terms, a system can be defined as a set of objects that have relationships to other objects and the attributes of other objects (Broderick, 1993). Bertalanffy presented a theory that looked at living organisms as existing within a system that includes relationships and interactions with other systems, contributing to growth and change for every unit involved (Friedman, 1997). His proposal suggests “the whole is more than the sum of its parts” (Bertalanffy, 1968, p.18) and the interactions and the relationships between the units have an impact on all parts of the collective system.

These ideas serve as the basis for understanding why parents matter in the lives of children, why social support matters for parents, and why early childhood programs can have an impact both children and parents. I’ve chosen Family Systems Theory from Murray Bowen and Ecological Systems Theory from Urie Bronfenbrenner – both developed using concepts from Bertalanffy’s theory – to help explain how theory is

relevant to understanding the connections suggested in this study. Each of the considered theories will be discussed in greater detail in this section.

Family Systems Theory

Family Systems Theory, developed by Murray Bowen in the 1970's, posits that families are like other systems that involve interrelated elements that interact and are interdependent on one another. Family systems are interrelated, have patterns in the ways the member interacts, and there are boundaries to consider and rules and messages that guide relationships within the family unit (Gilbert, 2006; Broderick, 1993). For Bowen, the family is considered an emotional unit wherein any impact on one family member will inevitably impact another part/family member in the system, and it is within this context that children's development typically happens (Gilbert, 2006). According to Schaffer (1996), families are the ideal context for supporting child development because they are typically small, intimate groups composed of individuals invested in the security and care of the child.

At the same time, family units are able to link the child with a variety of outside settings (e.g. other families, workplace, schools) connected with the family (Schaffer, 1996). Parents are considered the leaders of the nuclear family under this model whereby they have the ability to observe the interactions within the unit, direct and redirect negative stressors like anxiety or frustration, and facilitate the system in a way that makes the family unit more functional and cooperative (Gilbert, 2006). It is the parents then who are in a critical position to either facilitate or hinder a child's development and the general functioning of the family. It is also the parental role that can potentially benefit

from the use of resources tied to early childhood programs that can further promote the functioning of the family system.

Family Systems Theory is relevant for this study because it provides a framework for understanding the relationships between children, parents, early childhood programs, and social resources and why each can influence the others. In this perspective, one sees the family as a unit, the child is part of that unit, and inputs from the environment will impact the family unit in one manner or the other. Early childhood programs are part of the child and family environment thus we can expect some level of exchange between the two as well. Same goes for the provision and use of social resources and referrals, which can have an impact on the family as a whole. This theory does not assume that all inputs are beneficial or detrimental to the family unit but it does explain the interactions between systems and the ways in which each party will be affected in some manner by the interactions (Gilbert, 2006).

If the preschooler is attending an early childhood program and the teacher's recognize a need because the parents are not visiting the school or it's noticed that the children are ill-kept, services can be offered. More information may be found about the family circumstances when addressing the needs of the participating child. It may be the case that one or both parents are unemployed, or there are health needs currently not addressed, or a lack of support systems to help the family. Whatever the presenting need, the family dynamics will change when inputs of resources are provided and all members of the families may be affected. For example, the children may get more positive

attention, the family may be better fed, and there may be less anxiety in general due to the parents unemployment status, financial or health hardships.

This is an oversimplified example, yet it is an appropriate illustration of Bowen's theory and what can happen when social resources (inputs) are introduced into a family unit. One system does influence another and within the family unit, changes in one member produces changes in each member as well. Using this theory gives insight into why this study can suggest changes in parent involvement when resources are given to parents or changes in the family when the family participates in an early childhood program.

Ecological Systems Theory

Urie Bronfenbrenner (1988) developed the Ecological Systems Theory with influence from Bertalanffy's work. Bronfenbrenner felt General Systems Theory did not provide a sufficient explanation for the complex and dynamic relationships within social systems and that there was a need to consider the ecological environment when studying systems (Friedman, 1997). His view posts that "human development cannot be seen in isolation but must be viewed within the context of the individual's relationship with the environment" (Friedman, 1997, p.6). In this perspective, Bronfenbrenner's work provides an explanation for the ways in which child development occurs within a system embedded in a distinct environmental environment, and that both direct and indirect influences will impact the child in that given context while also providing a complex matrix for understanding and defining behavior (Friedman, 1997; Shaffer, 1996).

The family unit and peers are the most immediate contexts in which child development occurs but there are also many other social influences that can influence development. These influences can include direct contact such as school and community settings or there can be indirect influences such as those from social conditions like the country's economic conditions or the presence of war and conflict in the region (Schaffer, 1996). Bronfenbrenner outlines five systems structures – microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems, and chronosystems – that are all layers of an environment that can influence a child's overall development. As the child matures, these layers that include the immediate family, the community context, and even the societal landscape will all have some form of influence on how that child matures. Her interactions with these changing environments will only continue to grow and become more complex as her skills to engage with this ever-changing and expanding world continue to develop. The figure below illustrates the multiple inter-related systems described.

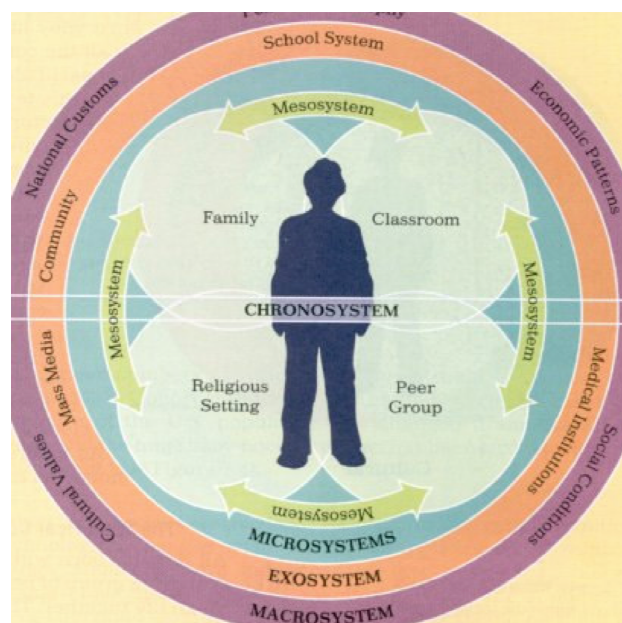


Figure 2: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model, 1984

Given the multiple influences on child development, understanding the layers of environments that do have a potential impact is also a foundation for the proposed study. This study argued that multiple systems are relevant and involved when thinking about children in early childhood programs. The complexity of the relationships increases when we study the impacts of parents, their involvement in early childhood programs, and the services offered to parents to further support the parents in the program thus helping the child in the process. Like Family Systems Theory, Ecological Systems Theory helps to explain the interactions between relationships and systems as it affects a child and family. These interactions are at the core of what is being proposed in this study. This theoretical framework also takes into consideration the environment with the family unit and the ultimate impact on the children within that unit, and underlying theme of this research.

Additionally and congruent with the current study, Bronfenbrenner provides the argument that early childhood programs need to involve the children's parents and community so that all environments touching the child will have similar goals and thus a greater impact (Bronfenbrenner, 1988). School is considered a significant social institution that greatly influences a child's development and the family unit because so much time is spent there (Schaffer, 1996). Family and schools are microsystems and the relationship between the two requires consideration of the mesosystems that reference the interconnectedness between the systems whereby Schaffer (1996) emphasizes that children's development cannot be fully understood without recognizing the interactions and connections between family and school systems. These explanations help to further

understand the value of early childhood programs in the lives of children and families, particularly those considered at-risk for developmental challenges, and illustrate the appropriateness of this theoretical perspective for the research.

Early childhood programs are part of the systems that interact with the child and family and will thus have some influence on overall outcomes. Because early childhood programs are intrinsically a part of the early childhood years that are critical to child development, greater consideration of what happens in such programs must be studied as it has implications for family systems functioning as well as macro systems functioning with schools, community, and society as a whole. Fig. 2 illustrates the ecology of child development adapted from Bronfenbrenner's work, which emphasizes the valuable role of early childhood programs in child development. He notes that early childhood programs are intrinsically tied to the ecological environment of a child and a family.

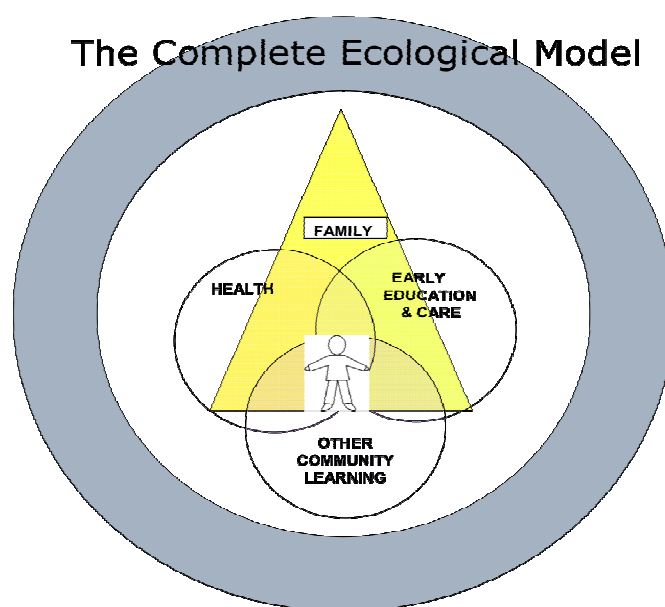


Figure 3: Ecological Model for Child Development, 1984

Moving forward with a strong theoretical foundation based on the two theories presented, the next step is to review the literature for prevalence of the suggested relationship in the field.

Prior Related Work in the Profession: A Critical Literature Review

This section will provide an overview of the relevant literature found in the social work, education, early childhood, psychology, and sociology disciplines and will include a discussion of the gaps in the literature that would be in support for my research study. To review, this study suggested there might be a relationship between levels of parent involvement and the number of social resources and referrals available in early childhood programs. The focus is specifically on the possible connection in preschool settings serving at-risk children ages 3-5 and their families. This study also aimed to examine preschool administrator perceptions of the connection between the social resources and parent involvement and what these professionals see as barriers to using services and engaging parents.

The literature was reviewed to better understand what work had already been completed to address my topic area. As a preview, what was found was more relevant to the factors that influence parent involvement in support of child outcomes and less was available on the ways in which *resources* can impact levels of parent involvement in support of child outcomes. Much of the literature also focused on older age groups and less on the early childhood years (birth to five years). And little was found focusing on the administrators in preschool programs and their thoughts about parent involvement

and resources in preschool programs. These findings and the gaps in the literature will be addressed in greater detail in the coming pages.

Parent involvement effects on development and student performance in educational settings

The literature on parent involvement in early childhood programs and the ways in which parent involvement can have an impact on child outcomes is available. Some of the literature on parent involvement was described in the earlier sections of Chapter 2, but the review uncovered material specific to factors that influence connection between parent involvement and young children, academic performance, and developmental outcomes.

Higher socio-economic status was correlated with higher levels of parent involvement, which in turn, was linked to higher children's pre-literacy (Arnold et al., 2008). Social-ethnic characteristics were also tied to parent involvement levels and linked to student achievement (Driessen et al., 2005). In-line with this evidence, some programs with a high percentage of ethnic minority pupils devoted extra attention to parent involvement activities in the school because such efforts were seen to impact academic outcomes for students (Driessen et al., 2005). The quality of the program, specifically classroom quality, was further tied to parent involvement. In Head Start programs, classroom quality was the strongest predictor of parent involvement above parent's experience in the program, years of education for the parent, and perceptions of parent involvement in the class (Castro, Bryant, Peisner-Feinberg & Skinner, 2004).

Income and employment was also noted as a factor influencing parent involvement in academic settings. Desimone (1999) conducted a study that suggests there

is a relationship between parent involvement and student achievement records based on the students' race-ethnicity and family income. Parent employment was one of the strongest predictors for parent involvement right above income and a correlation between the two were seen in Head Start through elementary school settings (Castro et al., 2004; Weiss, Mayer, Kreider, Vaughan, Dearing, Hencke & Pinto, 2003). Weiss et al. (2003) offered data to support that mothers working full-time or attending school full-time were less involved in their child's school, related to the notion that employment and income do effect parent involvement. Mothers who worked fewer hours or who were attending school part-time showed higher involvement levels than the previous group, which could have implications for their child's developmental and academic outcomes (Weiss et al., 2003).

The impact of resources and interventions on levels of parent involvement

The literature provided a few useful references that compliment the discussion on resources and parent involvement and the relationships between the two. Parent engagement activities such as home-visiting and center-based groups were studied and have been found to modestly increase parent involvement levels in the program settings (Santos, 2005). Others suggest that the provision of social support services (e.g. food stamps, parent education, etc.) and intervention services (e.g. early intervention, home-visiting, etc.) have been tied to positive parenting behaviors and improvements in child behavior (Dishion, Shaw, Connel, Gardener, Weaver & Wilson, 2008). One study found that parents were more responsive to their child's needs and spanked less while children had less tantrums and were more responsive to instruction when resources were in place (Dishion et al.). Still others have tied the provision of services like family literacy

programs to greater outcomes for young children *and* their parents. St. Pierre and his colleagues found evidence from a study on literacy programs, showing an increase of literacy skills for both parties with the use of the services (St. Pierre, Ricciuti & Rimdzius, 2005).

Resources intended to support school readiness for children, and which are delivered in the home environment, have been tied to an increase in parent involvement in their child's academic learning with more expressive language skills being developed (Necoechea, 2007). Early childhood programs were also cited among the types of services supporting children and families that can influence parent involvement. Programs like Head Start have showed positive benefits to children including better cognitive/language performance, social-emotional skills were present, and lower levels of aggression as compared to control groups in the study (Love et al., 2005). Most notably, improvements were seen in the parents of children enrolled in Head Start programs as they showed higher engagement levels in the program, reported less spanking in the home, and more receptive behaviors towards their children (Love et al., 2005). The authors do caution that programs must be fully implemented and should adhere to the standards proscribed but positive outcomes found in Early Head Start programs were generally associated with those who participate.

The impact of social resources on young children and families

The Abecedarian Project was one important contribution to the field and one of the few examples of social resource inputs linked to child outcomes. The Abecedarian preschool program provided an individualized approach to high risk children and families by giving early childhood education, pediatric healthcare, and family support services to

participants (Ramey, Campbell, Burchinal, Skinner, Gardner & Ramey, 2000). Families who were socioeconomically at-risk were given many public and private resources that were presumed to improve the overall performance participants (Ramey et al., 2000). Control groups received a combination of nutritional supplements, family support social services, and pediatric care and referrals while the 'preschool treatment' group was given these components in addition to participation in early childhood education programs. Findings showed that the most vulnerable children benefit from the preschool program in terms of cognitive advancements and buffered against non-optimal biological and/or behavioral qualities (Ramey et al.).

While these findings illustrate successful academic outcomes can be influenced with early intervention education programs coupled with social support resources, again, the focus of the study was on child development and not on the levels of parent engagement or parent input. It would have been interesting to see what non-academic outcomes came from the control group that received only social resources. What were the effects on the parents and their engagement in the classroom? Were parents who were given these resources still able to support their child's development in the home environment in other ways such as story telling, strong attachment relationships, positive behavior practices?

Other references have been found to show positive effects of resources on child outcomes (again, however, without reference to parent involvement). Zaslow, McGroder & Moore (2000) found that preschool-age children who had custodial parents participating in welfare-to-work programs showed some benefits in the area of cognitive

development and emotional adjustment although findings were small. Other studies looked at the impact of what would fall under the category of ‘social resources’ and the effects on child outcomes and school readiness, but were not necessarily linked to early childhood programs. One example is a study looking at parent education programs and its impact on children birth to six-months in age (Bakermans-Kranenburg, Van Ijzendoorn & Bradley, 2005). The study suggests that early intervention programs using parent education programs were more effective based on findings from the Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment (HOME) inventory that would demonstrate a higher quality home environment supportive of the infant (Bakermans-Kranenburg et al., 2005). This tells us resources can have a wider-range impact that can even include changes in the home environment.

This same idea is reflected in another study reviewing the Family Check-Up (FCU) program – another type of social resources – and its impact on parents’ positive behavior support and school readiness in early childhood (Lunkenheimer, Dishion, Shaw, Connell, Garner, Wilson, & Skuban, 2008). FCU parent participants did show improvements in positive parenting, which in turn, promoted their children’s language development and inhibitory control skills (Lunkenheimer et al., 2008). These findings were aimed at supporting parenting practices that could then indirectly impact school readiness for preschoolers. Nievar and colleagues (2008) looked at school readiness for preschoolers as well. Services that aimed at supporting parents’ sense of self-efficacy, help in addressing children’s behaviors and language skills, and addressing issues around maternal depression and parenting practices would show positive outcomes for the

parents and preschooler, but only within the context of services being delivered through home-visitation (Nievar, Jacobson, & Dier, 2008). The study did not look at the impact of the services themselves and instead, focused on the services delivered in the home environment, which is where outcomes were studied, but the findings are still worth mentioning.

These references show that the provision of social resources can have an impact on the child and family. What the references do not show is that *resources* can have an impact on *parent involvement*, which in turn can impact both child outcomes linked to school readiness and development and parent/family outcomes. The literature also doesn't present findings in the context of early childhood programs for *preschoolers*. Although some research is available to suggest there are connections between resources and general outcomes for young children and their families, unfortunately there is not sufficient evidence in the literature to suggest that the proposed argument and research questions are accurate or fully plausible without further investigation and empirical testing.

Contrary findings in the literature

There are studies that contradict the proposed relationship between parent involvement, early childhood programs, social service supports, and child/family outcomes, stating that there is little influence between the variables. Some references were located suggesting that social resources have no bearing on parent involvement but instead, it is a mechanism that inhibits families from gaining independence, making them more dependent on the welfare system (Growing Up in Poverty Project, 2000). Other articles reference the inadequacy of services in general so that we are not truly addressing

the needs of disadvantaged populations (Reid, Bailey, Cane, Cook & Buchard, 1994).

Concerns about the impact of resources on parent involvement levels were considered moot in the perspective of this author.

Several studies also argue that supports given to parents do not have an impact on positive child outcomes. One study showed no statistically significant impact of the Comprehensive Child Development Program (CCDP) program – a program that provides case management and home visiting to multi-risk, low-income preschool children and their families – as compared to control group families in the areas of cognitive and social-emotional development for children or positive parent outcomes. Anticipated outcomes such as enhanced parenting skills or economic self-sufficiency was not found statistically significant and home-visiting also wasn't seen as an effective intervention approach (Goodson, Layzer, St. Pierre, Bernstein & Lopez, 2000).

Olds, O'Brien, Racine, Glazner & Kitzman (1998) reviewed their findings from previous randomized trials of prenatal and early childhood home visitation programs involving more than 1,500 women in New York and Tennessee and noted similar challenges in the findings. The authors cited a problem when, in the midst of wanting fervently to help children and families, there is an overstatement of the potential benefits of health and social welfare programs that becomes translated by advocates and policy-makers in the policy arena (Olds et al., 1998). The authors argue that there *is* a relationship between the social welfare programs and individual outcomes (in this case, supporting maternal health), however the benefits of the relationships are not necessarily

as strong as some may assume which is against my position that there is a strong relationships between the two.

Additionally, there remain skeptics of the value of early childhood programs and social services to at-risk families despite the research that highlights the importance and value of such resources (Davies, 1999; FAN report, 2000). Kirp (2007) argues that research shows the effectiveness of early childhood programs in getting children ready for kindergarten learning and beyond but only if the programs and curriculum are implemented properly. Less understood is what makes a quality program and how do we know that the fidelity of the curriculum is being true to its design? This line of thinking has cast some doubt on the general effect of early childhood programs and was the driving force of the *Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation* study on which this study is based.

Gaps in the literature

This critical literature review shows that researchers are thinking about the importance of parent involvement and its effect on child, parent, and family outcomes. Researchers are even discussing the role of social resources in child, parent, and family outcomes. The gap in the literature lies in the available evidence showing the impact of *social resources* on *parent involvement* that in turn can have effects on child, parent, and family outcomes. The first step in addressing this area of scholarship would be to understand the relationship between social resources and parent involvement before one could even begin to address outcomes. Therefore, the purpose of this dissertation was to address this gap using a methodological design that studied the potential relationship between the two concepts using data from the *Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation FY09* survey and qualitative interviews with administrators who completed the *Evaluation*

survey. In doing so, the study contributed to the scholarship filling this gap in the literature.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation FY09 Study

(Text from this section was taken from the Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation FY09 Final Report, 2009. Permission to use this text was given by the Principal Investigator.)

Over the past decade, much attention has been paid to the need for public funding of early education and intervention programs to support the healthy development of children birth to age five and their families. The persistent achievement gap for children from low-income, minority families, coupled with federal and state mandates for educational accountability, have created incentives for public programs to provide positive and enriching experiences during the critically formative early years of development in order to establish a foundation for later learning. Yet, in a decade when many states' public investments in early childhood educational programs have reached an all-time high, the question remains: *How do we know what works, for whom does it work with, and how does it work?*

In order to fully understand and appropriately target programmatic efforts to the needs of young children and families, it is essential to examine questions about efficacy and quality implementation in the “real world” of large-scale publicly-funded early childhood systems. Because the Illinois early childhood system is one of the country's

largest and most well-financed, evaluation of the Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) offers a unique and important opportunity to explore a number of issues at the forefront of early childhood education and policy including how best to deliver early childhood services for children birth to age five and how those services relate to later educational and developmental outcomes.

The ECBG Programs and their Logic

Established in 1997 by Section 1C-2 of the School Code (105 ILCS 5/1C-2), the Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) includes four programs: (1) Prekindergarten Program for Children at Risk of Academic Failure; (2) Preschool for All Children program; (3) Prevention Initiative for programs offering coordinated services to at-risk children and their families (birth to three); and (4) the Model Parental Training Program. The development of ECBG strongly suggests the commitment of key policymakers in the state to creating a system of support for children ages birth to five and their families. All four ECBG programs share the goal of fostering early development and school readiness competencies for children throughout the state of Illinois who are considered to be “at risk” socially and academically. These efforts place an emphasis on early childhood intervention, with mandates to involve parents in children’s early development and learning and to foster interagency collaboration and community outreach efforts to children, families, and communities in greatest need of services.

The *Prekindergarten Program for Children at Risk of Academic Failure (PreK)* and the *Preschool for All (PFA)* program are the largest of the ECBG programs. With the ultimate objective of expanding preschool universally to all three- and four-year-olds in Illinois, *Preschool for All* also provides funding to serve families of low to moderate

income whose children are not considered to be at risk academically, although services for at-risk children take priority.

Overarching *Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation* Questions

Since the onset of the evaluation contract Erikson and subcontractor SRI International, Inc. have worked closely with ISBE and its research advisory committee to discuss and prioritize the research questions to be addressed in this evaluation. Given the overarching objective of the ECBG to improve the school readiness and later outcomes of children, support at-risk families, and provide quality early childhood services to reach that goal, the major constructs and research questions that drive the evaluation plan are:

Questions about Program Implementation and Quality

1. How are the programs being implemented and what is the quality of ECBG programs?

Questions about Participants

2. What are the characteristics of children and families participating in the ECBG programs?

Questions about Children's Development

3. What are the developmental outcomes of the children attending ECBG programs?

The *Phase I* activities of Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation study include (1) Analysis of ISBE Program Administrative Data; (2) Conducting Stakeholder Interviews to better understand perceptions about early childhood programs in the field; (3) Conducting a Program Web-Based Survey on all programs funded by the ECBG; and (4) Site visits of Birth-to-Three programs.

Program Web-based Survey

The evaluation team developed two-sets of web-based program surveys: one-set for the birth-to-three programs (Prevention Initiative & Parental Training) and a second-

set for the three-to-five programs (PreK and PFA). Within each set of surveys, one survey was sent to the ISBE Grantee survey and the second survey was sent to the program site level where children and families were actually served. Program site-level contact information was not available from ISBE, so we asked in the Grantee survey contact information about each of their program's sites. Therefore, we were only able to distribute the survey to sites for which the grantee provided contact information. Some of the grantees completed the site survey(s) themselves, while others were sent to the site contact and completed by a director or coordinator at the site.

In fall 2008, the web-based survey was sent to all birth-to-three and three-to-five programs funded by the ECBG in order to obtain a comprehensive picture of the landscape of the entire ECBG system—that is, to get a better picture of the basic characteristics of ECBG programs across the state—and to get an initial understanding about how programs are being implemented. Another purpose was to collect information not only from each ISBE grantee (the entity that receives the state funds), but also from the individual program sites at which children and families actually receive ECBG services. The web survey collected a great deal of information, including:

- Numbers and demographic characteristics of children served and their families.
- Numbers and distribution of programs, classrooms, sessions and teaching staff
- Parent engagement and program participation (e.g., duration, frequency, intensity of contacts, etc.)
- Program structural and management characteristics (e.g., caseloads, types of services provided, staff turnover, program models and curricula used, etc.)
- Staff educational background, experiences, training, and professional development

From these surveys, we learned information about how programs operate, descriptive characteristics of the programs, their staff, and the children and families they served. The survey response rates were excellent for both the 0-3 and 3-5 programs. For the 3-5 PreK and PFA programs specifically, the following responses rates were recorded:

Grantee Surveys: 522 out of 601 completed surveys (87% response rate)

Site-Level Surveys: 843 out of 914 completed surveys (92% response rate)²

(End of excerpt taken from the *Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation FY09 Final Report*, 2009)

Research Design: A Mixed-Methods Approach to Social Inquiry

The mixed methods approach is a valuable type of research design in the social sciences and a method that is used in the current study. It is based on a way of thinking that acknowledges the complexity of social phenomena, recognizes that any one approach with involve some level of partiality and embraces the idea of using multiple approaches to social inquiry (Greene, 2007). According to Greene (2007), the primary purpose for using mixed methods in research is to better understand phenomena. That understanding could entail several ideas: 1) addressing and enhancing the validity and credibility of our findings, 2) generating greater depth, breadth, and inclusive understanding of what we study, 3) using multiple perspectives to challenge and probe for new information, and 4) engaging in dialogue around differences in that understanding (Greene, 2007).

² Only site-level PreK/PFA survey data was used in the quantitative component of the current mixed method study.

Additionally, the philosophy of this approach invites multiple ways of studying the same concept. The approach lends to more depth and generative material versus limiting our scholarship because it does not hold fast to one only approach of inquiry (Greene & Careacelli, 1997a). Moreover, mixed methods include diverse approaches to design, data collection and analysis, interpretation and reporting, which can include the use of diverse methodologies, a thoughtful design, and purposeful intention for social inquiry (Greene, 2007). Lastly, mixed methods designs embraces dialogic engagement with difference in order to challenge old ideas and generate new areas of inquiry (Greene, 2007). Such qualities are strengths of mixed methods designs in research when one attempts to grapple with the complexity and diversity of studying social phenomena as evident in the study.

According to Greene (2007), the mixed methods approach serves five purposes: triangulation, complementarity, development, initiation and expansion. *Triangulation* refers to the intentional use of multiple methods to study the same phenomenon as a means of strengthening the results (Greene, 2007; Creswell, 2009). It has been used in both quantitative and qualitative methods, and has been used to increase validity while designed to offset biases (Creswell, 2009). When results are consistent, there is greater confidence in the material.

Complementarity “seeks broader, deeper, and more comprehensive social understandings by using methods that tap into different facts or dimensions of the same complex phenomenon... [it] serves to elaborate, enhance, deepen, and broaden the overall interpretations and inferences from the study” (Greene, 2007, p. 101). This

purpose allows for use of different approaches in research that compliment each other and help contribute findings to the overall study that can only be found using different methods of engagement. This concept follows that there are many ways of knowing and learning. Strategically planning to study one phenomenon from different perspectives yields a more complete understanding of the foci being studied.

Development refers to using information attained in one method to inform the sequential implementation of another method in studying the same phenomena (Greene, 2007). This is evident when studies begin with quantitative measures and a qualitative component is added to look more in-depth at individuals and case studies related to the first method employed; a common practice in the social sciences. This purpose is also closely tied to triangulation in social science research, which has been seen as a valuable component and tradition in the field (Caracelli & Greene, 1997).

Initiation refers to use the multiple methods for studying the same concept to understand divergence and dissonance in results that would build into new areas of inquiry (Greene, 2007). This purpose has been tied to Greene's ideas of complementarity but the main distinction is the focus on difference and looking at areas for further investigation. In doing so, there is generative potential for gaining insight into new areas that were not previously considered and can include the use of different methodologies and philosophies for social inquiry.

And lastly, *expansion* refers to using different methods to assess different phenomena so that the scope of the study is expanded and the multiple methods to study the phenomena are expanded as well (Greene, 2007). When different methods are used

to assess different phenomena, “collectively, [the study] expands the range... well beyond the reach of a single method or methodological tradition” (Greene, 2007, p.104). There are benefits to this method as it opens up the possibility for discovering new information and tailoring a methodological design more accurately to whatever is decided as the foci for the study. This particular intention is not within the scope of the current study but the obvious benefits of this concept can be applied in future related studies.

Generally, the characteristics and intentions of mixed method designs were appropriate for the current study, which used both quantitative survey data from a secondary source and qualitative interview data. This study sought to describe and understand the relationship between social resources and level of parent involvement in early childhood programs from different perspectives. The complexity of this social phenomenon could not be fully understood with one component alone – neither survey nor interviews could capture the relationship fully in isolation. Thus, the current study sought to validate findings from a quantitative component with a qualitative component (*triangulation*). The study used a design that complimented different methods for understanding the same phenomena (*complementarity*). It used findings from one component that used survey data to inform the design and approach of the other component that employed interviews (*development*). And the study was designed with the intent of initiation as it focused on the divergence and dissonance in the findings that spurred new areas of social inquiry (*initiation*). The value and utility of a mixed methods research design will be more evident in the forthcoming discussion of the study methodology.

Current Study and Research Questions

The original purpose of the *Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation* was to look at the landscape of early childhood programs. The research questions and purpose of the original study were very explicit in that in-depth inquiry into any one area (e.g. parent involvement, professional development) was not intended. The current purpose was to take the survey data from the original *Evaluation* and move it one step further. This dissertation addressed a new set of research questions based on the PreK/PFA site-level survey, and studied a relationship between two variables discussed in the survey – social resources and levels of parent involvement.

The current study sought to 1) examine whether or not there was a statistically significant relationship between the variables *social resources* and *parent involvement* on the survey that was not due to random error and 2) to better understand the relationships between variables at the program-level by means of interviews with administrators. Together, the mixed-methods research design provided greater understanding of the complex relationship between social resources and levels of parent involvement in early childhood programs.

The research questions of the current study were divided based on the format – quantitative or qualitative – in which the responses were attained. Information of families and program characteristics collected in the original study were used to set the context and background for the current study.

Quantitative data hypothesis

Programs that offer more resources to parents will demonstrate more success in levels of parent involvement in their programs.

Qualitative data research questions

1. What types of social resources and referrals do PreK/PFA programs provide (not reflected in the survey) and are there any services that programs want to provide but can't? What prohibits or supports these programs in offering those services and getting families to use the resources?
2. How is parent involvement described in programs that offer varying numbers of social resources?
3. What are the reasons for low levels of parent involvement if all the necessary resources are provided for a participating family? Conversely, what are the reasons for the high levels of parent involvement when limited resources are provided?

Quantitative Component (Part 1)

Among the various types of research methods found in social work literature, there are both fixed and flexible modes of research. These terms originate from a fallibilistic realist perspective that believe the goal of science is to “[describe] or [understand] the properties of specific phenomena and [describe] or [understand] how those phenomena react or change in the presence or absence of other specific phenomena in an open system” (Anastas, 1999, p.20). The idea being that scientific research is fundamentally descriptive regardless of the modality.

This study employed both fixed and flexible methods of research, the first component being a type of fixed method modality using secondary survey data from the *Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation*. The survey data represented a preplanned, structured method that was designed to be invariant as the survey was completed in the field; a characteristic of fixed method research (Cresswell, 2009; Weinbach & Grinnel, 2007; Anastas, 1999). The result of the investigation was the completion of a survey by a designated sample (described below) that was treated like an aggregate group. The

findings were descriptive of what was occurring in the population at large and clarified the nature or appearance of a given phenomena (Cresswell, 2009; Anastas, 1999).

Unlike flexible methods, fixed methods research assumes the researcher is removed from the phenomena being study and is present simply to record (Cresswell, 2009). In addition, this mode of investigation records a static picture that is limited to a specific time, place, and point of view thus it cannot reflect across a length of time and space (Weinbach & Grinnel, 2007; Anastas, 1999). The results then lend themselves to descriptive quantitative analysis and each of these characteristics was evident in this study component.

The role of the researcher in the original *Evaluation* study was to distribute a statewide survey to program administrators of PreK and PFA programs and to get a snapshot of what was occurring across Illinois early childhood programs in November 2008. The survey was designed to be descriptive in nature, control for any bias in questions, and the data was treated as aggregate to describe the population that completed the survey. The original purpose of the survey was to understand what was happening in context. The current study also intended to do the same except there was a specific focus on the interplay between two phenomena in that context: the prevalence of social resources and the levels of parent involvement in early childhood programs.

Part 1: Sampling

The study's unit of analysis was Illinois PreK/PFA preschool programs funded by the Illinois Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG). Preschool sites receiving ECBG funds according to the grantee survey were asked to complete a survey in November

2008. *Appendix A* is a map of Illinois illustrating the five regions based on the regions outlined by the Department of Human Services for health districts and is the same map used by ISBE to designate the locations of the programs. These include: Region 1 (*Cook County excluding Chicago*³), Region 2 (*Collar counties around Cook County*), Region 3 (*central region including Peoria and Champaign*), Region 4 (*central/southern region including Montgomery County*), and Region 5 (*southern region of the state*). The sample in the original study was the entire population of PreK and PFA programs in Regions 1-5 in the state of Illinois. This sample was comprised of 842 sites in the state that completed the survey, $n=843/914$ (92% response rate). Findings from the study reflected the general population and can thus be generalized across all Illinois PreK and PFA programs⁴.

All completed surveys were included in the study. This decision was based in the interest of attaining a broad understanding of the relationship between the variables *social resources* and *parent involvement* across all PreK and PFA programs in the state. An alternate sampling plan had been considered that would control for certain variables including child, family, and program characteristics. These controls would be based on studies found in the literature that would sub-set data analysis based on these same characteristics. These alternate plans were ultimately abandoned because such plans

³ Chicago/Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is a receiver of ECBG funds. Chicago was excluded from the original dissemination of the web survey because an evaluation entitled the *Chicago Preschool Evaluation Project (CPEP)* had just been completed in 2008. *CPEP* surveyed Chicago-based programs in a similar fashion to what was to be attained in the *Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation*. It was later decided that CPS programs would be included the web survey component of the *Evaluation* in April 2009, however, the findings will not be included in the current study.

⁴ 73 surveys were marked as missing due to incomplete survey data or a survey that was not returned. Missing surveys account for only 8% of the total sample.

would reduce the reliability of the findings and would limit the types of statistical tests that could be employed.

As discussed in the literature review, levels of parent involvement can be associated with certain qualities of the parent and/or family unit (Wong & Hughes, 2006; Sohn & Wang, 2006; Driessen et al, 2005; Brooks-Gunn et al., 2002; Weis et al., 2003; Knopf & Swick, 2006; Anderson & Minke, 2007). Question 19 of the original survey asked for the characteristics of families in PreK/PFA programs. Respondents were given 24 options and were asked to select all characteristics of families that apply to the participants in their programs. The responses varied throughout the region but the most frequently selected characteristics were: low-income status, parent does not have a high school diploma, single parent households, blended households, teen parents, history of substance abuse, and families that receive community resources (Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation FY09 Final Report, 2009). These responses could have served as an indicator for levels of parent involvement and the responses could be used for sub-setting the data.

One option was to only sample surveys that reflected common responses indicating the above family characteristics. The concern, however, was that surveys did not reflected all these qualities consistently. One survey may have selected 2 out of the 7 most common characteristics while another survey may have noted 5 out of 7. Stratifying the data for these specific control variables would have greatly lowered the sample size for the study. This may have resulted in less reliable results.

The same concern was evident when considering a sample based on preschool site characteristics such as the size of the program, the type of curriculum used, the teacher-

student ratio, or the demographic make-up of the staff and students program. There was enough variability among programs that sampling based on specific site variables would have \also decreased the sample size and thus resulted in less reliable results as well. The extent to which findings could be generalized across the programs statewide would also be diminished with this plan.

Given these considerations, it was decided to include all completed surveys in the study. The current sampling plan allowed the examination of trends in PreK/PFA programs throughout state of Illinois. Future studies can build on this general foundation and employ sampling plans that control for the variables in a way that was not feasible for the current study.

Part 1: Research design

Statewide PreK and PFA site-level survey data on two questions from the *Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation (FY09)* was used in the current study. One questioned looked specifically at resources and referral types offered to program participants (Section 6, Question 31)⁵ and the second was a question on parent involvement (Section 6, Question 32a)⁶. The responses for these two questions were extracted from the raw data and used create a new data set. This new data set was then used to study the relationship between resources and parent involvement in PreK/PFA programs. Several statistical methods were used including the chi-square test, correlation analytic tests (Pearson and Spearman's rho), and a simple analysis of variance (ANOVA) test.

⁵ Site-level survey question on resources and referrals (Section 6, Question 31) is attached in Appendix C

⁶ Site-level survey question on parent involvement (Section 6, Question 31) is attached in Appendix C

Part 1: Measurement of quantitative data

The *independent variable* in this study was social support. The *conceptual definition* of the independent variable was as follows: Social support can be defined broadly but for the purpose of this study, the terms “social support services,” “social resources,” “social support,” “community resources,” and “social service referrals” all apply to the same concept of providing parents (and by extension, family members) with the financial, educational and/or emotional tools to support individual functioning. This study posited that early childhood programs provide many of the resources and referrals needed by at-risk families participating in their programs. These supports may include – but were not limited to – parent education, job employment support, or connecting families with social service agencies. The ultimate goal of social support provisions is to ensure children and families to remain supported inside and outside of the preschool program. The rationale follows that social support was a critical element of early childhood programs that could arguably impact at-risk families depending on the number of resources that was available and used.

The *operational definition* of the independent variable was based on the web-survey. The original survey included a section on program resources and referrals offered to parents of children enrolled in PreK/PFA programs (Section 6, Question 31). These included, but were not limited to, home visits, parent-child interaction activities, parenting skill development activities, GED classes, linking with other community resources and general social services resources. The independent variable was measured as either categorical or ratio-level data depending on the type of analysis.

The *dependent variable* in this study was parent involvement. The *conceptual definition* of the dependent variable was based on definitions found in the literature and the working definition for this study. One definition was presented by Driessen, et al. (2005) who outlined four types of parent groups with four different levels of involvement – partners, participants, delegators, and invisible parents – in order from most involved to least. These identifier outlined parent involvement within a learning setting and the characteristics range in socio-economic status (high SES = partners → low SES = invisible), level of engagement (high = partners → low = invisible) and other general characteristics including ethnic make-up, immigrant status, and English-language abilities.

Another was the study's working definition for parent involvement, as previously noted, which was the extent to which parents were engaged in a program on a voluntary basis and when that engagement was in support of their child's success in school. For the parent, this could include attending parent-teacher conferences, volunteering in the classroom, using resources or referrals offered by the program, and the on-going interactions with teacher and staff. In turn, the rationale follows that these parent involvement activities may have some degree of impact on a child including potential influence on the child's ability to thrive in school settings. These last findings were rooted and supported in the literature (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Mo & Singh, 2008; Arnold et al., 2008; DHHS-ACF, 2005; Gonzales-DeHass et al., 2005).

In relation to the hypothesis, the lower levels of parent involvement types (delegators and invisible) are two groups that match what is known of the families in

PreK/PFA programs from the survey data. Mainly, the families in this study were of lower SES, lower education levels, more involved in informal activities in schools, and more reliant on school/teachers for expertise than parents who sought active participation in the classroom or engagement in their child's progress (Driessen et al., 2005). The study also contended that parents described in these lower categories of involvement would be in greater need of social resources and thus the value and impact of such resources was relevant. Furthermore, the working definition was broad enough to encompass the characteristics that were evident in the quantitative as well as the qualitative data used in the study.

The *operational definition* of the dependent variable was measured using the PreK/PFA site-level web survey question on parent involvement (*Section 6, Question 32a*). The question asked a set of five sub-questions pertaining to parent involvement rated on a 4-point Likert scale (completely successful, mostly successful, somewhat successful, and not successful). These questions related to the *program's* perception of parent involvement and success in engaging parents with the program based on observations from the previous academic year. The dependent variable was measured as either ordinal or interval-level data depending on the employed statistical test. Two reliability tests – Pearson and Spearman's rho – were also be used on the parent involvement questions to test the validity of the responses and to ensure that all five questions were measuring the same concept. A simple ANOVA tests was used in addition to post hoc pair-wise comparisons (Tukey's and Scheffe's) to validate ANOVA findings.

Lastly, effect sizes were calculated on all pair-wise comparisons that showed statistical significance (Thalheimer & Cook, 2002).

Qualitative Component (Part 2)

Qualitative research is the most commonly termed flexible research method in which the methods of empirical inquiry are “intended to define, explore, or map the nature of emergent, complex, or poorly understood phenomena” (Anastas, 1999, p.55). This type of method is seen as increasingly more valuable for research in social work and the human services. The nature of procedures used to gather data emphasizes on discovery, flexibility, and capturing phenomena as “experience-near” to the participant and the researcher as possible (Anastas, 1999). Together, the participant and the researcher are interacting, informing each other, and there is an opportunity for co-reaction of knowledge.

Additionally, flexible methods are argued as necessary to supplant fixed methods (quantitative research) because such flexible methods represented theories used in practice and were seen as better suited for the problems seen in social work and the human services (Tyson, 1995; Gilgun, 1994). It has been characterized as being naturalistic and not manipulative (Greene, 2007; Anastas, 1999). The researcher is responsible for identifying what matters through interpretation and fully considering meaning, as it is understood in the context of the participant (Eisner, 1991). And it is employs expressive language and the presence of “voice in text” (Eisner, 1991, p36).

Kvale & Brinkmann (2009) outline 12 aspects of qualitative research interviews from a phenomenological perspective, which are also worth discussing: *Life world*,

meaning, qualitative, descriptive, specificity, deliberate naiveté, focused, ambiguity, change, sensitivity, interpersonal situation, positive experience. Qualitative research interviews reflect the everyday world in which the participant lives (life world) and seeks to find meaning within that world (meaning). The interview is not intended to quantify findings as in quantitative research but instead, it seeks to attain knowledge expressed through language and meaning interpretation (qualitative). At the same time, the interview component encourages in-depth descriptions of what is experienced, felt, and opinions with less focus on fixed comments (descriptive).

The interviews in the current study demonstrated an element of specificity wherein the line of question was directly related to specific situations and contexts, and meaning was found within those descriptions of those situations and contexts (specificity). Simultaneously, the researcher exhibited a level of what Kvale & Brinkmann (2009) term *deliberate naiveté* because the interviewer was supposed to be open to “new and unexpected phenomena, rather than having readymade categories and schemes of interpretation” (p. 30). Furthermore, the collected interviews focused on a topic of research through open ended questions (focused) and relied on the ambiguous nature of responses to open doors to interpretative options (ambiguity).

Additional strengths of the qualitative research interview evident in this study, relate to the implications for the participant. Kvale & Brinkmann (2009) suggest that the line of questioning within the interview may spur a process of reflection on the part of the interviewee as the subject may change their descriptions in the interview process (change). In such cases, the interviewer must be able to recognize and be sensitive to

potential changes in the discussion that has implications for the research study (sensitivity). Moreover, the interview process is interactive between two people and thus considerations for the possible anxiety or defense evoked in the process is critical (interpersonal situation) to ensure that the experience of interviewing is positive for the participant. As noted, “a well-conducted research interview may be a rare and enriching experience for the subject, who may obtain new insights into his or her life situation” (positive experience) (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.32).

All of these intentions were considered in Part 2 of the study. The interview component provided a more in-depth inquiry into programs that was not originally intended because the component asked questions regarding the purpose, utility, and barriers to providing social resources in PreK/PFA programs not previously asked. The interviews delved directly into the topic of parent involvement, asking questions about the levels of parent involvement in the program and challenges in engaging parents. Additionally, the interviews identified whether there was a difference between the ways in which parent involvement was described in programs offering a varying number of social resources to participants.

The interview component supplanted the survey data and produced an opportunity to gain experience-near information that was naturalistic in nature, understood through researcher interpretation, which gave a voice to administrators who completed the original survey. At the same time, the format evoked the various qualities of qualitative research that strengthened the current study, giving way to triangulation and the emergence of new material.

Part 2: Sampling

A purposive sample of ten administrators was drawn from PreK/PFA preschool sites that completed the Web-survey. These administrators were selected because they have expert knowledge of their programs and spoke to the utility and challenges around providing social resource, the extent to which resources are used in programs, and issues around engaging parents. 843 participants completed the original survey and 54 out of the 843 participants fell under the sampling criteria outlined for the interview component. Participants from these local regions were contacted based on the information they provided in the survey⁷.

The sampling criteria used the quadrant method to determine four categories of participants based on the extreme frequency of scores for social resources and levels of parent involvement on the *Evaluation* survey. For the criteria based on social resources, the study selected two groups of candidates in programs that offered a high number of resources (11 or more) and programs that offered low number of resources (4 or less). For sample selection based on parent involvement, two groups of candidates were selected: programs that reported all responses as “completely successful” (high indicator) and the other with all responses as “somewhat successful/not successful” (low indicator). Very few respondents selected the lowest indicator (not successful) therefore this option was combined with the second lowest indicator (somewhat successful).

⁷ Respondents were informed on the survey consent form of the possibility that they may be contacted in the future regarding their responses. By completing the survey and providing contact information, the respondents thereby agreed to being contacted if necessary according to the consent form. An additional consent form was sent when the participant agreed to be part of the study.

The categories were sorted into four categories illustrated in Figure 3:

Figure 4: Qualitative data - Sampling criteria by category

<p>Category I</p> <p>High Resources</p> <p>High Parent Involvement</p> <p>(3 participants)</p>	<p>Category II</p> <p>High Resources</p> <p>Low Parent Involvement</p> <p>(2 participants)</p>
<p>Category III</p> <p>Low Resources</p> <p>High Parent Involvement</p> <p>(2 participants)</p>	<p>Category IV</p> <p>Low Resources</p> <p>Low Parent Involvement</p> <p>(3 participants)</p>

These four sample categories reflect four very contrasting points of view. The most interesting comments were anticipated from Categories II and III because these groups represent outcomes that were contrary to the hypothesis presented in the quantitative portion of the study.

Part 2: Research design

Identifying the participants

The first step of the Administrator Interview component was to send out a pre-notification letter to PreK and/or PFA administrators sampled for this sub-study to ensure adequate response rates (*Appendix D*). The ultimate goal was to get 10 out of the total potential administrators contacted for the final study. Invitation emails were sent to those who fell under the categorical sampling criteria, which included up to 54 potential participants total: 34 in Category I, 5 in Category II, 4 in Category III, and 11 in Category IV.

All potential participants were contacted in Category II and III because there were so few potential participants. For Category I and IV, ten of the total number was contacted initially and a sample group was selected for the initial contact list. Ultimately, three participants were selected for both Categories I and IV while two participants were selected for both Categories II and III.

The notification letter provided a brief description of the interview component and informed recipients that those who were selected could be contacted within the next few days. Administrators were contacted by phone to confirm participation. Final sample selections were chosen based on geographic location and type of program. The goal was to have as close to a representative sample of PreK/PFA programs that would reflect the regions in the state (Regions 1-5) and the types of programs (public vs. private programs; school-based vs. community-based programs). Upon confirmation of the administrator's participation, an email was sent with Informed Verbal Consent Form (*Appendix F*) and the interview protocol (*Appendix G*). For those who expressed interest in participating but were not selected, an email was sent to thank potential participants for their interest and they were informed that they were not been selected to participate in the study.

Conducting the administrator interview

The purpose of the administrator interview was to verify findings from the web-survey and to address the current research questions for the study. The interviews were conducted in-person or on the phone⁸ at a date and time of the administrator's choosing. The interviews lasted between 45-60 minutes and the format was semi-structured with part open-ended and close-ended questions. The protocol was piloted with one participant

⁸ Only participants from Regions 4 and 5 had their interviews conducted by phone.

prior so that adjustments could be made for length and clarity. All interviews were audio-recorded and the interviewer asked the administrator for verbal permission to record the interview before beginning the interview. The interviewer also reviewed the Informed Verbal Consent form prior to conducting the interview. A summary of the interview was sent to the administrator via email after the interview to ensure accuracy of the material (member checking).

Description of all potential risks

For all proposed research activities, any potential risks that exist were minimal. No form of deception was included in the administrator interview and most of the questions related to the program's operations, services, and the population served. While some questions solicited personal feelings or beliefs of the administrator, each individual had complete discretion as to which questions to answer. The interview was not designed to provide information on the effectiveness of a particular program, but rather to gain a deeper understanding of how the program operates in practice. Although the interview could have potentially identified barriers in the program, which may be threatening to the participant, the protocol was designed in a manner that focused on a balance between strengths and challenges in the program. Administrators were encouraged to speak about successes as much as potential barriers that could be identified during the interview and this balance was believed to ameliorate any potential risk of discomfort to the participants.

Procedures to be used to obtain informed consent

Confirmed participants were sent the Informed Verbal Consent form as mentioned. This form included a description of the purpose of the study and the rights of the participant in the study. The form was reviewed again prior to the interview at which time, consent was obtained and the interview was conducted.

Description of how subjects' welfare and confidentiality will be safeguarded

All data collected was held in the strictest confidence. Electronic materials were stored on a password-protected computer and were accessible only to researcher working on the project. All participating programs and individuals were assigned a de-identifiable, unique ID number. Once ID numbers were assigned, any identifying information was removed from all documents. A document containing the subjects' names and corresponding ID numbers was created in the event it was necessary to contact the subject(s) to clarify a comment and this document was also be password-protected. All recorded materials and notes have been stored in a locked cabinet for the duration of the study and will be destroyed after the oral defense.

Part 2: Measurement of qualitative data

Qualitative procedures involve a different approach to scholarly inquiry. The approach is based on a distinct philosophical basis and employs different strategies for inquiry, data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Cresswell, 2009). The following is a brief introduction to the purpose and methodological plan for measuring the study's qualitative data.

This study uses multiple sources of data (in the form of ten interviews) to understand a relationship between social resources and levels of parent involvement in PreK and PFA programs. The study took an inductive analytic stance to data analysis that organized the interview data into patterns, categories, and themes that were constantly refined into more abstract units of information (Cresswell, 2009). The approach focused on the meanings that interviewees attribute to the issue and the study was interpretive in nature meaning that the researcher made interpretations of what was seen, heard, and understood in the process (Cresswell, 2009).

These elements collectively were used to organize and analyze the qualitative data. The ten interviews were organized by themes from the literature, congruence with the survey, and themes that emerged in the interview transcripts during inductive analysis. The study looked at the meaning that interviewees shared about the topic and used member checking – sending the material back to participants to confirm the material – in order to validate the data. Lastly, the data was interpreted with Particular attention to researcher and participant biases that emerged in the data collection process.

Moreover, the qualitative component used a complementary approach to qualitative research, designed to produce findings that would be triangulated with the quantitative data in this study. The interview component also generated new information for developing new research questions. Questions 1-6 of the interview protocol (see Appendix G) were questions were used to triangulate with the survey data. Questions 7-12 built on the findings of both the survey and initial portion of the interview and produced more information pertaining to the success and challenges in using or providing

resources, the types of resources that families need, and understanding the relationship between the number of resources and parent involvement levels in a manner that was not achieved or intended in the survey. The data collected from the interviews was transcribed and analyzed using Atlas.ti software and findings are presented in Chapter 4.

Summary of the Research Methodology

As previously stated, this was a descriptive study using a mixed-methods approach. The study addressed research questions that built off the original *Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation* and contextual information relating to the characteristics of children, families, and programs from the original study was shared to place the current study in context. This was followed by Part 1 of the study that took secondary quantitative data from a statewide survey previously distributed to PreK/PFA administrators funded by the Illinois Early Childhood Block Grant. Responses to two questions on the original survey were extracted from the raw data set and analyzed for the potential relationship between number of resources/referrals and levels of parent involvement reported by survey respondents. The second component –interviews with PreK/PFA administrators – took a flexible research approach using qualitative interview data. The sample was a purposive group of ten administrators who were asked to participate in a semi-structured interview that delved deeper into the research questions posed in the current study. Rich, descriptive data about challenges to providing services, the adequacy of supports to families, and barriers to engaging parents were better collected through these interviews and the information was used to triangulate with survey data findings.

Careful consideration of a study's research design is always necessary in order to minimize the appearance of bias, to ensure ethical standards are maintained, and to increase reliability and validity of measures that may produce more sound findings. The original survey addressed each of these points. First, the appearance of bias was minimized because the survey was sent to *all* administrators who were receiving ECBG funds to run a PreK or PFA program throughout the state of Illinois according to Illinois State Board of Education records. To ensure ethical compliance, the Erikson Institute Ethics Review Board approved a protocol in which all respondents were informed of the study prior to the distribution of the survey and an informed consent form was emailed prior to the interview and reviewed again before the interview. Completion of the survey was understood to be an acknowledgment of respondent accepting the benefits and risks of completing the survey, and consent to be contacted in the future regarding this study.

The web-survey was pilot tested and the responses were discussed among several program administrators and the research team to ensure the reliability and validity of the instrument. The survey questions were geared towards attaining a descriptive 'snapshot' of programs and respondents were asked to simply report what they saw in their given programs within the appropriate fields. Within the large representative population of PreK/PFA programs, the survey responses were stable among respondents by region in the state and across programs with similar characteristics (e.g. child demographic was similar or program make-up was similar). Very few administrators reported confusion about how to answer the survey questions either and the feedback from the survey suggests that the instrument was easy to understand, it recorded what was intended, and

responses could adequately reflect what is occurring across PreK/PFA programs in the state.

Part 2 of study (administrator interviews) employed a research design that had the same goals of minimizing bias, ensuring adherence to ethical standards, and increasing reliability and validity of the instrument. In order to minimize bias among the ten administrators/programs that participated in the interviews, aside from the category distinction (high vs. low resource providers), the sample programs were similar in terms of child, family, and staff characteristics and curriculum used. The Erikson Institute Ethics Review Board reviewed this component that built off the previously approved survey instrument and the approved protocol was used. This protocol included a notification letter informing of the study, follow-up calls and emails for those who are interested in participating, and the review of an Informed Consent Form prior to beginning the interview process.

In order to increase the reliability and validity of the instrument, the interview protocol was pilot tested with one program administrator included in the final sample. Replication was also used to test the soundness of the protocol, which was why candidates were chosen from four categories. The semi-structured, open- and closed-ended protocol explicitly asked the research questions of this study and the format helped to ensure that questions would be asked consistently across all interview participants. Lastly, an audit trail for each interview participant was compiled. This audit trail included personal memos and notes recording the researcher's personal account of the interviews, description of possible situations that could affect the findings, and any other

observations that could help control for researcher bias. These notes were considered in the final analysis of the interview data.

In sum, this mixed methods approach was a strong research design that demonstrated the necessary and sufficient conditions for addressing the research questions in this study. The elements of the current study design were ideal for using secondary data and interviews to examine the relationship between social resources and levels of parent involvement in Illinois PreK and PFA programs. And ultimately, the subsequent analysis of both components was informative for the fields of social work and early childhood education.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Quantitative Component: Data Analysis

The purpose of the quantitative component in this study was to test the one-tailed research hypothesis – *PreK and PFA programs that offer more social resources to parents are associated with higher success rates around parent involvement* – using survey data from the original *Evaluation* study. The administrators of PreK and PFA programs completed the *Evaluation* survey thus responses reflect only the perceptions of the respondent. In addition, the information administrators have provided represents program-level data only. Student- or parent-level data was not included in this study nor the original study.

The independent variable – social resources – was based on responses from Question 31 on the original *Evaluation* survey. The question consisted of 12 options listing possible resources/referrals offered in programs and one fill-in space for respondents to note any additional resources not otherwise listed. Respondents were asked to check all resources that apply to their respective PreK/PFA program. The written responses (option M) were used to supplement the qualitative component of the study. The dependent variable – parent involvement – was based on responses from Question 32a, which consisted of five sub-questions relating to levels of parent involvement in the respective program. The response options were *completely successful, mostly successful,*

somewhat successful, and *not successful* and respondents were asked to select one response per question. The responses from these two questions were then compiled into one data set for analysis.

BOX 1: Operational definitions for the variables – Site-level survey

31) Operational definition for the independent variable (social resources)

Section 6, Question 31: Which of the following types of services does the PreK/PFA program offer to or refer parents of children enrolled? (*The service is provided by the PreK/PFA program or referrals are made for services available in the community*). (Mark all that apply).

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> a. Home visits | <input type="checkbox"/> g. Health and nutrition workshop/class |
| <input type="checkbox"/> b. One-to-one consultation/counseling | <input type="checkbox"/> h. Adult literacy/job development activities |
| <input type="checkbox"/> c. Parent-child interaction activities | <input type="checkbox"/> i. GED classes |
| <input type="checkbox"/> d. Parenting skill development activities | <input type="checkbox"/> j. Social services resources |
| <input type="checkbox"/> e. Parent resource library | <input type="checkbox"/> k. Linking with other community resources |
| <input type="checkbox"/> f. Other parent education/support activities | <input type="checkbox"/> l. Our program does not provide any parent resources |
| <input type="checkbox"/> m. Other, please specify: _____ | |

32a) Operational definition for the dependent variable (parent involvement)

Section 6, Question 32a: In your opinion, how successful was your program in the 2007-2008 school year with regard to the following statements about parent involvement (*parents of children who are attending the PreK/PFA program*). (Mark one for each item).

	Completely successful	Mostly successful	Somewhat successful	Not successful
a. Program staff and parents have effective and meaningful two-way communication on a regular basis	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. Our program helps promote and support parenting skills	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. Our program integrally involves parents in assisting their children's learning	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. Parents feel welcome in the program	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e. Program staff actively seek parent's support and involvement	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

In order to analyze the site-level survey data, the following steps and tests were used:

1. Raw data responses for the two questions were compiled and cleaned using SAS software.
2. Conduct reliability tests on the variable *parent involvement* using Pearson's *r* and Spearman's *rho* correlation analysis.

Analysis #1: Chi-square test of association.

3. Define “high” and “low” program categories based on frequencies of the responses on *social resources*.
4. Use the chi-square test to determine the significance of the relationship between “high” and “low” resource providers and the five questions on levels of parent involvement based on a scale of “completely successful,” “mostly successful,” and “somewhat successful.”

Analysis #2: Correlation analysis.

5. Create a single ratio-level score for the *social resources* (IV) and a single ratio-level score for *parent involvement* (DV), and conduct a correlation analysis on the two variables.

Analysis #3: One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA).

6. Define three value categories (Most, Some, Few resources) for the independent variable *social resources* based on the frequencies of the data.
7. Use ANOVA analysis to test the relationships between the mean value of each value category of *social resources* and the mean value for *parent involvement*.
8. Conduct post hoc pair-wise comparisons to verify the comparative means found in the ANOVA analysis.
9. Calculate effect sizes for the post hoc comparisons that demonstrated statistical significance.

Step 1: Creating a raw data set

The first steps of the study required extracting the responses on questions 31 and 32a from 843 surveys and import the data into a new database. The data was then cleaned of any error entries. For example, respondents that did not fully complete the

five sub-questions of 32a were cleaned to reflect a missing response instead of recording partial data. The social resources question (31) allowed for administrators to select up to 12 resource options and the data was stored with each individual selections as well as an aggregate score for the question i.e. administrator selected: home-visiting services and parent resource library (2 out of 12 resources selected).

The parent involvement question (32) consisted of five sub-questions with four self-report options and each response level was given a value: *Completely successful* = 1, *Mostly successful* = 2, *Somewhat successful* = 3, and *Not successful* = 4. The data was stored with a score for each sub-question. Aggregate scores for the entire question 32 responses were also stored. For example, one administrator selected ‘*Completely successful*’ on 4 out of 5 questions (total value = 4) and “*Somewhat successful*” on 1 out of 5 questions (total value = 3). Her total score was 7 (total value = 4+3). Total values that were lower (5=lowest) denoted higher success in parent involvement based on the survey. Total values that were higher (20=highest) denoted lower levels of success in parent involvement. Very few administrators responded “*Not successful* = 4” on all sub-questions, which would have resulted in a total score of 20. Given this scoring and clean data, this new set was used for analysis.

Step 2: Conducting reliability tests

In examining the data for this study, issues around face validity came to light for the Question 32a on levels of parent involvement. At the surface, some of the questions did not seem to reflect a measure of parent involvement. For example, sub-question E states: “Program staff actively seek parent’s support and involvement.” Although this question has been seen in other surveys assessing levels of parent involvement, it didn’t

appear to be a related question if reviewed alone and without the context of the other questions.

To ensure that the variable *parent involvement* was reliable and measures the same concept, the study conducted a number of correlations tests between the parent involvement sub-questions (see Table 2 and Table 3) resulting in a Pearson's product moment correlation coefficient (Pearson's r) value and Spearman's ρ nonparametric test value. Pearson's r was an appropriate parametric test that assumed the variable was at an interval or ratio levels of measurement and normally distributed within the population, applicable to the data in this test. The Spearman's ρ test was a particularly appropriate test for use with rank-order data, which also applied. Values ranging -1 to 1 denote a strong correlation between variables whereas a value closer to zero shows a weaker correlation.

Table 2: Survey Question 32a on levels of parent involvement

<i>In your opinion, how successful was your program in the 2007-2008 school year with regard to the following statements about parent involvement:</i>
32a. Program staff and parents have effective meaningful two-way communication on a regular basis
32b. Our program helps promote and support parenting skills
32c. Our program integrally involves parents in assisting their children's learning
32d. Parents feel welcome in the program
32e. Program staff actively seek parents' support and involvement

Each question was paired with each subsequent question. That is, Question A was tested against questions B, C, D, and E. Question B was tested against question C, D, E and so forth. The results were as follows:

Table 3: Correlation test on Q32a (parent involvement) outcomes

<i>Analysis pairs</i>	<i>Pearson's r</i>	<i>Spearman's rho</i>
Question A – B	0.5578	0.5600
Question A – C	0.4859	0.4913
Question A – D	0.4641	0.4815
Question A – E	0.4695	0.4807
Question B – C	0.6327	0.6305
Question B – D	0.3899	0.3969
Question B – E	0.5049	0.5044
Question C – D	0.4354	0.4338
Question C – E	0.5672	0.5441
Question D – E	0.5909	0.5932

Sample size = 709; Frequency missing = 134

The findings showed a generally positive correlation between the questions wherein Pearson's *r* and Spearman's *rho* values ranged from .40 to .63. As noted, the Spearman's *rho* test was appropriate for rank-order data and the values denoted an adequate level of correlation between questions (see Table 3). Although some questions were more related than others (e.g. questions B and C or D and E), together the questions on parent involvement produced correlation values that suggested the questions sufficiently measure the same concept. This outcome supported the use of the mean value for the variable *parent involvement* in subsequent statistical tests.

Analysis #1: Chi-square Test of Association

This study used the chi-square test to determine whether there was a statistically significant association between the variables *parent involvement* and *social resources* that could not be explained by random error.

Step 3: Defining categories based on resource frequencies

To begin analysis, the study distinguished between programs that offered high number of resources versus programs that offered low numbers of resources, and

compared these two groups against the sub-questions on parent involvement. In order to define the categories of high and low resource providers, the frequency of the responses on social resources were reviewed. Respondents were asked to mark all resources that apply to their program and could select anywhere from 1-12 options. Table 4 shows the category break down for the “high” and “low” resource provider groups based on the number of resource options that were selected on the *Evaluation* survey.

Table 4: Program categories for “low” versus “high” resource providers (n=757)

<i>Category</i>	<i>No. of Resources Options Selected (max =12)</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Cumulative %</i>
Low	1	5	.66
	2	7	1.59
	3	19	4.10
	4	51	10.83
	5	64	19.29
	6	125	35.80
	7	86	47.16*
High	8	90	59.05*
	9	79	69.48
	10	77	79.66
	11	145	98.81
	12	9	100
<i>Missing Frequency: 86</i>			

The literature provided no conceptual or operational definitions for social resources in this study. Other studies that looked at the impact of resources on child or parent outcomes provided no concrete examples of how to categorize a program as either a high or low providers of resources and/or services. Without a frame of reference and based on the uniqueness of the survey, only relevant to Illinois PreK and PFA programs, it was decided to define high and low categories based around the 50th percentile. Programs were considered “low resource providers” if that program selected 1-7 resource options on the survey. Programs were considered “high resource providers” if 8 or more

options were selected. Given this breakdown, approximately 47% of the programs fell within the low range and the remaining 53% fell in the high range and these categories were used to conduct the chi-square tests (see Table 4).

Step 4: Chi-Square analysis: Program type versus levels of parent involvement

The chi-square test of association is a widely used nonparametric statistical test that requires only nominal (categorical) level measurements for the independent and dependent variables (Weinbach & Grinnell, 2007). By using chi-square between variables, the study was able to determine whether or not an association between nominal variables in a sample was so strong it could not be attributed to a sampling error. The current study proposed a relationship between social resources and levels of parent involvement based on the responses from the survey data with the hypothesis: *PreK and PFA programs that offer more social resources to parents are associated with higher success rates around parent involvement.*

Using chi-square analysis, each chi-square test compared two categories of programs against three types of parent involvement responses: Completely, Mostly, or Somewhat Successful. “Not Successful” was a fourth option but because so few respondents selected this option, these responses were not included out of concern for skewing the data findings.

Chi-square results

A summary of the chi-square value, degrees of freedom and *p*-values are noted below (see Table 5) and full descriptions of the chi-square tests can be found in the appendix (Appendix C).

Table 5: Chi-square test findings

Question	χ^2 value	DF	P-value
32a: Program staff and parents have effective meaningful two-way communication on a regular basis	$\chi^2=11.31$	df=2	$p<.004$
32b: Our program helps promote and support parenting skills	$\chi^2=43.93$	df=2	$p<.0001$
32c: Our program integrally involves parents in assisting their children's learning.	$\chi^2=13.03$	df=2	$p<.002$
32d: Parents feel welcome in the program.	$\chi^2=2.80$	df=2	$p<.247$
32e: Program staff actively seek parents' support and involvement	$\chi^2=20.53$	df=2	$p<.0001$

In a chi-square analysis, the p -value corresponds to the level of significance and indicates the probability that sampling error has produced the relationship between the variables being tested. Traditionally, a p -value of .05 serves as the cutoff point for determining whether or not we can reject the null hypothesis for a one-tailed test applicable for the current study. For this study, the null hypothesis states there is no relationship between the variables.

Box 2: Chi-square test for question 32a

Question 32a: Program staff and parents have effective meaningful two-way communication on a regular basis. The findings for 32a suggest the probability of the relationship between the independent and dependent variable is due to sampling error is $p=.004$, making it unlikely that the association is due to random chance.

Chi-square for Question 32a

Frequency Percent	(1) Completely Successful	(2) Mostly Successful	(3) Somewhat Successful	TOTAL
High Resource Provider	188 26.55	187 26.41	10 1.41	385 54.38
Low Resource Provider	157 22.18	140 19.77	26 3.67	323 45.62
Total	345 48.73	327 46.19	36 5.08	708 100.00

Frequency Missing = 48

$\chi^2=11.31$, df=2, $p<.05$

The chi-square test for each sub-question on parent involvement (except question 32d) resulted in p -values below the traditional .05 rejection level suggesting there was a relationship between variables that was not due to random sampling error. Box 2 illustrates one of the chi-square tests with strong findings that support a association between the variables in this study, $\chi^2 (2, N=708) = 11.31, p<.05$. Question 32a “*Parent staff and parents have effective meaningful two-way communication on a regular basis*” had a p -value of .004, a value well below the .05 rejection level which allowed us to reject the null hypothesis.

Question 32d “parents feel welcome in the program,” resulted in a p -value greater than the .05 rejection level on a one-tailed test ($p=.247$) and it is possible the relationship between the value categories for resources and this question was not sufficiently strong and may be due to sampling error. Overall, the chi-square findings suggested there was a positive association between the variables that was not due to sampling error and further tests examined the strength of that association.

Analysis #2: Correlation Analysis

Step 5: Conducting a correlation analysis on single, ratio-level data

This study conducted correlation tests (Pearson’s r and Spearman’s ρ) by using the mean value of all responses for both variables *social resources* and *parent involvement*. Using the mean value allowed both variables to be read as ratio-level data, which was necessary for basic correlation analysis. Operating under the same premise of testing the hypothesis – *PreK and PFA programs that offer more social resources to parents are associated with higher success rates around parent involvement* – the

findings of the correlation analysis are summarized in the following tables (see Table 6,

Table 7):

Table 6: Simple statistics used for the correlation analysis (social resources vs. parent involvement)

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Sum	Min	Max
Parent involvement (DV)	709	7.95	2.41	5635	5.00	15.00
Social resources (IV)	757	7.74	2.50	5856	1.00	12.00

Table 7: Pearson's r Correlation Coefficient

	Parent involvement (DV)
Social resources (IV)	-0.22 <.0001 709

$r = -0.22, p = .0001$

The p -value level of significance ($p < .0001$) indicated the null hypothesis was rejected and the one-tailed research hypothesis was supported. That is, there was a statistically significant relationship between the variables that was not due to sampling error. The findings also supported the hypothesis wherein high levels of social resources were associated with high levels of parent involvement. The correlation coefficient $r = -0.22$ value denoted a positive relationship based on the values assigned to each parent involvement indicator. Lower numeric values were associated with the response indicators for higher levels of success in parent involvement and vice versa on the survey thus a negative coefficient accurately depicted the relationship that would support the study's hypothesis.

Interestingly however, the correlation coefficient ($r = -0.22$) indicated that the effect of variance for one variable on the other was 4 percent (r^2). This means that only

4% of the variance in parent involvement levels was attributed to the number of resources in a program. The other 96% of variance in parent involvement levels could be explained by another variable not identified. At the same time, this was a very low correlation value that did not tell us the magnitude or practical significance of the differences between the ‘levels of parent involvement – number of social resources’ relationship. In sum, the correlation analysis found there was a positive relationship between the variables, but only 4% of the variance in parent involvement could be linked to social resources and the effect sizes could not be verified based on such a low coefficient. Further investigation with the qualitative component was further necessitated given these results.

Analysis #3: One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

Step 6: Define three value categories for social resources (IV)

A one-way ANOVA test can be used when a study has one independent variable that has three or more value categories and one dependent variable that is continuous. In this first one-way ANOVA test, the independent variable *social resource* was defined with three value categories based on the number of resources selected survey data: “Few resources” (1-4 resources selected), “Some resources” (5-8 resources selected) and “Most resources” (9 or more resources selected). These groups were tested against the mean value for the dependent variable *parent involvement*.

The first step was to define the three value categories for the independent variable. As noted in the chi-square test, the literature provided no conceptual or operational definitions for defining social resources levels and there was no frame of

reference for defining value categories due to the uniqueness of the *Evaluation* survey.

Thus, the number of categories (three) was selected because it was necessary for conducting the ANOVA analysis. Subsequently, the values for the three groups were based on the frequency of selected resources that could be divided into three different categories. Table 8 shows the three value categories for the variable *social resources*.

Table 8: Value categories for the independent variable social resources

<i>Social Resources Categories</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Cumulative Frequency</i>	<i>Cumulative Percent</i>
Group 1: Few resources	82	10.83	82	10.83
Group 2: Some resources	365	48.22	447	59.05
Group 3: Most resources	310	40.95	757	100.00

Frequency Missing = 86

Step 7: One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA)

The ANOVA examined the difference between the mean value of each value category of social resources (Few, Some, Most) and the mean value for parent involvement. The result was a powerful parametric test that identified relationships between variables that may have been missed using other tests. The ANOVA analysis produced an *F*-value (*F* ratio) that was used to determine whether it was justifiable to reject a null hypothesis. The analysis was significant, $F(2,708) = 23.19$, $p = .0001$, and so one can reject the null hypothesis stating there was no relationship between the variables. As the value for *F* increases, the *p*-value decreases and in this test, there was a large *F* value ($F=23.19$) and a *p*-value less than $<.0001$ suggesting there was significant relationship between the variables that was not due to sampling error (see Table 9). This result was similar to the chi-square test and the correlation analysis.

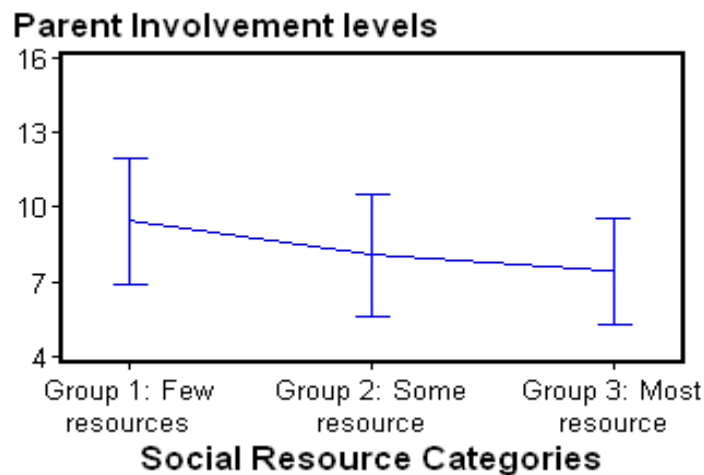
The ANOVA test also produced a plot graph output that summarized the mean value for parent involvement based on the resource categories. There was a positive relationship between the variables in which higher levels of social resources were associated with programs with higher levels of parent involvement (Figure 4). The same value formats were used for the parent involvement indicators wherein lower numeric values reflect higher success in parent involvement and vice versa, based on the survey. Therefore, the findings of the ANOVA were similar to those found in the correlation analysis and supported the hypothesis being tested. The use of post hoc pair-wise comparisons were then used to confirm the ANOVA results.

Table 9: ANOVA findings

<i>Source</i>	<i>DF</i>	<i>Sum of Squares</i>	<i>Mean Square</i>	<i>F-Value</i>	<i>P-value</i>
Model	2	253.78	126.89	23.19	<.0001
Error	706	3863.30	5.47		
Corrected Total	708	4117.07			

$F(2,708) = 23.19, p < .0001$

Figure 5: ANOVA Plot of findings based on social resource category and mean value for parent involvement



Step 8: Post hoc pair-wise comparisons

Post-hoc comparisons allow us to reexamine the results of an ANOVA analysis.

This test used pair-wise comparisons that examined the difference in means between groups tested in the ANOVA analysis and determined whether there was statistical significance between group values at the standard .05-level for one-tailed tests. The varying results in the ANOVA necessitated use of the two commonly used post hoc comparison tests: Tukey's HSD method and the Scheffe test.

Tukey's Studentized Range (HSD) test controls the Type I error rate and was used to compare the three categories of social resources for the independent variable in pairs (e.g. Group 1: Few resources vs. Group 3: Most resources) against the mean value for parent involvement levels. The test produced values for the difference between means and simultaneous 95% confidence limits. For this test, all pair-wise comparisons using Tukey's method showed statistical significance at the 0.05-level for one-tailed tests (Table 10).

Table 10: Tukey's HSD method for ANOVA post hoc comparisons (critical value = 3.322)

<i>Social Resources: Category Comparison Group 1: Few Resources, Group 2: Some Resources, Group 3: Most resources</i>	<i>Difference Between Means</i>	<i>Simultaneous 95% Confidence Limits</i>		<i>Comparison Significant at the 0.05 level (*)</i>
Group 2: Some vs. Group 1: Few	-1.36	-2.07	-0.65	*
Group 3: Most vs. Group 1: Few	-2.03	-2.74	-1.31	*
Group 3: Most vs. Group 2: Some	-0.66	-1.10	-0.23	*

The Scheffe's Test for post hoc comparisons controls for Type I error rates and generally has a higher Type II error rate than Tukey's for all pair-wise comparisons.

Despite the distinction, the Scheffe's test found similar findings in which all pair-wise comparisons showed statistical significance at the 0.05-level for one-tailed tests (Table 11). These results suggested that the relationship between parent involvement and social resources, as described ANOVA, was statistically significant and not due to sampling error. Effect sizes calculations would illustrate the magnitude of the relationship.

Table 11: Scheffe's test for ANOVA post hoc comparisons (critical value of $F = 3.00848$)

<i>Social Resources: Category Comparison Group 1: Few Resources, Group 2: Some Resources, Group 3: Most resources</i>	<i>Difference Between Means</i>	<i>Simultaneous 95% Confidence Limits</i>		<i>Comparison Significant at the 0.05 level (*)</i>
Group 2: Some vs. Group 1: Few	-1.36	-2.10	-0.62	*
Group 3: Most vs. Group 1: Few	-2.03	-2.77	-1.28	*
Group 3: Most vs. Group 2: Some	-0.66	-1.12	-0.21	*

Step 9: Calculating effect sizes for the post hoc comparisons

Statistical tests like the ANOVA tell us the likelihood that experimental results differ from chance expectations but effect-size measurements can tell us the magnitude of the effect of the treatment (Thalheimer & Cook, 2002). Effect sizes (Cohen's *d*) allow us to compare the magnitude of treatments from one group to another by looking at the difference between two means divided by the standard deviation of the two conditions (Thalheimer & Cook, 2002). This study calculated the effect size for the ANOVA post hoc comparisons that demonstrated statistical significance at the 0.05-level. According to Table 10 and 11, all three post hoc pair-wise comparisons showed statistical significance thus effect sizes for each test was calculated.

To attain the Cohen's *d* effect size, the study used the following equation appropriate when the sample groups are not equal, the degrees of freedom are greater than 1, and there are multiple condition levels for the sample category (social resources).

$$ES_{SM} \text{ (Cohen's } d) = \frac{X_{G1} - X_{G2}}{S_P}$$

$$S_P = \sqrt{\frac{[(n_{A1} - 1) S_{A1}^2 + (n_{A2} - 1) S_{A2}^2]}{[n_{A1} + n_{A2} - 2]}} * \sqrt{\frac{1}{n_{A1}} + \frac{1}{n_{A2}}} \quad (1)$$

Where: **ES** = Effect Size

X_{G1} – X_{G2} = Difference Between Group Means (values in the post hoc table)

S_P = Sample Distribution of Difference Between Means of Pair-wise Groups; The sample pool of distribution for the difference between means when the two samples are not equal in size

n_{A1} and **n_{A2}** = Group observations for two samples

S²_{A1} and **S²_{A2}** = Sample variation of groups A₁ and A₂ respectively

The group observations (**n_{A1}** and **n_{A2}**) and the sample variation/standard deviation (**S²_{A1}** and **S²_{A2}**) values inputted into the equation are noted in Table 12. The results of the effect size calculation for each pair-wise comparison are noted in Table 13.

Table 12: Mean values for variable social resources used to determine effect sizes

<i>Social Resources: Category</i>	<i>N Obs</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
Group 1: Few resources	82	3.41	0.89	1.00	4.00
Group 2: Some resources	365	6.55	1.05	5.00	8.00
Group 3: Most resources	310	10.27	0.88	9.00	12.00

Table 13: Effects size for ANOVA post hoc pair-wise comparison

<i>Social Resources: Category Comparison Group 1: Few Resources, Group 2: Some Resources, Group 3: Most resources</i>	<i>Diff Between Means</i>	<i>Comparison Significant at the 0.05 level (*)</i>	<i>Effect Size</i>	<i>Magnitude of Effect</i>
Group 1: Few vs. Group 2: Some	1.36	*	10.90	Large
Group 1: Few vs. Group 3: Most	2.03	*	18.53	Large
Group 2: Some vs. Group 3: Most	0.66	*	8.76	Large

A Cohen's *d* value of 0.2 to 0.3 denotes a "small effect." Values around 0.5 show a "medium effect" and values 0.8 to infinity reflect a "large effect" size. Together, these values denote the magnitude of the relationship being studied. Cohen's *d* values typically range from 0 to 1 but that wasn't the case in the ANOVA. The results in Table 13 showed very large effect sizes for each post hoc comparison significant at the 0.05-level for a one-tailed test. The reason the effect size values were larger than 1 was because the interval measures between the parent involvement levels (four interval levels – Completely, Mostly, Somewhat, Not Successful) against the social resource groups (three – Most, Some, Few) (see Table 12). The small interval values resulted in very small standard deviation values for each category. When one calculates a large difference in means against a small standard deviation value, the result is an inflated effect size.

In sum, the results of the ANOVA showed a positive relationship between the variables *social resources* and *parent involvement* wherein higher values in one variable resulted in higher values in the other and vice versa. The relationship was statistically significant at the standard 0.05-level for a one-tailed test, meaning that there was indeed a relationship between the variables that was not due to sampling error, and the magnitude

of that relationship was large based on the effect size calculations. These findings supported the hypothesis and were triangulated with the qualitative component.

Qualitative Component: Data Analysis

The quantitative findings from the *Evaluation* survey demonstrated that there was a statistically significant association – inverse relationships at times – between the number of social resources and levels of parent involvement in Illinois PreK/PFA programs. Unfortunately, the relationships between variables were limited only to the responses reflected in the original survey; a survey that presented a number of limitations. As previously noted, the survey reflected 12 options and one fill-in blank for social resources offered by a given program. It is possible that there were resources that were not reflected in the survey. Additionally, parent involvement levels were reflected from a program-level perspective using five basic questions on a four-point likert scale. It is possible that there were issues around parent involvement that could not be reflected due to the format of the survey and the quality (and quantity) of the questions. Ultimately, the original survey did not provide the necessary depth of information on these two critical components of PreK and PFA programs that, in turn, could adequately support the line of inquiry presented in this study.

The qualitative component was thus designed to supplement the survey data findings. Through interviews with administrators who completed the survey, the information attained was used to triangulate with previous findings and provide an opportunity for further inquiry on the relationship between social resources and levels of parent involvement. The goal was to also address the following research questions:

1. What types of social resources and referrals do PreK/PFA programs provide (not reflected in the survey) and are there any services that programs want to provide but can't? What prohibits or supports these programs in offering those services and getting families to use the resources?
2. How is parent involvement described in programs that offer varying numbers of social resources?
3. What are the reasons for low levels of parent involvement if all the necessary resources are provided for a participating family? Conversely, what are the reasons for the high levels of parent involvement when limited resources are provided?

In order to complete the qualitative component for this study, the following steps were taken:

1. Select a sample of program providers and complete the notification process.
2. Conduct the interview using the Administrative Interview Protocol.
3. Analyze the interview transcription data.

Step 1: Selecting the sample & complete the notification process

The sampling criterion was based on the number of resources/referrals offered by the program and the levels of parent involvement indicated on the survey. Only extreme frequencies for each variable were selected. The study selected two types of programs that reported high number of resources (11 or more resources of out 12) and those programs that reported low number of resources (4 resources or less). For sample selection based on parent involvement, two types of programs were selected: those that reported all responses as “completely successful” (high indicator) and those that reported all responses as “somewhat successful/not successful” (low indicator). Very few respondents selected the lowest indicator (not successful) therefore this option was combined with the second lowest indicator (somewhat successful).

As noted in the Methodology chapter (*Chapter 4*), the quadrant method was used in this study to reflect four distinct categories of programs: 1) high # of resources, high levels of parent involvement, 2) high # of resources, low levels of parent involvement, 3) low # of resources, high levels of parent involvement, and 4) low # of resources, low levels of parent involvement. 843 participants completed the original survey. 54 out of the 843 participants fell under the sampling criteria based on extreme survey values. The four categories of participants selected based on the extreme frequency of scores for social resources and levels of parent involvement on the *Evaluation* survey and the total number of possible participants was as follows (Table 24):

Table 14: Total numbers of potential participants for the Administrator Interview

CATEGORY	I	II	III	IV
# of potential participants	34	5	4	11

A sample of 29 programs/administrators reflecting these categories was compiled. The contact information for these programs was provided in the original survey and invitation emails were sent to those who fell under the categorical sampling criteria. All potential participants were contacted in Category 2 and 3 because there were so few potential participants. For Category 1 and 4, ten of the total numbers were contacted initially and a sample of participants was confirmed within that initial group. Participants were chosen based on geographic location and type of program because as the goal was to have as close to a representative sample that reflects the regions in the state (Regions 1-5) and the types of programs available (school-based vs. community-based programs).

The following figure illustrates the participant categories in the sample.

Figure 6: Qualitative data - Sampling criteria by category

(I) High Resources High Parent Involvement (3 participants)	(II) High Resources Low Parent Involvement (2 participants)
(III) Low Resources High Parent Involvement (2 participants)	(IV) Low Resources Low Parent Involvement (3 participants)

These four sample categories reflected four very contrasting points of view. The most interesting comments were anticipated from Categories II and III because these groups represent outcomes that are contrary to the hypothesis and would address research question #3.

A notification letter was emailed to the list of 29 potential participants explaining the purpose of the current study and informing that the recipient of the letter would be contacted in the coming days to discuss his/her participation. Participants in this pool were called if they agreed to participate after receiving the Notification Letter or received a reminder email if no response was received within several days. When all participants were confirmed and scheduled, the participants were emailed the Informed Verbal Consent form (Appendix E) and the interview protocol (Appendix F).

The final sample included ten preschool administrators in Illinois. All participants were either the “Director” or “Coordinator” of the early childhood programs at the site and directly oversaw the preschool program. One of the respondents was a Program Coordinator *and* preschool teacher in the program. Three participants were recruited for

both Categories 1 and 4 and two participants were recruited for both Categories 2 and 3.

Three administrators were in community-based programs, six administrators were in school-based programs, and one administrator had a program located on a military base. Six participants were from Region 2, one participant was from Region 4, and three were from Region 5. All participants were female administrators.

The following table summarizes the characteristics of the participants and their respective programs. Appendix G provides a brief description of all participants.

Table 15: Summary of Administrator Interview sample (n=10)

<i>CATEGORY (# of participants)</i>	
Category 1	3
Category 2	2
Category 3	2
Category 4	3
<i>PROGRAM TYPE</i>	
School-based	6
Community-based	3
Military-based	1
<i>REGION*</i>	
Region 2	6
Region 4	1
Region 5	3

** Participants in Regions 1 and 3 were not present in the sample pool.*

Step 2: Conduct the administrator interview

The interviews were conducted at a time and location convenient to the participant. All interviews were conducted in person except for those located in Region 5 wherein phone interviews were employed. The one participant from Region 4 was attending a training in Chicago therefore an in-person interview was scheduled during her time in the city. The Informed Verbal Consent form was reviewed and permission to audio-record the interview was obtained before the interview process.

The researcher then proceeded with the interview protocol, which involved a series of open-ended, semi-structured questions that would confirm administrator responses on the survey and elicit new information related to the research questions. At the end of the interview, the participant was asked if she had any additional questions or comments, they were thanked for their time, and were provided contact information if she needed any further assistance related to their participation. Participants were also sent summaries of their interviews via email and asked to confirm the material to ensure data validity (member checking). Once the member checking confirmations were received, the interviews were transcribed and were uploaded into Atlas.ti for analysis.

Step 3: Analysis of qualitative research interviews

The process of qualitative data analysis is continuous and interactive. It involves continual reflection on the interviews, asking questions, creating codes, categories and themes from the interviews, and re-examining of each of these steps simultaneously (Creswell, 2009). Creswell (2009) outlined five steps for data analysis in qualitative research that were followed in part for this study. The first step was to organize and prepare the data by transcribing the interviews, sorting the data into its appropriate categories, and adding field notes to each interview. The second step was to read all the data and reflect on the overall content of the interviews. An extensive coding process in which codes were assigned for each relevant theme followed this step. The themes for this study were based on three sources – the literature, information from the original survey, and emergent themes from the interviews. The fourth step was to use the codes to generate a description of the categories and themes that surfaced in the analysis, and begin to advance the representation of the materials in narrative form (presented in the

forthcoming sections). The last step (step five) of data analysis involved the interpretation of the findings, which are presented in Chapter 5.

To begin, Table 26, 27, and 28 illustrate the themes, descriptions and codes used to analyze the interview transcriptions. The coding structure is discussed separately in the next sections for each source from which the themes were derived.

Themes from the literature (Table 26)

Themes from the literature on best practices in early childhood programs, the role of parent and parent involvement, and the value of social support and social resource networks surfaced throughout the administrator interviews. Table 26 outlines these three main categories and sub-categories based in the literature and related themes that fell under each category. The coding structure for each of those distinct themes was then used to analyze the interview transcriptions.

The category of *best practices in early childhood programs* covered a number of topics evident in the interviews. According to Schweinhart (2004), DHHS-ACF (2005), Copple & Bredekamp (2009), and Kirp (2007), quality early childhood programs focus on engaging parents and the non-educational needs of children and families as such component contribute to the success of all participants in the program. All administrators spoke to the value of engaging parents and they discussed the various strategies for getting parent involved in the classroom, increasing attendance at family-oriented activities, and the importance of communicating valuable information to the parents regarding their child and/or resources in the community. All administrators also spoke to the essential role they and their programs played in addressing the non-educational needs

of families presented in the program. These ideas were also tied to the strategies used to connect families with much needed resources in the area.

The development of strong parent-teacher-school relationships was also commonly cited in the interviews and a theme resonating in the early childhood literature on best practices. As noted in previous chapters, research suggests that the parent engagement in programs is a valuable method of supporting child development inside and outside the classroom, and it is through partnership between parents and programs that the needs and goals of children are well supported (Arnold et al., 2008; Driessen et al., 2005; Duch, 2005; Schweinhart, 2004). The relationships between parents and programs also have benefits for the parents as involved parents have greater access to information to support personal family needs (Epstein, 2006). Administrators spoke to the importance of building relationships with families and strategies they have used to connect with the participants in their program because they have seen the benefits of those relationships.

Administrators also described the overall benefits when children participate in preschool programs. Participation in high-quality early childhood programs have been seen to close the academic gap between students and gains are evident in social-emotional development for participating children (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Kirp, 2007; DHHS-ACF, 2005; Henry et al., 2003). According to administrators, elementary schools and districts see the dramatic difference between children who have had a preschool experience and those without (Respondents 1A, 1B, 1C, 3G, 4I). Further evidence of this will be described in the analysis sections.

The role of parents and parent involvement was a second category in which administrator comments were reflected in the literature and vice versa. The literature suggested that there were benefits to both the child and parent when parents participated in the programs. Research noted that parent engagement in programs was a valuable method for supporting child development both inside and outside the classroom and it was through partnership with the parent and the program in which the overall needs and goals of the child were well supported (Arnold et al., 2008; Ritchie & Willer, 2008a; Driessen et al., 2005; Duch, 2005; Schweinhart, 2004). Administrators shared similar sentiments noting benefits to parents as engaged parents had a better sense of self-efficacy and had greater access to information that would support their family's personal needs; concepts evident in the literature (Gonzales-Mena, 2010; Epstein, 2006).

Administrators also discussed the challenges to engaging parents. They spoke of the role of ethnic and cultural background, the role of income and employment, parent perceptions of the teacher-school relationships, and also the parents' level and experience with formal education. Each of these factors has implications for levels of parent involvement as each was reflected in the literature (Wong & Hughes, 2006; Sohn & Wang, 2006; Driessen et al., 2005; Desimone, 1999; Weiss et al., 2003; Knopf & Swick, 2006; Anderson & Minke, 2007; DHHS-ACF, 2009).

The relevance of *family circumstance* was a related category discussed in the interviews. One administrator lead a program located on a military base and discussed the challenges of working with children and families in the military (Respondent 4J). Other administrators who had programs located in rural areas and discussed the isolated nature

of families in their programs (Respondent 1A, 1B, 2D, 2E, 3F, 4I). Some of the administrators described their participating families as single and young-parent households that presented its own challenges in terms of isolation, lack of support, and financial struggles (Respondent 1C, 2D, 2E, 3F, 3G, 4H, 4I). And unemployment was a another need cited among program administrators (Respondent 2D, 3F). Administrators recognized the importance of engaging parents and made it a priority in their programs, however, there were diverse challenges (and successes) depending on the program and circumstances of participating families.

Lastly, *the role of social support (resources) and social support networks* was a category widely discussed in the interviews with comment that were evident in the literature. Kim et al. (2008) discuss the importance of social support and creating a social resource network because it is an effective way to cope and adjust with life's stressful situations. Participants in Illinois PreK and PFA programs are admitted into the program based on level of risk for the child and family as a whole, and administrators communicated that their participating families are in need of diverse resources and networks as a result of their circumstances. The conversations described the importance of social support and developing a network of resources that would serve the non-educational needs of family in early learning settings; discussions relevant in the literature (Keel & Drew, 2004; Balaji et al., 2007; Stewart et al., 2008)

Building a system of support in the community and among parents was a related category that resonated in the interviews. Administrators communicated the importance of having a system to connect children and families with necessary social resources in their

community; an idea present in the literature (Gonzalez-Mena, 2010; Ritchie & Willer 2008a). This concept was very much tied to the literature on meeting the non-educational needs of parents. Some administrators discussed the importance of understanding the community and outreach in order to support families in the preschool program (Respondent 1C, 2E, 3G, 4H, 4J). Other administrators impressed on the importance of building a community of support and networks for families to rely on once they leave the preschool program (Respondent 1C, 2E).

As noted in the literature, early childhood professionals must be acutely aware of “the family’s structure, culture, language, customs, and beliefs and then incorporate that they learn into the [preschool] environment ... and their interactions the child and family (Ritchie & Willer, 2008a, p.13). Creating a safe space for parents to ask questions is also critical to building that system of support (Gonzales-Mena, 2010). The role of culture is equally important, as it will frame the type of systems and relationships that are developed (Rogoff, 2003; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). These ideas were also evident in the interviews.

Overall, administrators discussed a number of topics that they believed influenced the use of recommended resources and barriers to getting participants connected. In-line with what was present in the literature, administrators discussed the rationale families use to seek support wherein type of support, the importance of network size, the quality of the support, and the availability. These were all considerations that influenced whether or not resources would be used (Stewart et al., 2008; Berkman et al, 2008). Cultural background also plays a role in the extent to which resources are used (Kim et al., 2008).

The literature and administrators alike also cited the various barriers to using resources and accessing networks including the perceived stigma attached to getting support, embarrassment, language barriers, and concerns of reactions in the community (Ahmed et al., 2008; Stewart et al., 2008). These themes were noted in the interviews and were coded accordingly.

Table 16: Themes, descriptions, and codes based on themes in the literature

THEMES FROM THE LITERATURE	
<i>Theme</i>	<i>Codes</i>
Best practices in early childhood programs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on engaging parents • Focus on the non-educational needs of children and families • Developing the parent/teacher/school relationships • Benefits of preschool experience (e.g. close academic gap, social-emotional development for children, empowered parents) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent engagement focus • Non-educational needs focus • Parent-School relationship focus • PreK/PFA benefits
The role of parents and parent involvement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefits for children and parents related to parent involvement • Successes in parent involvement • Challenges in parent involvement Relevance of family circumstances (implications for parent involvement) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military families • Isolated families in rural areas • Single, young parent households • Role of income and employment • Role of parents' experience with education • Family dynamics (DV, DCFS, abuse, composition) • Access to transportation/issues in transportation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PI: Child/parent benefits • PI Successes • PI Challenges • PI: Family circumstances

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Codes</i>
<p>The role of social support and social support networks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Type, size, quality and availability of support/support network • Benefits of social support/networks (including economic stability, physical/mental health, parent involvement, access to information) • Challenges of social support/networks (including lack of use, stigma, embarrassment, language barriers, over-dependence, difficult transitions) <p>Building a system of support in the community and among parents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing resource connections • Building community/parent support network • Cultural component in use of resources and building networks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SS: Characteristics • SS: Benefits • SS: Challenges • SS: Community/parent network • SS: Cultural component

Congruent information from the quantitative survey (Table 27)

The original Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation provided the landscape of early childhood programs in Illinois. The interview descriptions on the *demographic characteristics* of participating children and family in programs match what was noted in the survey results as well as Head Start demographic data (Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation Final Report FY09, 2009; DHHS-ACF, 2005). Families were described as having low socio-economic status, low levels of parent education, single-/teen-parents, English-language learners, and some new immigrants. There were also cases of homelessness, domestic violence, and unemployed program participants. Along with these characteristics, administrators discussed the challenges for working with at-risk populations discussed in the subsequent sections.

The *level of resources* was an additional theme in the interviews that was triangulated with the survey data and survey analysis results. The researcher reviewed the survey responses with each administrator to confirm accuracy and to inquire if additional resources were provided to participants that was not reflected in the survey. In some cases, contrary responses were noted between the original survey and the information attained in the interview (Respondent 4J).

Lastly, *levels of parent involvement* was another theme in the interviews used to triangulate with the survey data and to provide more information for the quantitative results. Like the number of resources, the researcher reviewed the survey responses on levels of parent involvement with each administrator to confirm accuracy. The interviews reflected successes and challenges around engaging parents and the strategies used to increase level of parent involvement. In some cases, contrary responses were also noted between the original survey and the information attained in the interview (Respondent 2E and 3F). The relevant code scheme of themes for survey congruence is described in Table 27.

Table 17: Themes, descriptions and codes based on congruent material from the survey

CONGRUENT INFORMATION FROM THE QUANTITATIVE SURVEY	
<i>Theme</i>	<i>Codes</i>
Demographic characteristics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low socioeconomic status • Low education levels • Single-/teen-parents • English-language learners • New immigrants • Homelessness • Unemployed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent/child characteristics
Level of resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High levels of resources provided (including 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High resources

those not noted in the survey & resources desired) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low levels of resources provided (including resources desired) • Contrary responses to survey 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low resources • Resources: Contrary response
Levels of parent involvement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High levels of parent involvement • Low levels of parent involvement • Contrary responses to survey 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High PI • Low PI • PI: Contrary response

Emergent themes from the administrator interviews (Table 28)

Review of the interview transcriptions resulted in several emergent themes that were consistently communicated by the participants. Seven themes total were derived from the analysis and the related coding scheme is described in Table 28.

Funding was a consistent theme that was discussed by all participants. FY2009 resulted in a 10% cut in funding for all ECBG-funded programs, which was a decrease from the planned 33% cut (ISBE Report, 2009). As a result, all participants discussed the challenges programs faced as a result of continued cuts in funding and a stagnant economy. Specifically, participants spoke of challenges in providing adequate resources in the classroom, challenges in providing the same level of parent engagement activities, challenges in maintaining staff programs and preschool programs, as well as fears for sustaining the program if further cuts are made in subsequent years. The details of these comments were evident in the interview transcriptions.

Cultural understanding and the ethnic component to parent involvement was discussed by the participants. Several administrators shared they were serving ethnically diverse populations that required a level of cultural understanding in order to really reach the participants (Respondent 1C, 2D, 3G, 4H). One respondent (Respondent 3G) noted

she served Burmese refugees and many new immigrants; a population that required staff training so that the professionals could adequately and competently work with these groups.

Staff composition and professional development was a concern of participants.

The parent educator position was seen as a valuable role for bridging the connection between classroom and families but the availability of funding to maintain that position in preschools was cited as a challenge (Respondents 1C, 3G, 4J). Training and professional development for teachers and aides was also a common concern because funding cuts had resulted in a decrease in opportunities to fund additional staff trainings. Staff turnover was also a cited concern because of the budget cuts that could not maintain the level of staffing from previous years.

Related to levels of parent engagement, the *format of parent engagement activities* was a prominent topic of discussion and closely related to the importance of parent involvement in early childhood programs. All administrators discussed the importance of timing and format of parent activities that support good family participation. The location and time of the event (afternoon versus evening) were critical components that dictated the level of participation. Family-oriented activities were cited with higher participation rates versus parent-only activities. The provision of childcare, food, and incentives were also strategies employed to get families to attend activities. Challenges to participation were tied to the location of the event as some families must travel quite a distance to return to school and issues arose around the timing of the event

(Respondent 1A, 1B, 2D, 3F). Some families found it difficult to return to school after picking their children up in the afternoon (Respondent 1B, 2D, 4H, 4I).

The theme of *preschool infrastructures* was evident in the interviews and noted in the literature as well. Copple & Bredekamp (2009) discussed the need to create a more improved and better-connected education system between preschool and elementary programs that can operate with varied funding sources, different infrastructures, traditions and values. These ideas were discussed by six participants who spoke to the fear of further funding cuts that would result in closing the preschool programs completely (Respondents 1A, 1B, 1C, 2E, 3F, 3G). School-based program administrators and the one administrator tied to a KinderCare corporation impressed on the importance of being tied to a school district/private funder because the external entity was able to shoulder some of the costs when funding cuts were employed this fiscal year (Respondent 1A, 3F, 3G, 4H). Other administrators were hopeful that school districts would establish more permanent preschool classrooms and build the program into the general budget so the transition would be more seamless for children and parents transitioning from preschool into kindergarten (Respondent 1C, 2D, 3G). This was believed could ensure that preschool programs would not be closed based on funding determined at the state level from year to year.

Lastly, all participants discussed *overall strengths* and *overall challenges*. In terms of strengths, the participants spoke of the general strengths of the children and families who participated in the preschool program. The interviews also revealed strengths related to the programs themselves as well as successes and strategies for

engaging parents and increase the use of available resources. Conversely, the participants shared overall challenges in their programs. The interviews revealed circumstantial challenges (unemployment, homelessness, isolation, etc.) fueling the child and family participants as well as challenges in running the preschool program. Administrators also spoke of the barriers to engaging parents and increasing the use of resources within their respective sites. These emergent themes are outlined in Table 28 below.

Table 18: Emergent themes from the interviews

EMERGENT THEMES FROM THE INTERVIEWS	
<i>Theme</i>	<i>Codes</i>
Funding <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issues relating to classroom environment (e.g. ability to provide basic class supplies or meet ISBE standards) • Issues related to parent/family activities (e.g. cutting parent programs) • Issues related to staff (e.g. staff cuts, cut in professional development, and closing classrooms) • Issues related to sustainability (e.g. dependence on district, fear of closing programs) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding
Cultural understanding/ethnic component to parent involvement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for cultural understanding in programs • Role of ethnic/cultural background on levels of parent involvement (including language, feelings of discrimination, lack of familiarity with programs) • Strengths and challenges in working with ethnically diverse children and families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural understanding
Staff composition and professional development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role of parent educator is key in some programs • Importance of trained teachers and aides • Importance of professional development however limitations due to funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff considerations

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issues in staff turnover due to limited funding 	
Parent engagement activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location and time of parent activities (afternoon vs. evening) • Parent-child format vs. parent-only format • Incentives • Food • Space for other children • Opportunities to meet personal needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent engagement activities
Preschool Infrastructure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating more secure funding streams and permanent classrooms • Building preschool program into elementary program; seamless transition for children and families • Waitlists for preschool programs • School-based vs. community-based programs (strengths and challenges) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preschool infrastructure
Overall strengths and successes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengths of the children and families • Strengths of the program • Strategies that engage parents & increase use of resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall strengths
Overall challenges and concerns <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenges of the children and families • Challenges for the programs • Areas of need and improvement • Barriers to engaging parents & increased use of resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall challenges

Results of the Administrator Interviews

Category I: High Resources, High Levels of Parent Involvement (n=3)

Themes from the literature

Focus on engaging parents (Code: Parent engagement focus). All respondents in this category discussed the strategies their programs have used to engage parents.

Respondent 1A shared she has parents who approach her looking for preschool programs

and the program does outreach to get families enrolled as well (personal communication, November 13, 2009). Her program used newsletters, postings in the newspaper, and word of mouth to help get parents enrolled and engaged in the programs. She also used incentives like food and prizes to keep the families engaged (personal communication, November 13, 2009). Respondent 1B communicated with parents through weekly and monthly newsletters sent to parents to announce events and classroom progress and a Parents As Teacher newsletter was also sent to parents with advertisement for events throughout the county (personal communication, November 16, 2009). Respondent 1C's program engaged parents through newsletters, word of mouth, and the extensive use of the parent educator who 'diligently' informs of the events and resources available (personal communication, November 19, 2009). Respondent 1C also encouraged parents to get involved in the community's Parent Association Committee (PAC) to help with the planning and direction of family activities (personal communication, November 19, 2009). She saw this type of involvement in external committees as a proponent of increasing involvement in the classroom.

Focus on the non-educational needs of children and families (Code: Non-educational needs focus). Attendance to the non-educational needs of participating children and families in PreK/PFA programs is a best practice standard in Illinois programs and Respondent 1C shared the philosophy of her program exemplifying this approach. When discussing the resources given to parents, Respondent 1C said:

We do everything to support them and if we cannot, we find ways to do that and that's first and foremost. And if we are having an issue with a parent, we have no problems getting them to come in and work with us (Respondent 1C, personal communication, November 19, 2009, p.8).

Respondent 1C said that creating a safe space for parents was essential for getting parents involved and addressing their needs to ultimately support the children and family as a whole. She said,

I think word of mouth that we've done a lot of the things that we've done gets more parents to come in and ask questions...they don't feel stupid and that's one of the biggest things. Everyone has these questions and we're just here to provide information. And again, if we don't have the information immediately, we can go find the resources for them. Then if they don't want to go alone, we don't just send them alone. We'll go with them (Respondent 1C, personal communication, November 13, 2009, p. 5).

It was also important to give families a space to bring their other children.

Respondent 1C was able to address this point saying, "They [participating parents] have babies so we have made it comfortable for them to bring their kids in [the program] and they [parents] begin helping and being a part of the program" (personal communication, November 19, 2009). Respondent 1A shared her program created a lending library/computer area for parents to use while the programs were in session (personal communication, November 13, 2009). This helped the teachers connect with parents more because the parents were on-site longer.

Developing parent/teacher/school relationships (Code: Parent-School relationship focus). Strong relationships between the parent and the teacher have been seen to help improve levels of parent involvement and getting families involved in the program. Respondent 1A discussed the importance of parent relationships with the teachers and the parent educators noting "it's that personal touch that really gets them involved" (Respondent 1A, personal communication, November 12, 2009, p. 7).

Respondent 1A continued saying, “When teachers say, ‘I really want to see you that night’ ...it’s a lot of positive along with that relationship-building that I think, really involves the parents” (personal communication, November 13, 2009, p. 7). These relationships in turn could help improve the communication lines for getting social resources to families who need them but may not want to ask for them.

Benefits of preschool experience (Code: BP-Preschool benefits). All respondents in Category 1 shared the benefits of the PreK/PFA experience for participating children and families. Respondent 1B communicated:

The districts are appreciating the impact of the preschool experience... And we’ve heard from several districts now that they can tell which kids are coming in without the PreK versus the ones that have and they’ve been really helping us locate those children [who need preschool] (Respondent 1B, personal communication, November 16, 2009, p. 2).

Respondent 1C shared similar sentiments saying:

We are seeing remarkable results academically...They [schools and districts] know who are the PreK students who are in kindergarten. They [the students] know the structure, their letters, sounds, colors. Literally, leaps and bounds above those kids who don’t have the structure. We know they are there and our kids are doing better academically overall (Respondent 1C, personal communication, November 19, 2009, p.8)

All respondents in this category hoped that these academic benefits would support the establishment of more permanent preschool classrooms that would not be in jeopardy of closing if funding from the state were to be cut or eliminated (Respondent 1A, personal communication, November 13, 2009; Respondent 1B, personal communication, November 16, 2009; Respondent 1c, personal communication, November 19, 2009).

Relevance of family circumstances (Code: PI: Family circumstances). One Category I respondent communicated the relevance of unique family circumstances that

could contribute to the challenges when the interviews moved to the topics of available social resources and increasing levels of parent involvement. Respondent 1A shared transportation was an issue because some of her families do not have a car (Respondent 1A, personal communication, November 13, 2009). Respondent 1B also shared struggles with transportation, as it is limited in the rural areas in which her program is located. She further said she wished she could provide transportation because she believed the availability of transportation could help increase enrollment numbers in her program (Respondent 1B, personal communication, November 16, 2009).

Building a system of support in the community and among parents (Code: SS Community/Parent networks). Building a system of support among parents and within the community has been a valuable component of early childhood programs (Ritchie & Willer, 2008a; Schweinhart, 2004). Respondent 1C said her families consistently come to the program because “they know the quality that we [the program] put out. They know the support that we provide. They know the relationships are built” (personal communication, November 19, 2009, p.4). Respondent 1C also said building relationships with the community was incredibly valuable and mentioned that many local stores and professionals have donated in-kind goods to her program (personal communication, November 19, 2009). This administrator also works to create a network of support among parents and community members saying:

The parents build relationships with other parents by hanging out and staying around so if one parent doesn’t necessarily want to say something, another parent might come in and say, “they [point to another person] are having a little problem.” We can direct them and move forward with that” (Respondent 1C, personal communication, November 19, 2009, p.6)

A community of parents is also believed to be a critical for a successful preschool program. Respondent 1C affirmed this idea saying:

It goes back to the relationship. It goes back to creating a community of parents. I have parents who do outstanding things for other parents...[it is]the unselfish nature and awareness of there's all these people involved in this so how can we do things to better each other. We do a lot of coat drives and food drives and the reality is that we do it for parents” (Respondent 1C, personal communication, November 19, 2009, p.10).

Preschool program seems more successful in engaging parents and increasing the use of resources when parents feel engaged and welcomed which is a goal of high-quality early childhood programs (Kirp, 2007; Copple & Bredekemp, 2009; Gonzales-Mena, 2010).

Congruency with the survey

Demographic characteristics (Code: Parent/child characteristics).

Respondents 1A, 1B, and 1C confirmed responses from the survey reporting they served children and families of low-socioeconomic status, young single parents and a number of ethnically diverse English-language learners. Respondent 1B gave further insight into the populations her program serves saying, “I think because... the families have to self-transport, we don’t end up with the lowest of the low-income. We link those children with Head Start. We don’t have the transportation so we have the slightly higher involved families” (personal communication, November 16, 2009, p.2). Respondent 1C confirmed that her program served a number of families whose parents have only a high school education and who are very young. She also noted she serves a large number of Hispanic families (personal communication, November 19, 2009).

High levels of resources provided (Code: High resources). All respondents in Category 1 confirmed they provided all the resources noted on the survey and programs

in Category I have been proactive in ensuring that families are connected with a variety of social resources available in the community. According to Respondent 1A,

We have a lot of resources that we kind of keep at our fingertips and [in] case anyone needs anything, we are on the phone. We can adapt and it differentiates for each family. If we know a family is having trouble putting food on the table, we can say let's connect you with Open Arms Mission and get you set up there or [we say] 'here's a number, let's have you call.'... Whatever their needs are, they are more comfortable sharing those needs and getting resources... We look at the needs of the family and say what are the needs that are going to help the children be successful here. And if we need to connect this family with some sort of resource to help that child, that is exactly what we are looking for... We want to provide our families with as much guidance as we can" (Respondent 1A, personal communication, November 13, 2009, p. 4)

Respondent 1A's comments mimicked similar sentiments of other respondents in the same category who also took a proactive approach to linking families with resources (Respondent 1B, personal communication, November 16, 2009; Respondent 1C, personal communication, November 19, 2009).

The Category I respondents also provided other resources that were not listed on the original survey. Respondent 1A and 1B have a special staff in the programs that provided case management for children receiving multiple services including occupational therapy, physical therapy, and/or speech therapy. Respondent 1A also noted that her program provided transportation for participating students. In terms of resources the programs would like to have, Respondent 1A and 1B would like more full-day classroom programs to admit more students, the ability to provide home visits to families, and more staff development opportunities (Respondent 1A, personal communication, November 13, 2009; Respondent 1B, personal communication, November 16, 2009).

Both suggested, however, that the flexibility to get these additional resources and program components were dependent on the funding.

High levels of parent involvement (Code: High PI). All respondents in Category I shared that they experienced very high levels of parent involvement. Respondent 1A shared that she connects families with each other to help increase parent involvement saying, “We try to network families together and we try to connect them with play groups and that sort of thing. It’s very interactive” (personal communication, November 13, 2009, p. 2). Respondent 1C shared that all parent activities have “100% participation.” For example, an event called the Day of the Child held in April “had easily 200 families in attendance” (Respondent 1C, personal communication, November 19, 2009, p.4). This administrator further communicated that when attendance is not high, she would contact the parents to see what the issue was so that they can ensure better attendance at subsequent events. It was a very proactive approach to engaging parents as Respondent 1C shared:

We had an activity last week that we didn’t have the numbers that we normally have and so we’re going to send out a survey to the parents to see what we did and what we need to do to be more accommodating (Respondent 1C, personal communication, November 19, 2009, p.4).

Despite tough circumstances facing some programs with varied class schedules, limited classroom spaces, and limited transportation, Respondent 1B shared that parents ban together to address challenges saying,

All the districts have different starting times. It’s just been a challenge. But the families have really stepped up and been really good about bringing other children with [them]... we’ve been able to work internally linking one family with another family willing to transport children with them... We are then seeing families every day now because they are there

to pick-up and drop-off. We get a lot more parent involvement than other programs [because of this]" (Respondent 1B, personal communication, November 16, 2009, p.3).

This networking and support had been cited to increase parent involvement in Respondent 1B's area.

Emergent themes

Code: Funding. Funding was a major concern of all administrators and of particular concern for Category I administrators who hoped to maintain the high quality of their preschool programs. Respondent 1A shared her concerns and the benefits of being a school-based program stating:

If we were on our own [without district support], we wouldn't be saved. It's a snowball effect and it all stems from the funding... I can tell you that the program would not run if we were not part of the district because ISBE doesn't pay all of our transportation or supplies... The district takes over a lot of that. We use a lot of funding from the district to supplement the ISBE to get the programs where they have to be and to be a success." (Respondent 1A, personal communication, November 13, 2009, p. 6)

This same administrator expressed her concerns for maintaining the quality standards required in the classroom environment when funding constraint kept her from making the necessary improvements to her classroom setting. Respondent 1A shared:

"[A conference was] explaining the new guidelines for ISBE [Illinois State Board of Education] and [there were] a lot of the guidelines in there. They [ISBE] want us to have these things in place but there is no funding there. I was thinking about playground. Is it the safest? Are we going to be graded absolutely perfectly on that? Probably not but we don't have the funding to fix that as well. You will be scored down low for things out of your control" (Respondent 1A, personal communication, November 13, 2009, p. 7).

Respondent 1C expressed fears if the funding did go away saying, "if the funding goes away, the PreK program goes away and I think that is the same for all the other

programs in the state” (personal communication, November 19, 2009, p.8). Respondent 1B shared related concerns saying that the lack of funding had made it impossible for her to provide a full-day program, which could help families who need a full-day program for their children (personal communication, November 16, 2009). These diverse concerns all stem from the limited funding for PreK/PFA programs in the state and the potential threat for additional funding cuts in the next fiscal year 2010.

Code: Cultural understanding. Respondent 1C administered the only program in Category I that have a culturally diverse program population. Respondent 1C served a large population of Hispanic families and made the following remarks:

There is a difference between our Hispanic families and our non-Hispanic families and how supportive they are... They [Hispanic families] may not have the means but they have everything else you want to see. Strong family matriarchs. Just very strong structures built in so the families are in tact. This is something missing in the non-Hispanic families (Respondent 1C, personal communication, November 1, 2009, p.2).

Respondent 1C further noted that the Hispanic families in her program were very involved and active in the Parent Association Committee (PAC) in which the meetings were held in Spanish. Having the PAC component connected to the preschool program was believed to help increase the level of parent involvement and helped to maintain the strong connections between the preschool program and the program participants (Respondent 1C, personal communication, November 19, 2009).

Code: Parent engagement format. Regarding attendance to parent activities, it was cited as “significantly a lot more [attendance] when we have families together” (Respondent 1A, personal communication, November 13, 2009, p. 2). Respondent 1B shared similar sentiments saying that “parent-child types [of parent activities] get better

turnout” as well as when there is a topic of interest to the parents (personal communication, November 16, 2009). For example, Respondent 1B said she hosted an informational session about the H1N1 virus, which had a large attendance. Incentives and food were used by Respondent 1A and Respondent 1B who also used programs hosted in the evening to reach parents. Respondent 1C shared that her parent activities are at several points during the day so that her program can accommodate the varying schedules of parents (personal communication, November 19, 2009). Furthermore, teacher’s aide and high school students were used in all programs to help with childcare during the activities and this was seen to boost attendance (Respondents 1A, 1B, 1C).

Respondent 1C’s program participation was noted as exceptionally high which she attributed to the strong relationships between the program and the parents:

Our parent-child activities are once a month. We always have 100% participation in that. It’s just the relationships we build when we go out to our families with the home visits. With parents, we are building. We share the importance of this. It’s a teaching opportunity for you. It’s a teaching opportunity for us to help you (Respondent 1C, personal communication, November 19, 2009, p.4).

Code: Staff considerations. Respondent 1C expressed the importance of having the right people and the right positions in the preschool in order to address the non-educational needs of families and engage parents saying:

We also have a parent coordinator who is also bi-lingual. If you really want to know why we are successful, it’s because we’ve hired the right people for the right positions. We’ve are people-oriented. Our parents come to us for everything. My parent coordinator... [is] very firm and very direct. [She says,]“This is for your children. You need to be doing this and this is not an option. You need to be here”... Most other programs... cut that [parent educator] position and I did everything to keep that position because that is the life-line. Parents are more apt to talk

to the parent educator than they are to talk to me, the principal”
(Respondent 1C, personal communication, November 19, 2009, p. 1)

Other respondents shared needs of the staff including staff development that, according to Respondent 1A, “suffered because of funding” (Respondent 1A, personal communication, November 13, 2009, p. 6). Overall, all respondents suggested that it was the strong staff that has been pivotal in creating their strong preschool programs.

Code: Preschool infrastructure. The preschool infrastructure itself was a topic of discussion for some of the administrators in Category I. Respondent 1A shared various concerns relating to this theme saying:

Our programs are bursting at the seams. We have long waitlists for children wanting to get into our program and we have kids leaving 0-3 program and [who] not being able to transfer into the 3-5 programs because their needs are not as severe as other children. We definitely need an increase in our preschool program” (Respondent 1A, personal communication, November 13, 2009, p. 6).

Her program was facing issues with transition between Birth to Three programs to preschool to kindergarten. She also had to deal with the limited spaces due to funders and classroom facilities (Respondent 1A, personal communication, November 13, 2009)

The considerations of having a preschool program housed within a district (school-based programs) were communicated by two of the administrators. Respondent 1A said that being school-based program was critical to allowing the preschool program to continue: “I can't stress enough how our district has provided funds for us to survive the cut that the state has instilled” (Respondent 1A, personal communication, November 13, 2009, p. 8). Transition from the preschool to the elementary school settings was also an issue for administrators. Respondent 1C said the transition from a family-like

environment in the preschool setting was not as evident in the elementary school level; a quality that is unfamiliar to most of her family participants (personal communication, November 19, 2009).

Overall Strengths & Challenges

Code: Overall Strengths. Respondents 1A, 1B, and 1C communicated a number of strengths and successes experienced in their respective preschool programs during the interviews. Respondent 1A cited the strength of her program was the parents as she said, “They [parents] love their children. They want what’s best for them and that is why they have gone through the screenings and learned about this program from other people” (Respondent 1A, personal communication, November 13, 2009, p. 2). She also cited the importance of a preschool experience saying:

I hope in your gathering of information that somehow the message gets across that early intervention is a necessity in the lives of these children. The earlier we can prevent the gap from widening the better chances these students have to become successful in school and life” (Respondent 1A, personal communication, November 13, 2009, p. 8).

Administrators also spoke of the strengths of their preschool program. Most poignantly, Respondent 1C said her program sought to diminish any barriers and keep families from making excuses for not attending the program or getting involved: “We work really hard not to create those barriers. If there is a barrier, we address it and we find a way to fix it. And families aren’t scared to ask” (Respondent 1C, personal communication, November 19, 2009, p.6). She further suggested that a preschool program can be successful when that program has a firm understanding of its participants saying, “We’re aware of the need and we understand our population ... and that is what it

comes down to... You see the big picture and see how to make it happen. It's more seamless for the children and families" (Respondent 1C, personal communication, p. 11). This understanding contributes to a greater ability to build relationships with families, connect with them, and get parents engaged.

Code: Overall Challenges. Respondents were asked what they saw as the overall challenges in engaging parents in their PreK/PFA programs and increasing the use of available social resources. Respondent 1A replied:

I think they are embarrassed. That their problems [are their problem and – oh they can do it on their own – but some of them can't and they need a little hand holding and guidance. We all have trouble times and we need them to understand that we are here to help them and help their kids. It's always in the best interest of the kids" (Respondent 1A, personal communication, p. 4).

She also shared challenges in engaging parents who experience a sense of "learned helplessness" which has been a relevant challenge for getting such parents involved (Respondent 1A, personal communication, November 13, 2009). Respondent 1B cited similar challenges tied to the lack of role models and breaking that barrier of learned helplessness to get parent "on board" (personal communication, November 16, 2009). "Lack of role models to support her own development and so you know, breaking that barrier is the challenge. It's like that learned helplessness we're trying to overcome" (Respondent 1B, personal communication, p. 6).

At the same time, parents have to do their part. Respondent 1B said that in working with difficult to reach parents – a mother in her example – there was the component of "getting the commitment back on her part too. We've offered, offered, offered but at some point, the mom has to give back too and step up and say ok"

(personal communication, November 16, 2009, p.7). Progress was seen only when parent and school could collaborate in an effort to support the child and family. Lastly, Respondent 1A and 1B cited fear as a barrier to getting families engaged and using available resources.

Category II: High Resources, Low Levels of Parent Involvement (n=2)

Themes from the literature

Focus on engaging parents (Code: Parent engagement focus). Both respondents in Category II expressed the importance of engaging parents in their respective programs. To get parents more involved, Respondent 2D's program tries to accommodate families by offering events at times that are convenient to them and offering food and incentives to keep families engaged (personal communication, November 6, 2009). The dates and content of the events are communicated by the teachers and via weekly newsletters sent home as well (personal communication, November 6, 2009). Those responses were similar to what was shared by Category I participants.

Respondent 2E shared a different approach for engaging a parent that begun with thinking about how to approach and engage them in the first place. It also involved greater focus on building that relationship with the parents. Respondent 2E first suggested that one consider whether or not you are trying to get parents to join you and your program, or are you joining the parents (personal communication, November 12, 2009). She went on to say this is a different approach, further stating:

If you are waiting the parents to join you and you have laid out a program for them to join you, that's going to be tough and you're going to have to

work really hard at building relationships. It can be done but if your philosophy and you think through for your agency and your mission is to join parents, then you are going to have a very different approach. This is the approach we encourage” (Respondent 2E, personal communication, November 12, 2009, p.5).

The model used in Respondents 2E’s program was more proactive at identifying at-risk children and families as these populations were approached in diverse settings including prenatal clinics, hospitals, WIC programs, in early childhood programs, and in the high school settings (personal communication, November 12, 2009). When a child or family was identified as needing social support, representatives from the program were able to target them and recommend them to preschool programs and diverse services throughout the community. The model approach was described as holistic, intentional approach to identifying and recruiting families that Respondent 2E felt has helped her program to build relationships with parents, actively engage them in the different program with which they participate, and increase levels of parent involvement (personal communication, November 12, 2009).

Focus on the non-educational needs of children and families (Code: Non-educational needs focus). Respondent 2E felt that her program did an exceptional job at addressing the non-educational needs of the families she serves and that services are tailored to address the here-and-now needs of the families (personal communication, November 12, 2009). The administrator shared:

The resources provided were developed because we saw a need in our community. And that is how we present it to other [preschool] sites as well. You need to get a pulse on your community and figure out what you need. If you have a GED program and there is no need, why would you have it” (Respondent 2E, personal communication, November 12, 2009, p.4).

The interviewer then asked if the resources currently offered by the program have evolved, to which the Respondent 2E said, “Yes, getting a pulse on the community and seeing a need is what we had to do. Assessing the need of the community and the family and responding and filling the gap” (personal communication, November 12, 2009, p.5). In this way, this administrator felt her program could provide more appropriate resources and she encouraged other programs to follow suit.

Developing parent/teacher/school relationships (Code: Parent-School relationship focus). Respondents in this category shared the value and benefits of strong parent-teacher relationships that were related to levels of parent involvement although parent involvement levels for this category were low based on the survey data. Respondent 2D said “There are good relationships and that could help with participation. The teacher-parent relationship does make a huge impact and our current teacher has really connected with them and that has strengthened program” (personal communication, November 6, 2009, p.5). Respondent 2E informed that her program does not have transportation for the preschool program as they are community-based center but the lack of public transportation has enabled the program to build relationships with the parents. This is because parents must drop off their children:

We have an opportunity two times a day to connect face to face with someone who cares about that child so relationships can form and whatever it is with that child come up, we can talk about it or celebrate successes that kind of thing. We do have that opportunity to make those relationships with those parents (Respondent 2E, personal communication, November 12, 2009, p.2).

Both respondents shared they used the program activities and the staff to help build those relationships with parents that could support the children in their respective programs.

Relevance of family circumstances (Code: PI Family circumstances). The disparity between high resources and low levels of parent involvement for Respondent 2D could be attributed to the unique family circumstances of participants. Unemployment was a concern for the families served by Respondent 2D who said, “employment has been the issue. Our low SES families are the most hit since their hours are being cut” (personal communication, November 6, 2009, p.2). Respondent 2D also said her program served quite a number of teen parents and the related challenges when working with the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) could be problematic for her parents and parent engagement. Respondent 2D shared the following example illustrating challenges in helping teen parents navigate resources through IDHS:

[IDHS is] very strict about if that parent is a student in high school, whatever time they are out of high school, their baby or preschooler needs to be picked up. Believe it or not, we have a 16 year-old dad with a 3 year-old son...the person with full custody is him and he wants to play football. You have teenage parents who want a full life but IDHS will only pay high school and not the part-time job or school activities” (Respondent 2D, personal communication, November 12, 2009, p.2).

Respondent 2D felt these circumstances made it difficult for teen parents to develop as individuals and effective parents, which could have implications for their participation in the programs (personal communication, November 6, 2009). Furthermore, she said:

A lot of our families work evenings and that has been difficult. A lot of them have very limited resources. We have some children who are out of DCFS protective custody so those moms are emotionally ill-equipped. They are doing just the basic needs of life” (Respondent 2D, personal communication, November 6, 2009, p.2).

These circumstances, in turn, make it difficult for families to be involved in the preschool program.

Challenges in use of social support/social support networks (Code: SS Challenges). When asked what were the challenges present among parents that kept them from using the available resources in the program, Respondent 2D said that “personal barriers” were the only barriers she could see to families using resources and services. She attributed personal barriers to feelings of pride, embarrassment and fear (personal communication, November 6, 2009).

Building a system of support in the community and among parents (Code: SS Community and parent networks). Respondent 2E described the creation of a system of support for families with young children as paramount to a successful early childhood program and success for at-risk families outside the classroom. She provided the following framework for setting up a system of support that extends beyond the preschool classroom:

For 3-5 (year old children and programs) you need a system. Think macro, micro. Think of your district or your program within a larger system and how is that connected and that system within a community. How is that connected? And then around each family you are build a system... Identify the need and deliver the service and this translates across all age levels (Respondent 2E, personal communication, November 12, 2009, p.1)

This respondent felt that such a system was in-line with meeting the non-educational needs of families that could translate to success in the preschool programs.

Demographic characteristics (Code: Parent/child characteristics).

Respondents 2D and 2E confirmed their survey responses with regards to the populations served in their respective programs. Both administrators noted they served ethnically diverse families of low-socioeconomic status, teen and young parents, English-language learners, and many parents who were unemployed. Respondent 2E noted her program served a large number of teen parents trying to finish high school and her program also connected with families who need medical insurance as well. Respondent 2E further noted, “Some of our most at-risk families are pretty isolated and don’t have transportation so they aren’t able to attend our program” (personal communication, November 12, 2009, p.6). The lack of transportation had further implications discussed in the forthcoming preschool infrastructure section.

High level of resources provided (Code: High resources). Respondents 2D and 2E selected all possible resource options on the survey and confirmed their responses during the interview. Additionally, Respondent 2D shared that her program was well connected with numerous resources in the community (personal communication, November 6, 2009). Although she ran a community-based program, Respondent 2D feels she did receive support from the local district because her building was situated adjacent to the local public school and early childhood center that housed early intervention services (personal communication, November 6, 2009). Respondent 2D also noted her program provides childcare from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. which helped for students in the half-day preschool program (personal communication, November 6, 2009). Respondent

2E shared that her preschool program was one component of a system of care for at-risk children and families. Families in the preschool program accessed the different services and programs within that 'system' which included home visiting services, parent activities, and referrals to a variety of resources in the community (personal communication, November 12, 2009).

Additional resources and services were provided to Category II programs that were not reflected in the survey. Respondent 2D noted her program provides breakfast and lunch during the school day, and dinner at parent events (Respondent 2D, personal communication, November 6, 2009). She also said her program provides mental health consultation in collaboration with the mental health organizations in the community (Respondent 2D, personal communication, November 6, 2009). Respondent 2E cited many resources that were not included in the survey. This administrator's program offered parent-infant classes, music classes for children, sign-language classes, hospital visits, programming for teen parents, Lapsits, Family Fun Times (family-centered activities), Family Literacy programs, a 'Warmline' for parents to call in if they have developmental questions, and they support families in the prenatal clinic and the WIC clinic (Respondent 2D, personal communication, November 12, 2009). In terms of resources the respondents want to provide but can't at this time, Respondent 2D said she would like more parent education programs available and Respondent 2E wanted to provide transportation to participants in her program (Respondent 2D, personal communication, November 6, 2009; Respondent 2E, personal communication, November 12, 2009)

Low levels of parent involvement (Code: Low PI). When Respondent 2D was asked why she thinks her program experiences low levels of parent involvement, she replied that alcoholism, selfishness, lack of education, pride, and an indifference to those things available to children and families were the reason for a lack of parent involvement (personal communication, November 6, 2009). She went on to say that there was always better participation, however, when incentives were provided and parent events (personal communication, November 6, 2009). Interestingly, Respondent 2D shared comments that reflect an inverse relationship between parent involvement and resources saying:

We definitely have parents who want to be a part of the programs. The parents who come are the ones who don't need resources. [Their] homes have two parents in the home or a grandparent. The ones who need the resources are the ones who are not accessible. Those who don't need the resources are more present. It is an interesting dynamic in my opinion" (Respondent 2D, personal communication, November 6, 2009, p.5).

The survey responses for Category II participants describe this group with high numbers of resources available and low levels of parent involvement, and Respondent 2D's comments mimic this inverse relationship found in the survey analysis.

Contrary responses on levels of parent involvement (Code: PI Contrary response). Respondent 2E's survey responses noted low levels of parent involvement in her preschool program, however, discussions with the respondent communicated otherwise. The respondent shared "In PreK, we are very open and proactive when it comes to parent involvement or parent participation or parent conversation..." and some parents have commented that representatives for Baby Talk are present "everywhere" as they will see staff not only in the preschool settings but in the hospital, medical centers, community agencies helping to support the same families in the PreK program

(Respondent 2E, personal communication, November 12, 2009). She attributed the multiple contacts with families in diverse setting contributing to high levels of parent engagement because a “strong relationship” was developed with families throughout the community (personal communication, November 12, 2009). These remarks are contrary to the survey and reflect the strength of a mixed method approach that could verify and validate data findings.

Emergent themes

Code: Funding. Category II respondents expressed similar concerns to the funding and the inherent lack thereof similar to Category I participants. In particular, Respondent 2D communicated several concerns regarding funding. She said the late disbursement of funds from the state caused problems for her program each year:

We wait months to get funding from the state for the childcare subsidy. For the preschool program, we are in our 2nd year. The problem is that we don't get our money [on time] and we haven't gotten any payments [so far]. That is a huge problem and there are a lot of programs closing because of it... The children come and we serve them but we just carry the cost and it comes out of their bottom line. It makes it tough for us... This is the second fall that we've had to carry for without funding (Respondent 2D, personal communication, November 6, 2009, p.1).

Responded 2D also shared:

If there are new needs, we are pretty limited because our budget was cut by 10%. Our community resources were the hardest hit so the services we provide are the bare bones. We know we need to pay a teacher, we need to provide a snack and a qualified TA and we need to serve as many children as we can (Respondent 2D, personal communication, November 6, 2009, p. 4).

Respondent 2D had hoped to provide her own monthly parenting classes but was unable at this time due to funding constraints (Respondent 2D, personal communication, November 6, 2009)

Respondent 2E shared similar concerns saying:

We think state funding is going to go away. We thought we knew this lesson but we're learning it again. You cannot be reliant on a single funding source. We really have to diversify and we've taken steps to do that. We got a 10% cut this year. We didn't have to lay anyone off because we had four retirements and so we just didn't replace them [the teachers]. We had to cut some hours but we are going to families less (Respondent 2E, personal communication, November 6, 2009, p.7).

The implications of an unsteady, fluctuating funding source has caused all administrators to cut back in their programs and prepare for the possibility of additional cuts.

Code: Parent engagement activities. Respondent 2D shared that she used \$20 gas cards as incentives to bring parents to programs held once-a month and those steps resulted in good attendance rates (personal communication, November 6, 2009). She described the challenges and format of her program saying that parents were not interested in returning to the school for a parent engagement activity especially when the families in her program have multiple children in the household. In order to accommodate these issues, Respondent 2D said her programs are hosted at 5:00 p.m. and dinner was always served along with the provision of childcare for the preschoolers (personal communication, November 6, 2009). This format was seen to help increase parent involvement levels. Respondent 2D further commented, "It has to come in the bottom line. There needs to be something for them to take-away that is tangible" (personal communication, November 6, 2009, p.5)

Home visits formats have been altered to be more helpful in engaging parents as well. Respondent 2D said:

Most families are resistant to someone coming in the home so we do the visits at the center. I think it is hard to go from work and then go home and feel they have to clean their homes so we schedule it at the centers right after work to make sure it actually happens. We want to make it work for them. We offer the visits on the Saturday. We offer parent days on weekend and that makes a big difference (Respondent 2D, personal communication, November 6, 2009, p.3)

The general idea from Category II respondents was to make the programs fit the needs and circumstances of the parents versus asking the parents to bend the school program formats. Accommodating parents was a means for increasing parent involvement.

Code: Preschool infrastructure. Respondent 2E said that her program was not connected with a school district and that had been a mixed blessing. In some ways and as previously discussed, the approach of her program sought families in diverse settings like health clinics, community agencies, and school settings to identify child and parents for the preschool programs and other services they may need. In such a way, Respondent 2E says her program was able to identify more at-risk families who could use the preschool program (personal communication, November 12, 2009). Unfortunately and according to the respondent, the local superintendent has said that families can only be contacted if they belong to the school district. At the same time, Respondent 2E noted she held an extensive waitlist, which was of concern for her, as she could provide no alternatives for families looking to enter the preschool program (personal communication, November 12, 2009).

Overall Strengths & Challenges

Code: Overall Strengths. Category II respondents shared a number of strengths and successes for their respective programs and the families they serve. A strength of parent in Respondent 2D's family was described as follows: "I know they love their children. We look at the strengths of the family versus the deficits and work with that. For example, in a family that has a strong work ethic, we will try to work with the families work schedule" (Respondent 2D, personal communication, November 6, 2009, p.5). Respondent 2E shared a similar strengths-perspective approach saying there was value in, "establishing strengths in the family, building on those strengths, and knowing that the parent is the expert" (personal communication, November 6, 2009, p.3). Respondent 2E also said that when the approach was to join the family versus expecting the family to join the program, there was less resistance and more openness in the relationship (personal communication, November 12, 2009). She continued saying, "That's what we do in PreK. We want to join their family in educating their child. And we see that as 'you're responsibility and we want to help you with that' " (Respondent 2E, personal communication, November 12, 2009, p.3).

Respondent 2E's program model extends beyond the preschool classroom as representatives are within the community also looking to serve the most at-risk. This was considered a strength of her program (personal communication, November 12, 2009). Respondent 2E described her work as the following: "we want children to be successful when they come to school, we are going to look a little closer at potential and we are

going to identify them in different agencies” (personal communication, November 12, 2009, p.2). Respondent 2E further suggested strategies for engaging parents saying:

We would focus on the child. I think that is a strategy we would use with parents. If the family is not engaged, we would focus on the child and do a lot of games and play and attention on the child use the behavior of the child and try to engage the parent through the child (Respondent 2E, personal communication, November 12, 2009, p.8).

Code: Overall Challenges. Respondent 2E provided a valuable response to what was the overall challenges facing the use of available social resources and engaging parents in early childhood programs stating:

You are not going to make a change in every family. Some families are not at that point that they can make a change. They are not willing. They are not able. And the goals that we have for families may not be the goal that that family has for themselves right then. Maybe that family’s goal is to get food on the table and they are on survival mode. I think it’s about establishing whose goals we are thinking about (Respondent 2E, personal communication, November 12, 2009, p.8)

These sentiments were similar to those shared by all interview participants in this study.

The program may have a better sense of how to connect with hard-to-reach families through early childhood programs if the program started with parent goals and altered its perception of parent engagement and active use of resources,

Category III: Low Resources, High Levels of Parent Involvement (n=2)

Themes from the literature

Focus on engaging parents (Code: Parent engagement focus). In an effort to engage parents and similar to other respondents, Respondent 3F shared her program had changed the format of the parent activities to accommodate parent schedules. Her parent-child activities were hosted only in the evenings as a result and food was always served

as an incentive for families to come in (personal communication, November 12, 2009).

Additionally Respondent 3F said all parents received a weekly newsletter announcing the activities and opportunities for parent to get involved. Parents were also included in the mailing list for the Prevention Initiative (Birth-Three programs) in the community and they were welcome to those events as well (personal communication, November 12, 2009).

Respondent 3G had a similar approach to engaging parent in her program. Programs were tailored to the cultural context of the participants and hosted in the afternoons and evenings to accommodate schedules. For example, Hispanics were the predominant group in the programs so parent-activity events centered around craft-making and discussions that were valued in this particular cultural group (personal communication, November 23, 2009). Additionally, newsletters were used to communicate resources and events that would be of need or interest to participating families in Respondent 3G's program (personal communication, November 23, 2009).

Developing the parent/teacher/school relationship (Code: Parent-school relationship focus) and Successes in parent involvement (Code: PI Successes). One respondent (3F) spoke to the successes in parent engagement she's experienced in her program despite the limited availability of resources. That success has been tied to the quality of her teachers: "I have thought for a long time that the successes we have...is directly connected to the teacher. The teachers who are enthusiastic about our family involvement activities are the sites – the teachers in those sites – where we really have extraordinary attendance at times (personal communication, November 12, 2009, p.3).

Relevance of family circumstances on levels of parent involvement (Code: PI

Family circumstances). Unique family circumstances were considered when thinking about the challenges in using limited resources available for Category III programs and engaging parents. Respondent 3F noted a number of concerns for families including unemployment and limited social services available as everyone experienced cuts due to the local, state, and federal economies (personal communication, November 12, 2009). She further gave an example:

My co-worker coordinates a Christmas giving tree with local churches and local banks and there are families coming in seeking help sooner. More families than we have seen before... We have families coming in saying 'we know it isn't going to be easy... we aren't going to have much of a holidays this year. Can you help out?' (Respondent 3F, personal communication, November 12, 2009, p.3).

Given the tough circumstances facing families, these were important considerations for understanding parent involvement and use of social resources.

Code: Challenges in parent involvement (Code: PI Challenges). When asked about the challenges in parent involvement, Respondent 3G discussed the lack of cultural understanding as a major barrier to parent engagement (personal communication, November 23, 2009). She felt that if the teachers, staff, and administrators fail to understand the cultural heritage of their participants, then they are already at a disadvantage for connecting with families. Culture was an important component of who the families are and how they related to the preschool program (Respondent 3G, personal communication, November 23, 2009). She also said she would be using some of her funds to bring in experts on family involvement because her program needs to have a better understanding of what family involvement looks like when the participants are of

ethnically diverse communities: “We’re working with a new demographic and...there is just a cultural understanding that has to happen... I mean, what do we do when have a child come in who come from a vastly different culture than our own?” (Respondent 3G, personal communication, November 23, 2009, p.4). Addressing these issues was believed could potentially increase levels of parent involvement in her program.

Code: Building a system of support in the community and among parents

(Code: SS Community and parent network). Respondent 3G mentioned the importance of building a system of support for her program during the interview. Respondent 3G’s program was a school-based program and she cited benefits to being connected to a district because it helped provide a system of support for families if they accessed it (personal communication, November 23, 2009). She said, “We are linked to community contacts and we provide that support” but unfortunately “not a lot of parents take the district up on that” (personal communication, November 23, 2009, p.6). The resources, however, were available if needed by families in her program.

Congruency with the survey

Demographic characteristics (Code: Parent/child characteristics).

Respondents 3F and 3G confirmed the demographic data they provided in the survey citing they served families of low socioeconomic status and ethnically diverse populations. Respondent 3F noted she served households in which parents worked two jobs in the tourism industry (personal communication, November 12, 2009). Her families lived in rural areas and had to commute quite a distance to attend the preschool programs: “many of families are working 30 minutes away, 30 miles away, 45 minutes away, [and]

it's very difficult for families to take advantage of local programs because the transportation" (Respondent 3F, personal communication, November 12, 2009, p. 2).

Respondent 3G confirmed serving many English-language learners, parents with lower levels of education, and refugee populations (personal communication, November 23, 2009). She described participants in her program as follows:

Our at-risk factors for our community really include issues like second-language learners. We have limited bi-lingual classes. It just so happens that two places that run programs just started bi-lingual classes for kindergarten two years ago but majority of our kids are second-language learners. Other risk factors are definitely low income, low level of education, single families, homelessness and foster. We do have children who have siblings with special education needs. We've had students with siblings who have autism so some of their social skills (older siblings) so some of their social skills have been questionable... We've also had incarcerated parents. We've had some of those issues where one or both of the parents are incarcerated (Respondent 3G, personal communication, November 23, 2009, p.2)

Low levels of resources provided (Code: Low resources). Both respondents confirmed their survey responses noting they offered limited resources to participating children and families. The resources offered were limited to home visits (Respondent 3F), parent-child activities (Respondents 3F and 3G), parent-skill activities (Respondent 3F), parent resource library (Respondents 3F and 3G), and linking to other community services (Respondents 3F and 3G). Funding cuts were also attributed to why fewer resources could be made available. For example, Respondent 3F said "And in reality, we do not have the funding to maintain much of a resource library for many years" (personal communication, November 12, 2009, p.5). She went on to say, "We're pretty much limited to education services but we do try to link families with other services if families express a need or we see a need... it's what we can do... I think it is part of our

responsibility” (personal communication, November 12, 2009, p.7). In terms of linking families to community resources, Respondent 3G said, “that is few and far between [and] more in terms of crisis intervention...we do that but on a real case-to-case basis” (personal communication, November 23, 2009, p.5). These comments speak to, and confirm, the limited resources for Category III participants.

Respondent 3F did share that her program provided transportation to students through the district (Respondent 3F, personal communication, November 12, 2009). This is information that was not reflected in the survey. She went on to say that she would like to provide more half-day programs as her program only consists of full-day preschool programs at the moment, but there is not funding to allow it. Respondent 3G didn’t mention any additional resources above what was noted in the survey but did mention she would like more staff development for her program. Again, the availability of such a resources was not possible due to funding constraints (Respondent 3G, personal communication, November 23, 2009).

Contrary response on levels of parent involvement (Code: PI Contrary response). Respondent 3F cited high levels of parent involvement in the survey, however her remarks noted otherwise. In the interview, she cited moderate levels of parent involvement that were incongruent with her responses on the survey saying:

In the past, we would have parent involvement activities once a month in some districts. And we would do some during the day and our daytime activities. We just don’t get many people because so many of our parents work... [and] as our funding started covering less and less of our teacher and aide salaries, we had to cut back. So now, we do 3 parent activities evening.., we’ve just had a lot less involvement (Respondent 3F, personal communication, November 12, 2009, p. 8)

In some programs, the presence of strong and involved teachers were tied to higher levels of parent involvement but generally, levels of parent involvement were considered low (personal communication, November 12, 2009). At the same time, Respondent 3F did cite some successes in parent involvement that could speak to higher levels of parent involvement than what she initially alluded to. This was evident in her following statements:

We always have messy things [at parent engagement events]. We're always finger painting, gluing, cutting things and where we're creating. We're doing all kinds of things and everyone can let go and do messy things. I think so many of many families don't take time for that. They are working parents. They are trying to keep up with meals and taking care of the house and other community activities and religious kinds of education and meetings and they are involved in lots of things. And I think that the busy parents are the – busy people are more involved. It's parent get involved in things, they are involved in everything and they want to be involved in their children's education. But I don't know – we just have families who are involved because they want to do things with their children. (Respondent 3F, personal communication, November 12, 2009, p. 8)

Although these remarks were made, it remained consistent that levels of parent involvement in her program were not congruent with the survey responses and were not as high as she had hoped for (Respondent 3F, personal communication, November 12, 2009)

Respondent 3G cited contrary responses to parent involvement as well during the interview. She noted that the transportation services for the preschool program was a barrier to increasing parent involvement and building a relationship with parents; comments that alluded to low levels of parent involvement (personal communication, November 23, 2009). Respondent 3G said, "I don't like the idea that parents don't come

to the school. They put their kids on the bus and they never see the teachers, they never see the classroom. They never see the other kids” (personal communication, November 23, 2009, p.2). When asked specifically about parent involvement levels, Respondent 3G said, “It’s minimal. I’m not happy about it. It’s minimal” (personal communication, November 23, 2009, p.4).

Emergent themes

Code: Funding. As with other respondents, Respondents 3F and 3G both shared similar concerns due to cut in early childhood programming funds. Respondent 3F, running a school-based program, shared:

It has been a number of years since we’ve had sufficient funding to completely fund our preschool program. For probably, maybe approaching eight or nine years, we have had money for only partial salaries and benefits for teachers and aides. So for those years, we have funded what we can for teachers and asked districts to pick up the remaining of the funding as well as the day-to-day expense (Respondent 3F, personal communication, November 12, 2009, p.1).

There was a general fear regarding additional cuts as well that would eliminate preschool programs entirely. Respondent 3F said:

I anticipate if our funding is cut more, all districts will eliminate PFA sections across the board. The talk is we may eliminate 40-50% or more, our districts will be unable to offer the level of preschool that they are able to offer now (Respondent 3F, personal communication, November 12, 2009, p. 1).

Respondent 3G shared similar sentiments saying:

When the cuts came out which was like 27% or something like that, there was a lot of talk here about not going forward with the program at all. So that was pretty scary...And then when it was refunded to the 90% level, there was more of an appreciation that we would carry on with it (Respondent 3G, personal communication, November 23, 2009, p.1).

Funding cuts have also changed the format of the program. For Respondent 3F, funding cuts resulted in a decrease in the number of home visits being made to families each year (personal communication, November 12, 2009). This decrease was seen to negatively impact the relationship and decrease parent involvement:

“Parents are positive about that [home visits] and are sad to see the multiple home visits go by the wayside... they [parents] see that as the teacher and the program and the school district as taking a personal interest and I think parents are more responsive then to our teachers when they have that one-to-one basis (Respondent 3F, personal communication, November 12, 2009, p.4).

The number of parenting activities in Respondent 3F’s program also was cut and her program was unable to offer as many field trips as before because the district can no longer shoulder the cost (personal communication, November 12, 2009).

Code: Cultural understanding. When describing the children served in her program, Respondent 3G tied many of the characteristics to the cultural background of the children and discussed the importance of cultural understanding when working with ethnically diverse populations (personal communication, November 23, 2009). With regards to the children, she said the Hispanic children are quite resilient, adaptable to the classroom environment and they exhibit a “level of social skills and awareness of people at a very young age” (Respondent 3G, personal communication, November 23, 2009, p.3). Respondent 3G continued saying, “I think it is absolutely a cultural component” (personal communication, November 23, 2009, p.3).

Insofar as cultural understanding, Respondent 3G said “we’ve got to start incorporating into our PreK program, cultural understanding. We just don’t get it” (personal communication, November 23, 2009, p.3). She continued saying:

There is no excuse not to get on the internet and research what education looks like in their countries. Not that their child has been in an educational environment but the parent has and you have to know what the norms are and what the family norms are and I really. The bi-lingual community came out with a statement saying the next best thing or better than the next best thing – if you don't have a bi-lingual, bi-cultural teacher, then you need to understand the culture. A teacher doesn't even have to speak the language. She just needs to know the culture and incorporate that into the education and I don't see that's happening very well (Respondent 3G, personal communication, November 23, 2009, p.3).

This need for cultural understanding was tied to similar comments on engaging families.

Respondent 3G believed that this level of understanding would help increase parent involvement and relationships in the program.

Code: Staff considerations. When asked about the importance of the staff composition, one administrator discussed the current challenges facing classroom in her program and the important role of the teacher. Respondent 3F noted the importance of having trained teachers in the programs to help address the greatest needs in her program, which was cited as behavior problems:

I think that we are seeing children with less ability to delay gratification. Less ability to attend to issues and topics with I think they've had less direction. They come with fewer rules...[but] we have very strong teachers, however, who typically able to help children understand the whole concept of school" (Respondent 3F, personal communication, November 12, 2009, p.3).

This administrator felt this was an example of why qualified teachers were necessary in PreK/PFA programs (personal communication, November 12, 2009).

Code: Preschool infrastructure. The preschool infrastructure was of particular importance to Respondent 3G who felt better connections between the preschool and elementary programs could have greater benefits for the children but that these

connections were currently problematic (personal communication, November 23, 2009).

Respondent 3G felt the districts were not aware of preschool benefits for children. She stated:

If you take a district like this one that has 14,000 kids, frankly 60 kids is a drop in the bucket. I happen to think a very important drop in the bucket but nevertheless a drop in the bucket so does it help? Does it hurt? The principals ...are very interested in maintaining those program so that becomes very helpful in a district and in this case, it's very true (Respondent 3G, personal communication, November 23, 2009, p.2).

Respondent 3G also cited frustration in district mandates to continue screening children to determine risk level however children who were screened were placed on a wait list; a process considered ingenuous to families (Respondent 3G, personal communication November 23, 2009). Respondent 3G further expressed challenges in making preschool programs a present member at the district meetings while coordinating professional development activities for the staff (personal communication, November 23, 2009).

Overall Strengths & Challenges

Code: Overall Strengths. When discussing the strengths and successes of the early childhood programs, both respondents in Category III spoke in terms of the parents. When asked about strengths, Respondent 3F said, "Their [parent's] willingness to be involved. I believe every parent wants a good life for their child and I think some of our parents are better equipped than others to be able to work toward that end" (personal communication, November 12, 2009, p.2). Similarly, Respondent 3G communicated that some parents have a respect for education and they want the opportunity for their children while support for themselves (personal communication, November 23, 2009). When

parents did see the value of education and the preschool programs, it was one perspective that was used to better engage parents in early learning settings.

Code: Overall Challenges. When asked about the overall challenges, the responses were divided between challenges with the parents and barriers with cultural understanding. Respondent 3F cited challenges relating to the parent saying:

I think that many of our parents are very involved in their own lives, their own difficulties, their own problems and it manifests itself, at least on the surface, as parents who don't care. I still believe that parents do care but some are better equipped. They were dealt a better hand in life and emotionally equipped to respond to their children" (Respondent 3F, personal communication, November 12, 2009, p.2).

She went on to say, "Parent who are so involved with their own lives and difficulties that even though we do everything we can think of to help, I think sometimes families are just not capable" (Respondent 3F, personal communication, November 12, 2009, p.7).

Respondent 3F concluded:

I don't believe that it is families who don't care. I believe it is families who are ill-equipped to handle the situations they find themselves in. Granted, those situations might be because the parents made bad choices but I fear that many of our parents are just not capable. They might know what is the best choice but they aren't capable of following through with that better choice (Respondent 3F, personal communication, November 12, 2009, p. 8).

Respondent 3G cited language barriers and cultural familiarity as the greatest challenges to engaging parents and increasing the use of resources (personal communication, November 23, 2009). This respondent also tied the challenges to previous experiences with education wherein parents who did not have a good experience were less willing to participate and visit the school (personal communication, November

23, 2009). These were additional considerations in examining the complexity of why parent get involved or use available resources through early childhood programs.

Category IV: Low Resources, Low Levels of Parent Involvement (n=3)

Themes from the literature

Focus on engaging parents (Code: Parent engagement focus). All respondents in Category IV shared strategies they used to engage parents that have ultimately proven unsuccessful. Respondent 4H provided information to parents through the cubby system and meeting with parents as they come to pick up and drop off children in the program (personal communication, November 9, 2009). Respondent 4I sent materials and reminders home with the children's homework packets as well as weekly newsletters (personal communication, November 17, 2009). Respondent 4J reached parents at several points when they sign in at the front desk to pick up their children and again when the parents reach the classroom (personal communication, November 5, 2009). The levels of engagement remained low despite the focus on getting parents involved, personally inviting them to events, and consistent encouragement to use available parent resources.

All Category IV respondents also formatted parent events so that the events would be convenient to the parents in the hopes of increasing engagement. Respondent 4H scheduled parent conference close to pick-up time so that parents would attend and would not feel burdened by having to return at a separate time for the meeting (personal communication, November 9, 2009). Respondent 4I used stickers and incentives given to the children in the hopes of getting parent to remember events important to the children

and increase attendance. She noted that this has helped in some instances but parent engagement has remained low despite her efforts (personal communication, November 17, 2009). Respondent 4J further communicated similar remarks wherein her program was tailored to fit the interests and schedules of the family participants. In her program, parents were also diligently encouraged to attend events (personal communication, November 5, 2009). Again and despite these efforts, parent involvement levels remained low as reflected in the survey data and the interview remarks.

Focus on the non-educational needs of children and families (Code: Non-educational needs focus). Category IV respondents shared efforts to address the non-educational needs of their program participants. Respondent 4H said:

I get a lot of families that come in that come in asking for help (not related to the child). Sometimes not because I have to earn that trust with them but because I have a fairly established relationship with majority of my families so they do come to me and say, “this is where I went. I don’t know what to do.” And so I will try to dig holes to figure out where they have to go and will try to get on the phone and help out (Respondent 4H, personal communication, November 9, 2009, p.2).

She went on to say, “at other agencies, they are just a number. So there is a sense of degradation. You know and feeling that they aren’t important enough...Here they aren’t treated like a number” (personal communication, November 9, 2009, p.2). Focusing on the non-educational needs of participating families has helped her to build relationships in her program but not enough to create a moderate difference in levels of engagement. Respondent 4I also expressed a desire to meet the non-educational needs of families saying, “I just do all that I can do” to help the families in her programs yet outcomes still

resulted in low parent involvement levels despite her efforts program (personal communication, November 17, 2009, p.4).

Relevance of family circumstances (Code: PI Family circumstances). The unique family circumstances were a consideration for why parent did not use the limited resources available in Category IV programs or why Category IV programs experienced low levels of parent involvement. When asked if parents were involved in the program, Respondent 4H gave the following response:

I would see them trying to participate [but] some of these parents, you have to remember, are trying to make themselves better. They have a full house of kids. They are low-income. They are trying to be both father and mother and in some cases they are trying to figure if they can go to school. They have to figure out if they can make that happen. You just can't say that just because they didn't read with the kids, they aren't interested. I told her [the teacher] that she has to stretch her boundaries a little bit and see what is really happening (Respondent 4H, personal communication, November 9, 2009, p.2).

Respondent 4H felt that parents were doing the best they could and while it seemed like they didn't care, Respondent 4H felt this wasn't the case. Their circumstances kept parents from being better engaged in the preschool program (personal communication, November 9, 2009).

Respondent 4I also shared similar sentiments that family circumstances, such as income status, could have implications for levels of parent involvement. She said:

I've been asking myself this. Which ones [parents] get involved and which ones don't. I think the lower incomes come the most. I think they take advantage of the family nights and coming to the classroom. Of the time I've been here, those are the families I notice (Respondent 4I, personal communication, November 17, 2009, p.4)

Respondent 4J was the one administrator in this study whose program was located on a military base. This administrator informed that her programs serve military families that include the Air Force, Army, Navy, National Guard, Marines, and reservists (personal communication, November 5, 2009). For participating military families, the stresses were quite unique. Respondent 4J cited the parenting needs of service men and women as the greatest saying:

Many times, there are families here who have no assistance from their own families from raising children and the hectic schedules of being in the military and being called to duty while finding child care last minute... It's hard for them to find the care they are comfortable with and deal with the stresses of that and being deployed. The stress of putting your life on the line and having arrangements if needed. The stress on the family and children when the parents are gone (Respondent 4J, personal communication, November 5, 2009, p.2)

The direct stresses of being in the military with two active wars overseas were immediate circumstances that were believed to impact the levels of engagement in Respondent 4J's programs.

Challenges in parent involvement (Code: PI Challenges). Respondent 4J continued her comments on the needs of military families and the main challenges to engaging military parents saying:

It's the timing. We are fighting a war right now. Many people are deployed so on base, people are doing the work of three or four people in their place and they just don't have the time to break away for parent education events but they know the importance of being with children (Respondent 4J, personal communication, November 5, 2009, p.3).

Although military families did recognize the importance of being involved in the programs, their circumstances made it difficult for that to happen (Respondent 4J, personal communication, November 5, 2009).

Challenges of the use of social support/networks (Code: SS Challenges). In

terms of challenges relating to the use of social resources, Respondent 4H here shared challenges in getting parents to use the parent resource library. She felt that parents were not interested in as seen in their behavior at pick-up and drop-off times in the program: “They come in and they come out [of programs]. We have parents coming in on their cell phones and they don’t have time to talk to the teachers” (personal communication, November 9, 2009, p.4). This inability to connect with parents in the program was also seen as a contributing factor to the low levels of involvement noted in Respondent 4H’s program.

Building a system of support in the community and among parents (Code: SS Community and parent network). Respondent 4H recognized the importance of having a system of support and resources for families; however, she expressed some challenges in this area. She stated: “My stumbling ground is that I know there are a lot of programs out there but I have had a chance to look at what resources are available and investigate what is out there” (personal communication, November 9, 2009, p.4). Respondent 4H recognized her role in building the system and cited a need for greater collaboration in the community and among parents as well.

Respondent 4J noted the system of support that is available for military families in particular, which appeared to be quite extensive from her remarks. She said:

Many of the services [available to parents in the preschool program] are offered because they are based on studies on military families and what are most needed. It is based on knowing how to help them and how to succeed especially as part of the military. It’s pretty standard across the base (Respondent 4J, personal communication, November 5, 2009, p.6).

Respondent 4J also noted that the internal activities like parent involvement activities, were derived from her survey team who surveyed the individual parents to get a sense of what their needs are. She said, “so many of the things we do for our parents come from the result of those surveys and the team deciding what we need to address the lower areas where we aren’t meeting needs effectively” (Respondent 4J, personal communication, November 5, 2009, p.6). Additionally, she noted her program has a military life consultant who works with the staff and families on base around individual family needs (personal communication, November 5, 2009).

Congruency with the survey

Demographic characteristics (Code: Parent/child characteristics). All respondents in Category IV confirmed their survey responses with respect to the characteristics of the families served in the program. Respondent 4H noted that her program served single- and teen-parent families, families of low-socioeconomic status. She also served a number of English-language learners, primarily Spanish-speakers. Respondent 4I noted her program serviced primarily Caucasian, English-speakers who are of higher incomes while Respondent 4J’s program served military families. Some preschool participants in Respondent 4J’s program were children of officers, some came from two-income homes or single-family homes, and there were both English and Spanish speakers in her program.

Low levels of resources (Code: Low resources). Respondent 4H, 4I and 4J noted providing only four resources on the survey – parent-child activities, parent skill development activities, a parent resource library, and linking families to community

resources – and these responses were confirmed during the interview. According to Respondent 4H, the ability to offer services “comes down to cost and how are we paying for it” (personal communication, November 9, 2009, p.6).

Category IV respondents did share having more resources than what was noted in the survey. Respondent 4H shared that her program does provide childcare because the preschool program is housed within a KinderCare early learning center (Respondent 4H, personal communication, November 9, 2009). Respondent 4J also noted additional resources that lead to a contrary response to what was noted in the survey. This will be discussed in the next section but it is important to note that her program did provide a variety of resources that were not otherwise specified in the Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation survey. In terms of desired resources, Respondent 4H said she would like the parents and staff to receive more child development training (Respondent 4H, personal communication, November 9, 2009). Respondent 4J said she would like more parent education programs and affordable childcare (Respondent 4J, personal communication, November 5, 2009). These flexibility of getting these resources however, would be difficult due to funding constraints; sentiments shared by both respondents.

Contrary response on levels of resources (Code: Resources-Contrary response). Respondent 4J noted her program was located on a military base and it didn’t have many resources on the survey but these statements appeared to be contrary during the interview. Her interview highlighted numerous resources that were available to participants. Families on base have access to a Military Life Consultant who was akin to a parent educator and who could provide services particularly around children’s behavior

issues due to constant moving and deployments (Respondent 4J, personal communication, November 5, 2009). In addition, she cited an additional resource saying,

We are unique in that if [families] didn't take advantage what [programs] are offering and they were having trouble with paying bills and behavior problems, then the supervisor can get involved and they know that in the back of there mind. I can't think in the past ten years when a supervisor needed to get involved because a family did not want to get involved (Respondent 4J, personal communication, November 5, 2009, p.3).

These were additional resources that were available to families. Families in 4J's program also had access to mental health consultants, medical services, car care assistance, and the commissary where items could be bought at a discount (Respondent 4J, personal communication, November 5, 2009).

Low levels of parent involvement (Code: Low PI). All respondents communicated experiencing low levels of parent involvement in their programs, which was congruent with their reports on the survey. Respondent 4I described the reason as: "Life is so busy and there is so much to do. Like parents working. We have a lot of parents working" (personal communication, November 17, 2009, p.1). When asked about parent involvement in her program, she responded that they "were struggling...It seems like they do [school] work in the beginning of the school year and then they decrease. Like the first project, the first family night, we have a big turn out and then it starts decreasing" (Respondent 4I, personal communication, November 17, 2009, p.2). As shared previously, Respondent 4H felt families were not interested in getting to know the program or teachers (personal communication, November 9, 2009) and families from Respondent 4J's program were dealing with the circumstances of being in the military

during a time of war (personal communication, November 5, 2009). These were all factors contributing to the low levels of parent involvement in Category IV programs.

Emergent themes.

Code: Funding. The availability of funding was a concern shared by several of the respondents. Respondent 4J said that all decisions relating to new resources and new activities must take funding into consideration: “Funding is always an issue. If it cost something, we would have to look at the resource needed and work with that” (personal communication, November 5, 2009, p.6). Respondent 4H said she had hoped to get additional training on child development for her staff and the parents in her program but funding kept her from offering it. Respondent 4H further shared that she ran a PFA program in a KinderCare early learning center and stated, “It is expensive to run those types of [comprehensive] programs and for me in a corporate settings, [Kindercare has] got shareholders and a bottom line and it looks like they don’t really care and I have to wonder about that” (personal communication, November 9, 2009, p.6). A corporate setting like KinderCare puts further limits on how Respondent 4H can use funding in her program since there is an extensive approval process to implement to programs and/or services (personal communication, November 9, 2009). Ultimately, funding limits was seen as a barrier to improving the preschool program for the children, parents, and staff.

Code: Cultural understanding. Respondent 4H was the only administrator in Category IV who served ethnically diverse populations in her preschool program.

Respondent 4H cited the following:

I think the greatest challenges have been learning to communicate [with ethnically diverse populations] in different ways so that the program is

really understood. Even the children if they don't have the English skills, if they don't have the basis down in their own language, if that is shaky and then you come in and throw English language on top of that, there is something that takes place. Sometimes it clicks and moves forward and sometimes they just stare at you with a blank look (Respondent 4H, personal communication, November 9, 2009, p.2).

These were considerations for working with English-language learners in her program.

Respondent 4H also cited differences in cultural understanding that had an impact on how her staff worked with the children and parents in her program. She stated:

I've noticed with the Hispanic/Latino baby boy is considered that, a baby boy and at 5 yrs old, he is still an infant. In their eyes, they want him to stay a baby boy forever so self-help skills have been a real challenge (Respondent 4H, personal communication, November 9, 2009, p.2)

She connected challenges in language and cultural understanding as a possible barriers to parent involvement. Respondent 4H shared "People who are not bi-lingual participate more. And the two-parent families participate more. I would say it has to do with the communication and the difference of priorities" (personal communication, November 9, 2009, p.3). This consideration had implications for working with different ethnic populations in early learning settings and for increasing levels of engagement with this population.

Code: Parent engagement activities. Respondent 4I gave a confirmation of the low parent involvement levels in her program. She said parent activities in her program were always family-oriented and in the evening but due to traveling time, participation was consistently low (personal communication, November 17, 2009). She shared the following: "Last time, we only had 11 out of 100 invited. It was really bad. But it was a bad time and we knew that but that was the only time we could do it" (personal

communication, November 17, 2009, p. 3). Despite the efforts of all Category IV participants to change the format of the activities to accommodate family needs, attendance still remained low.

Code: Preschool infrastructure. Respondent 4H spoke extensively on the benefits and challenges of having a community-based KinderCare early learning program that offered the state-funded PFA preschool program. When asked if this nested, community-based program was helpful, she said:

I think it is a plus simply because it is one more way to be able to help the families that do call. My primary goal as a director is to help each and every family with what there needs are. To identify those needs and see what we can do to accommodate them. As a director, when someone calls, it does help because I have my own program with a school. If someone calls and says they want preschool and they can't get them in a school district or a head start and I can say we have that very same program here (Respondent 4H, personal communication, November 9, 2009, p.4).

Despite the benefits, she cited challenges saying:

In some ways though, it is a deterrent because they look at KinderCare and all they see is a daycare. And I have the same issue and tell them about the program. They have to see it before they believe it. Even though inside the program, we do have a preschool program and we are not just a baby-sitting service. And so it's education all the way around and it's not just with the PFA program. It's changing the mindset of people to see that it is an early learning program and we offer PFA as one more program to offer (Respondent 4H, personal communication, November 9, 2009, p.4).

These unique challenges of a corporate-sponsored, community-based program have implications for other programs in similar situations and it is uncertain the number of state-funded preschool programs in KinderCare-like programs at this time. Lastly, Respondent 4I and 4J mentioned little with regards to the infrastructure other than having ties to the school district was evident in their programs.

Overall Strengths & Challenges

Code: Overall Strengths. Category IV strengths were distinct for each respondent. Respondent 4H's program was housed in an early learning center that had childcare and external costs built into the program (personal communication, November 9, 2009). Respondent 4I said she felt supported by her school and that the school provided her with adequate professional development opportunities even though her child/parent engagement outcomes were not very high (personal communication, November 17, 2009). Respondent 4J spoke of the supports from the military that have helped to support her program participants despite the challenges facing military families (personal communication, November 5, 2009).

Respondent 4J attributed the high levels of parent involvement, despite a lack of need/use of resources to the parents. She stated:

[Parents understand the] importance of involvement and the impact on the children and the importance of the program. They understand the impact on the staff and the other families in the program. For the families who are always participating, I think it is because we have a good relationship with them since we see them so much. I think it is the level of education. They studied education and understand the importance of parent involvement. In other cases, they just find the responsibility of being a parent as a huge responsibility but one that being involved and being with children and knowing what their children are doing is important to them (Respondent 4J, personal communication, November 5, 2009, p.6)

Her comments speak to the importance of relationships and past experiences with education systems, themes discussed by other groups.

Code: Overall Challenges. All respondents were more focused on the challenges of their programs versus the successes. Two of the respondents shared extensively the challenges being faced in the field as an administrator of an early

childhood program. Respondent 4H felt that being part of a corporate institution required observing the bottom line and there was an approval process for all changes she wanted to implement, making it difficult for her to make any program adjustments (personal communication, November 9, 2009). Additionally, Respondent 4H passionately shared the following:

There is a whole understanding that needs to take place among the poverty level. I'm sure there are other issues with wealthy people because there is still that neglect piece. But no matter what, no matter rich or poor, there has to be an understanding of what is normal behavior and how to do we make it normal because it is our job as an educational piece of society to help these kids and this stage to understand that we need to work within the socio-logical standards and limitations they've been given. And if they are already behind because of some physical factor that we cannot see, some emotional deprivation, or chemical imbalance or whatever, then it is our job to figure that out. I have been told too often that I need to let some of that go and I have a hard time doing that. (Respondent 4H, personal communication, November 5, 2009, p.6)

Respondent 4H went on to say that fear was a huge barrier for parents wanting to get involved. She gave the following dialogue that parents may be thinking:

(parent internal discussion) There are a couple of different things that I can consider and I'm trying to look through their scope. I don't want to admit it that I'm not making it happen. I don't want you to tell me that I'm not making it happen. I don't want you to know what I'm doing. And oh my goodness, don't tell me that something is wrong with my child (Respondent 4H, personal communication, November 9, 2009, p.7).

Respondent 4H felt that parents would rather remain ignorant and not ask questions rather than recognizing the needs of the child (personal communication, November 9, 2009). Respondent 4J shared related sentiments saying that parents who do not want to get involved despite the available resources remain uninvolved because "[parents] don't

think they need it [the activities or services]” (personal communication, November 5, 2009, p.6). This was attached to feelings of pride as well as fear.

Connections Between the Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The purpose of the qualitative component was to triangulate and confirm findings from the survey data and produce new areas of inquiry that were not addressed in the original *Evaluation* survey. Upon analysis of both components, there were obvious connections between the quantitative and qualitative findings supported the strengths of this study’s design.

The correlation and ANOVA findings congruent with Categories I and IV. The results of the correlation and ANOVA analysis demonstrated a statistically significant relationship between levels of social resources and levels of parent involvement that was not due to sampling error. That relationship was a positive association wherein low levels and high levels of each variable were congruent. These quantitative findings were congruent with the Category I (high resources/high parent involvement) and Category IV (low resources/low parent involvement) participants. The interview data confirmed the survey responses for both categories except for Respondent 4J in Category IV. Respondent 4J’s interview suggested higher levels of resources than indicated on the survey (personal communication, November 5, 2009). The new areas of inquiry from the Category II and III interview data will be further discussed in the *Summary* chapter (Chapter 5).

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY

Findings from the Quantitative Data

Integrative summary and fit with the hypothesis

The beginning of this dissertation stated the purpose of this study's quantitative component was to test the one-tailed research hypothesis – *PreK and PFA programs that offer more social resources to parents are associated with higher success rates around parent involvement* – using survey data from the original *Evaluation* study. This was achieved using multiple methods of analysis. The first step was to create a clean data set reflecting the responses to two *Evaluation* survey questions on social resources and parent involvement levels in Illinois PreK and PFA programs. The next step was to test the reliability and validity of the responses for parent involvement on the survey using Pearson's *r* and Spearman's *rho* correlation analysis. Both tests showed that the five sub-questions on parent involvement levels adequately measure the same concept thus the mean value for the parent involvement responses were used in subsequent tests.

A chi-square test of association was used to determine whether or not there was a significant relationship between the variables *social resources* and *parent involvement* that was not due to sampling error. Two categories were created – high and low resource providers – based on the number of resources provided in the program. These two categories were tested against the five questions on parent involvement based on the

indicators “completely successful,” “mostly successful,” and “somewhat successful.” The findings of the chi-square test showed that there was a statistically significant association between both variables across all questions at the .05-level of significance for a one-tailed test and that the relationship was not due to sampling error. This finding supported the hypothesis.

A correlation analysis was conducted using the mean value for the variable *social resources* against the mean value for the variable *parent involvement*. The findings showed that one could reject the null hypothesis stating that there was no relationship between the two variables because the p -value ($p < .0001$) was significant at the standard .05-level of significance for a one-tailed test. The remainder of the findings supported the hypothesis as the analysis resulted in a positive relationship between variables. Higher values in social resources were associated with in higher levels of parent involvement and vice versa. While the relationship was positive, the correlation coefficient ($r = -.22$) was very low and suggested that only 4% of the variance could be explained by the relationship of one variable on the other. The low correlation value also indicated that the magnitude and the practical significance of the difference between variables were negligible. These findings, although supportive of the hypothesis, highlighted further need to analyze the variables using different tests because of the 4% variance outcome.

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) tested three value categories for the variable *social resources* (Most, Some, Few resources) against the mean value of responses for variable *parent involvement*. The analysis produced significant results,

$F(2,708) = 23.19, p < .0001$ which stated there was a significant relationship between the variables that was not due to sampling error. The results also showed a positive relationship between variables wherein slightly higher levels of social resources were associated with higher levels of parent involvement and vice versa.

Post hoc pair-wise comparisons were then used to verify the ANOVA findings. The Tukey's HSD Method and Scheffe's tests confirmed the pair-wise relationship between groups to be statistically significant at the standard .05-level for a one-tailed test. Effect sizes were also calculated for all post hoc comparison that showed statistical significance (three total) and the results were large effect sizes meaning the magnitude of the relationship between the variables was large. Overall, these findings remained supportive of the hypothesis in the study due to its inference of a positive relationship between variables.

Convergence or divergence with past literature

In congruence with the literature, the survey data used in the quantitative component demonstrated the importance and focus given to engaging parents and addressing the non-educational needs of children and families in Illinois PreK and PFA programs. Both ideas were addressed in the survey and the responses described the 'landscape' of what was occurring at the program-level across the state in these two areas.

Parent involvement was a key component of this study because it was seen as a cornerstone of Illinois programs thus program administrators were asked to respond to questions around parent involvement in their programs on the survey. High-quality early

childhood programs should have a strong parent involvement component (Kirp, 2007; Schweinhart, 2004) and given the responses on the *Evaluation* survey, one might infer that Illinois was achieving its goals of providing high-quality preschool programs for residents. Most program administrators responded to the parent involvement questions as being “completely successful” (frequency of 562 out of 843 responses) and “mostly successful” (frequency of 542 out of 843 responses); very high, positive response rates on parent involvement.

Meeting the non-educational needs of children and families was also a key component of the *Evaluation* study and an element congruent with the literature on best practices in early childhood programs. The original survey included questions on the number of social resources and referrals that were offered to children and families in the program that is directly related to the idea of meeting the non-educational needs of children and families in early learning settings. The survey findings showed that Illinois PreK and PFA programs offered a variety of social resources to participating families as indicated by the responses on the *Evaluation* survey. Over 50% of programs offered 7 or more resources to participants; a diversity of services that could potentially address the needs encountered in program settings. Although the current study did not look at outcomes for participants, the number of resources provided suggested there may be benefits to children and families that go beyond school success; an idea that needed further examination with the administrator interviews.

Insofar as divergence with the past literature, the quantitative component did not have a basis in the literature. The literature provided references to the influence of social

support on child, parent, and family outcomes. The literature also provided references on the influence of parent involvement on child, parent, and family outcomes. The gap lay in the relationship between social resources and levels of parent involvement, which were addressed in this study and the results were unique to Illinois PreK and PFA programs that completed the *Evaluation* survey.

This uniqueness of the current study contributed the issues around defining program categories for ‘high resource providers’ and ‘low resource providers.’ The uniqueness of the secondary data also contributed to the challenges in analyzing the relationship between variables. Resources and parent involvement were variables outlined without the use of standardized measures. Given these circumstances, the current study did not present a divergence from past literature as Illinois PreK/PFA programs had never been studied in this manner prior to the current study. Instead, the quantitative analysis provided a new contribution that supports there is a relationships, inverse at times, between the provision of social resources and levels of parent involvement in Illinois PreK/PFA programs that is statistically significant. These findings cannot be generalized across all early childhood programs but the variables discussed – social resources and parent involvement – can be discussed across early learning settings.

Explanation of the findings

Taken together, the findings from all tests demonstrated a statistically significant relationship between the variables *social resources* and *parent involvement* on the *Evaluation* survey that were not due to sampling error. Multiple methods of analysis

were employed to verify findings and the overwhelming result was that levels of parent involvement were positively associated with the number of resources in a program and the relationship between the two had a large magnitude based on the effect size calculations. Overall, the quantitative analysis illustrated the existence of a relationship between the identified variables in Illinois PreK and PFA programs. This could lead one to consider focusing on increasing resources in such programs that target at-risk children and families with the intent of increasing parent involvement. At the same time, this finding suggested further research into the factors that could also play a role in affecting levels of parent involvement.

Limitations

There are always limitations present when using secondary data and this concern was no less relevant in this study. In this section, the discussion will address the obvious limitations in using the survey data of the *Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation*. At the same time, the researcher contends the data that had been collected was still valuable. Juxtaposed with an added qualitative component, the findings from the survey data was validated and was ultimately informative for those interested in better understanding the relationship between social support and levels of parent involvement in Illinois PreK and PFA preschool programs.

The original purpose of the *Evaluation* Survey was to understand the universe of early childhood programs funded by the ECBG. The questions included in all the instruments were general in nature and aimed at understanding what constituted the “universe” of ECBG-funded programs, the landscape of where programs were located,

the demographics of children, families, and staff, and what services and curriculums were being used in the programs. Basic information attained from the initial phase of a multi-year study helped to inform the research design to be used in the subsequent years, a research design to address specific questions not related to the current study. In-depth inquiries into any one area of interest (e.g. parent involvement, forms of social support, demographics), however, were not addressed in any greater detail than what was noted in the final instrument versions – an obvious limitation in the data. The data was also reported as programmatic level information given by the administrator and/or lead teachers in the program and input from parents was not included in this phase of the study. This was another limitation as the study aimed to discuss parent involvement without input from the parents being referenced.

The number of resources and referrals listed in the survey presented a limitation as well. 12 items were listed as possible resources and/or referrals offered by each program with one fill-in the blank option. A small committee of five persons including program directors, researchers, and teachers compiled this list of commonly provided resources in early childhood programs. The person completing the survey was asked to check each item that applied to his/her given program. It was therefore possible that other services were being offered but were not listed; therefore this information was not reflected in the survey data. It was also possible that services were being offered but were not used appropriately due to other barriers that were not considered or reflected in the survey. For example, programs may have offered parent education classes but parents may not use the programs due to conflicts with transportation or childcare. The data

reflected the availability of the resource but it showed no information on the use or success of the programs nor did it reflect the challenges for parents using offered resources. All these limits were addressed with the administrator interviews that were designed to fill the gaps in the survey data such as understanding the role of resources/referrals, their effectiveness, and barriers to resource use.

Additionally, parent involvement was measured from a programmatic level and not at the level of the parents. Parent involvement levels on the survey were based on the administrator's *perception* of parent involvement across the PreK/PFA programs and responses were reported only on a 4-point likert scale. Again, the survey responses didn't include any input of parents directly. Additionally, only five questions evaluating parent involvement were included in the surveys and were very general questions. Some may say that these questions did not accurately reflect parent involvement in a meaningful way because the questions were so general in nature. Standardized scales for parent involvement were available but when the original designers of the survey worked on this section, it was believed that including the scales into the current surveys would increase the likelihood that people would not complete the survey. The survey was already considered too long and adding this component would add a considerable amount of time thereby increasing the likelihood of lower response rates.

The questions that did remain were more linked to the level of participation of parents in classroom activities and parent-teacher conferences. The responses did not necessarily reflect the participation of individual families. Instead, the responses reflected an aggregate sum of the participation of all parents in a given program. This issue led to

questions about the validity or the ability to generalize the data. For example, a small group of parents may participate ten times more than others which could result in the perception of great parent involvement at the program when that was not an accurate depiction of parent involvement overall. It is important to recognize that administrators are responded to the surveys in this study and there was a level of subjectivity in their responses. Confirmation of responses with the qualitative component helped to validate responses but the contrasting responses between the survey and interviews further illustrate the variability and subjectivity involved in the different data used in the study.

Lastly, this study suggested there might be a relationship between the number of resources in a given program and levels of parent involvement; a research question tested using various methodological instruments. While the various tests illustrated the presence of a relationship between variables – whether weak or strong – the tools did not test or control for other relevant factors or barriers that would influence the relationship being studied. Underlying barriers/factors alluded to in the literature – such as demographic characteristics, language, transportation needs, and coordination – were not being tested in this study. This was another limitation that spoke to the scope of what this study could imply with the findings. It was possible that without consideration of external variables like these, there indeed may not have been a relationships or the correct variables were not being tested at this time.

Despite these limitations, findings from the *Evaluation* survey were tested for statistical significance for *administrator perceptions* of parent involvement and the relationship between variables showed statistical significance. This is program-level data

and relevant only to Illinois PreK/PFA programs at the specific time in which the Evaluation survey was completed. The findings are entirely legitimate so long as this distinction is fully recognized. Additionally, the administrative interviews delved into the background context and questions regarding resources, referrals and parent involvement that were not collected in the surveys. What wasn't attained in surveys was better reflected in the interviews thereby providing more adequate responses to the research questions in this study and shedding light on additional barriers that were not considered in the survey data.

It is important to remember that the quantitative results are *solely* based on analysis of the *Evaluation* survey and the variables taken from that survey unique to Illinois state-funded preschool programs. The results also reflect only the perspective of the program administrators. The analysis was conducted with consideration to all the limitations discussed when using secondary data and furthermore, all findings reflect program-level data. Despite the limitations discussed, the findings provided were still valuable and would not have been possible without analysis of the *Evaluation* survey data in its current form.

Specific research needed to extend the findings

The mixed method design was the valuable centerpiece of the study that was used to extend the findings from the quantitative component because the conflicting findings from the data analysis and the limitations presented in using the secondary data from the *Evaluation* survey necessitated further steps be taken to validate the current findings. The second component – qualitative interviews with administrators – was added to

address these issues. The qualitative component, in turn, produced information that was used to triangulate with findings from the quantitative component and provided further support for the outcomes of the various tests used in this chapter. Presentation of the qualitative findings is found in the subsequent sections.

Additionally, this study needs to include a sample of teachers/staff and parents who should be surveyed and interviewed to further extend the current findings. The input from these two groups could give greater input on the relationship being studied and most importantly, it includes the voice of the parents. This is a critical component when trying to understand levels of parent involvement in early childhood programs. The inclusion of these two groups was also noted in the qualitative component, which would have been strengthened with their inclusion.

Findings from the Qualitative Data

Category I and IV (positive relationships)

Integrative summary and fit with the research questions

Categories I and IV represented the two groups that had positive relationships between number of resources and levels of parent involvement based on the survey data. Category I represented programs with high numbers of resources and high levels of parent involvement. Category IV represented programs with low numbers of resources and low levels of parent involvement. Six respondents – three in each category – were sampled for the administrator interviews and their responses were reviewed for themes related to the literature, congruence with the survey data, and emergent themes that arose from the interviews themselves as discussed in *Chapter 4: Results*. Again, these

interviews were conducted with the goal of addressing the research questions in this component.

Generally, the information attained through the interviews confirmed the administrator's responses previously submitted in the *Evaluation* survey and opened new areas of inquiry that were not considered in the original study. The use of the interview protocol (Appendix F) aided the confirmation of survey material and discovery of new topics that addressed the research questions in this component. The interviews delved into the resources that program provide that were not otherwise specified on the survey. Category I respondents cited transportation and case management as additional resources provided in their programs (Respondent 1A and 1B) while Category IV participants shared they provided childcare (Respondent 4H) and family consultation for military families (Respondent 4J).

Both categories of respondents shared information about the resources they would like to have but cannot provide at this time. Respondents cited a need for more preschool programs to accommodate students on long waitlists for the program (Respondent 1A and 1B), childcare (Respondent 1B and 4J), more parent education programs (Respondent 4J), and a need for more parent and staff development in the area of child development (Respondent 1A and 4H). The extent to which these resources could be provided all depended on funding; a frustration shared by all respondents in each category.

Participants also shared ideas on what prohibited and supported their programs in offering services and getting families to use the available resources. Challenges in offering diverse services were related to funding constraints in most cases. Getting the

families to use resources was different for the respondents. Category IV respondents, who had very low levels of parent involvement in their program, discussed the challenges of getting parents to use resources. Respondents 4H, 4I, and 4J cited family circumstances, busy lives, and a lack of interest as barriers to getting parents to use available resources and increasing parent engagement in the program.

Additionally, the administrators gave their insights into why levels of parent involvement are low when all the necessary resources were available and conversely, why parent involvement levels were high when resources were not needed. The quality of the program, the relationships with the parents, and an understanding on the part of the parent for the importance of education were all reasons why parents were engaged in programs even when resources were not needed – a noted strength of the programs. Conversely, low levels of parent engagement when resources were available were tied to feels of embarrassment, fear, and pride. Respondents in both categories acknowledged that they could not help every family and not every family would seek help. The priority instead was to reach as many at-risk families as possible and make whatever differences was possible with those who were open to receiving support.

Convergence or divergence with past literature

Category I and IV respondents discussed several important themes congruent with the literature. In the area of best practices in early childhood programs, respondents discussed the importance of focusing on engagement parents, addressing the non-educational needs of children and families, the importance of developing the parent-teacher-school relationship and the overall benefits of a preschool experience.

Respondents also discussed the relevance of family circumstances such as personal barriers, isolated families, and a lack of transportation as barriers to higher involvement levels (Respondent 1B). Respondents also discussed the importance of building a system of support in the community and among parents. Respondent 1C said this was one of the more effective strategies at getting parents involved and increasing the use of resources.

Convergence or divergence with the survey data

Category I and IV participants confirmed the demographic data from the survey. Both groups were serving low-income, ethnically diverse families, young parents. Some of the families lived in very rural and isolated areas (Respondent 1B) and others were single-parent households (Respondent 4H, 4J). Both groups confirmed the levels of resources and levels of parent involvement. Only one respondent had contrary survey responses as compared to her remarks in the interview. Respondent 4J noted very low resources in her program but in speaking with her, she said her program provided participating families with quite a number of resources including family consultation and therapy, access to the health clinics and social services departments on base, transportation, and additional support through military supervisors (personal communication, November 5, 2009).

Relevance of emergent themes

Emergent themes resonated among the interviews. Funding was an issue discussed by all respondents in both categories. Everyone shared the challenges in dealing with funding cuts and working towards maintaining a high-quality preschool program. Funding was considered a reason for the decrease in resources and

programming available to parents. Funding was also seen as a barrier to addressing needs in the program such as staff development, renovations in the classroom environment, and providing more parent-child activities to families.

Cultural understanding was also a theme that emerged from the interviews. Many of the respondents in Categories I and IV served ethnically diverse families and cultural understanding was necessary to adequately address the needs of these populations. Respondent 1C noted that her parent association committee was conducted in Spanish because they had so many Spanish-speaking families in the program. Making the language switch and building relationships with the families had helped to increase parent involvement to the point at which attendance rates were always 100% in her program (personal communication, November 19, 2009).

The format of the parent engagement programs was also an important component in the interviews as administrators discussed strategies for increasing parent involvement in their programs. The most successful program formats were those that were scheduled to accommodate the parents work schedule (typically in the evenings) and involved incentives such as food and something to take home. Such take-home incentives included books, gas cards, or supplies for the children. Successful events were also those that were informed by the interests of the parents and were events that were open to the entire family.

Preschool infrastructure and the extent to which the preschool program was tied to the kindergarten/elementary levels was an important topic of discussion that all respondents considered. Administrators in school-based programs that were tied to a

specific district spoke of the critical relationship between the preschool and the district saying that the preschool program would not survive if the district didn't come through with funds when the state cut early childhood funding. Others suggested that the preschool program needed to play a more prominent role in the elementary school system so that the transition from preschool to kindergarten would be more seamless for children.

Explanation of the findings

The positive relationships (high resources/high parent involvement and low resources/low parent involvement) in Categories I and IV reflected the findings in the correlation and ANOVA findings of the quantitative analysis. In the survey analysis, there was a positive association between the number of resources and the levels of parent involvement, and the relationship between the two variables was not due to sampling error. These findings support the hypothesis, confirmed the survey analysis, and addressed the various research questions in the qualitative component. At the same time, the information from the interviews gave more depth to a relationship that seemed relatively simplistic on the survey. In reality, the relationship between the number of resources and levels of parent involvement was quite complex and that complexity was described more fully with the administrator interviews.

Category I administrators reported high number of resources and high levels of parent involvement on the *Evaluation* survey. Important to highlight: The high numbers of resources these administrators provided were not tied to their respective programs having more money than others. The availability of diverse resources were more a matter

of good planning, resourcefulness in a time of fiscal constraints and making connections in the community to fill in gaps in services that PreK/PFA program could not meet.

Category I administrators spoke about getting by with less class materials, getting creative with activities, and asking for more donations. Whatever the method used, these administrators were able to provide the high level of resources because they recognized a need and adapted to meet that need even in the midst of threats to the entire programs funding source.

The high levels of parent involvement reported by this Category I participants was attributed to the strong relationships that were developed between the program administration and staff, and the programs participants. Levels of parent involvement were not simply tied to the availability of many resources that were offered to them. Instead, it was a combination of using the early childhood programs to access needed social resources while accessing valuable emotional support and encouragement from compassionate teachers and administrators who made an effort to connect with families on a deeper level. Families who felt more valued by the preschool and who had a trusting relationship with the teachers/program were more likely to be highly involved families.

Upon review of the demographics served across all program categories, the families demonstrated similar risk characteristics. The distinction between the success rates of other categories and Category I lay in the way these specific administrators/programs approached the families served in their respective programs. Regardless of the specific characteristics of program participants, Category I administrators found ways to access and engage their specific population in a way that

was meaningful to the participant. This meant extensive use of the participant's home language and adapting programming to meet the families needs with scheduling and getting the correct social resources needed. In some cases, it meant adding additional staff like a parent educator whose sole job was to help the program support the challenging needs of families. Whatever the strategy, the efforts were intentional and Category I programs consistently made a concerted effort to understand the families in their programs and make the early childhood program fit their group as closely as possible. The resources available were then adapted to meet the respective needs of participants.

In sum, Category I programs evidenced what were considered optimal results on the spectrum of social resource provisions and parent involvement levels. It was not that these programs had more money or more training than other programs in different categories. The results were tied to the ability of these programs to be planful and resourceful with the limited resources they were provided and what couldn't be attained from the program itself was acquired through outreach in the community. The important qualities that made this possible was the relationship and collaboration felt between the families and the schools.

More resources did not equate with better involvement. It was the *type* of resources that presented the best fit with the needs of the families that mattered most. It was programs in Category I in which we would see continuous review and readjustments of programs to fit of the non-educational needs of participants. In this way, available funds were used most efficiently to ensure that nothing was wasted on programs/services

that were not widely used or needed by program participants. The process of meeting non-educational needs was not considered a static point and there was no one perfect way to meet the diverse needs presented in the PreK/PFA programs.

Lastly and for Category I administrators, the key seemed to be recognizing the changing nature of the participants and macro circumstance – such as the struggling economy and unemployment – and then adapting the program or methods of engagement to reflect the change. These programs had a firm understanding of their program participants and this understanding was reflected in the changing services and approaches used to engage parents. Category I programs were consistently re-evaluating the effectiveness of the program's ability to meet the educational and non-educational needs of child and family participants.

At the opposite side of the spectrum, Category IV administrators reported low numbers of social resources and low levels of parent involvement on the *Evaluation* survey. The number of social resources reported on the survey was low and according to the interviews, the resources that were available were not widely used such as the parent resource library. Although funding was part of the reason why limited social resources were available, there was also the sense that having resources would not have an impact on levels of parent involvement during the interviews.

The low levels of parent involvement were consistently attributed to the unique family circumstances and lack of strong relationships with the programs more than the available resources. Issues such as unemployment, lack of transportation, isolated families, or families being members of the military during two active wars were just

some of the circumstances that Category IV respondents felt were relevant to the discussion of parent involvement. While it is possible to suggest more resources may be an avenue for better connecting with families, Category IV programs seemed to struggle with the basic understanding of the true needs of their participants; a different perspective than Category I programs who understood their participants and the local community very well.

Compounded with these issues was the sense of frustration and exhaustion communicated by Category IV administrators. The program challenges were spoken to more often than the successes of the programs and there is a need for caution necessary when programs accept the status quo without seeing opportunities for alternate paths to reaching parents. Administrators communicated a sense of acceptance that ‘this is the way it is.’ It became apparent that the administrators and staff in Category IV programs needed more support to find creative ways to approaching families and getting a better understanding of what the programs needed to better serve its participants. This level of infrastructure would need to come from a higher structure such as the district level or statewide-governing Illinois State Board of Education office. Greater support from higher levels of the education system could help Category IV programs, in turn, support their program participants possibly resulting in the implementation of more appropriate social resources in PreK/PFA programs and higher levels of parent involvement in Category IV programs.

Ultimately, programs with higher numbers of social resources were associated with higher levels of parent involvement. These findings came from both the survey data

and the interviews. The social resources were an appropriate fit to the need of the participating families in PreK/PFA programs (Category I) and it was the quality, not the quantity, of the resources that mattered most. Social resources were also used as a tool for building relationships between programs and participants, which was seen to help support higher levels of parent involvement. Lastly, and most importantly, factors like program quality, funding, cultural understanding, staff composition, and unique family circumstances were all considerations that influenced the extent to which resources were used in the program and the extent to which parents were engaged. These compounded influences speak more than the number of resources available and were direct influences as to why parents do and do not engage in the program.

A vivid example was given by Respondent 4J in Category IV. Her program was located on a military base and she shared that parents in her program were more concerned about deployment and getting appropriate care for their children when they were deployed rather than attending parent activities or coming to the classroom. Respondent 4J said her parents do want to be involved but the circumstances make it difficult for them to take the time to come to a parent education night when they are actively engaged in two wars abroad (personal communication, November 5, 2009). This discussion of the interview themes provided a better understanding of the preschool programs, and the complex dynamic between children, parents, and programs that are the crux of this dissertation. Although the interviews did support the hypothesis in the quantitative analysis, the interviews also shed light on the variety of compounding factors not otherwise considered in the original survey.

Category II and III (inverse relationships)*Integrative summary and fit with the research questions*

Category II and III administrators represented two sample groups that demonstrated an inverse relationship addressing research questions #3. Category II represented programs with high numbers of resources and low levels of parent involvement. Category III represented programs with low numbers of resources and high levels of parent involvement. Four respondents – two in each category – were sampled for the administrator interviews and their responses were reviewed for themes related to the literature, congruence with the survey data, and emergent themes that arose from the interviews themselves (Chapter 4).

Generally, the information attained through the interviews confirmed the administrator's responses reported in the *Evaluation* survey and opened new areas of inquiry that were not considered in the original study. Similar to the previous discussion, the interviews delved into the resources that programs provided not otherwise specified on the survey. Category II respondents cited diverse resources available to parents including mental health consultation and meals including breakfast and lunch for students in the program and dinner for all parent events (Respondent 2D). Respondent 2E cited even more resources and programs not reflected in the program including literacy programs, ESL classes for parents, programs for teen parents, parent-infant programs, and support in prenatal and WIC clinics (Respondent 2E). Respondent 3F from Category III also noted that her program provided transportation to the preschool, which is provided by the district and was not included in the *Evaluation* survey.

Both categories of respondents shared information about the resources they would like to have but could not provide at this time. Respondents cited a need for more preschool programs to accommodate students on long waitlists for the program (Respondent 3F), more parent education programs (Respondent 2D), and a need for more parent and staff development in the area of child development (Respondent 3F). As with Category I and IV administrators, the extent to which these resources could be provided all depended on funding.

Participants also shared ideas on what supports and prohibits their programs in offering services and getting families to use the available resources. A strong relationship with parents was seen to increase the level of resource use and levels of engagement (Respondent 2E and 3F). Challenges in offering diverse services were related to funding constraints which cut home visiting, the number of programs for parents and children, and even supplies in the program (Respondents 2D, 2E, 3F, and 3G). These resources were seen as strategies to connect with families but those relationships could not be as fully developed without funding especially for home visits.

Category II and III administrators also gave their insights into why levels of parent involvement were low when all the necessary resources were available and conversely, why parent involvement levels were high when resources were not needed. When discussing the overall strengths of the program, administrators 2D and 2E said that focusing on the strengths of the families and using those strengths as a way to engage parents was a great approach to having good outcomes in the program. The two also said that building a strong system of support among resources in the community and parents

was also key to have good outcomes related to resource use and parent engagement.

These steps were attributed to why parents may be involved even when resources were low.

Category II and III participants were also asked why parent involvement levels were seemingly low even when all necessary resources were available to them or levels of parent involvement were high when resources were not needed. Respondent 2E expressed that low levels of parent engagement when resources are available may not be a problem of the parent, but a problem of the professionals working with the parents. She said that while some families may not be able to change, it was still important to determine what the goals of the family are instead of the goals of the program. Respondent 2E continued saying that when programs focus on parent goals, there may be greater use of services when those services are in-line with the family's needs (personal communication, November 12, 2009). Respondents in these categories also acknowledged that they could not help every family and not every family will seek help. Respondent 3G from Category III further shared that cultural familiarity and language barriers were a reason why parents do not get involved even if they need resources. The lack of familiarity could be a reason for a lack of participation.

Convergence or divergence with past literature

Respondents from the two categories discussed best practices in preschool programs, which are cited in the literature. The four participants discussed the importance of focusing on parent engagement, attending to the non-educational needs of their participants, the importance of the parent-teacher-school relationship as well as the

benefits of a preschool experience for children and families. Respondents 2D, 3F, and 3G spoke of the benefits and challenges in getting parents to use resources and engagement parents while Respondents 2E and 3G discussed the importance of building a system of support within the community and among parents. Together, the interview remarks mimic much of what we found in the literature pertaining to early childhood programming and the importance of parent involvement and resources within those settings.

Convergence or divergence with the survey data

Both categories confirmed the demographic data from the survey. Both groups were currently serving low-income, ethnically diverse families, who are English-language learners. Participants in Respondent 2E and 3F also noted serving families with low levels of education. Unemployment was an issue in both categories and Respondent 3G even cited serving refugees in her community. Some of the families lived in very rural and isolated areas (Respondent 3F) and others were single-parent households (Respondent 2E).

Additionally, the groups confirmed the levels of resources and levels of parent involvement. Two of the four respondents had contrary survey responses as compared to their remarks in the interview. Respondent 2E noted very low levels of parent involvement in her program but in speaking with her, she shared that parent involvement levels were quite high because her program is well connected with services throughout the community (personal communication, November 12, 2009). Respondent 3G also provided contrasting responses. Her survey described her program with high levels of

parent involvement but when speaking with her, she described the levels as low and an area of struggle for her program (personal communication, November 23, 2009).

Emergent themes

Emergent themes also resonated among the Category II and III interviews. Funding was an issue discussed by all respondents in both categories. All four administrators in these two categories shared the challenges in dealing with funding cuts and maintaining a high-quality preschool program. Funding was considered a reason for the decrease in resources and the availability of parent/family programming. Funding was also a concern when it came to the sustainability of programs and administrators were discussing the importance of finding alternate funding sources to maintain their programs (Respondent 2D and 2E).

Cultural understanding was an additional theme that emerged from the interviews. Respondents 2E and 3G served ethnically diverse families and cultural understanding was necessary to adequately address the needs of these populations. Respondent 2E said that serving English-language learners required understanding cultural norms so that these families could be encouraged to use other resources in the program. Respondent 3G served predominantly Hispanic families and refugees as well. To her, cultural understanding was critical to accessing parents and supporting their children within early childhood settings because culture shaped how her families viewed the program and their interactions within it.

The format of the parent engagement programs was also an important component in the interviews as administrators discussed different strategies used for increasing

parent involvement in their programs. Respondent 2D and 3F felt her parent events had high attendance rates when hosted in the evenings to accommodate family schedules, and food and incentives were provided. Successful events were also those that were informed by the interests of the parents and were events open to the entire family.

Additionally, preschool infrastructure and the extent to which the preschool program was tied to the kindergarten/elementary levels was an important topic of discussion for Respondents 2E, 3F, and 3G. Respondent 2E ran a community-based program and cited the difficulties of not being tied to a district. She noted that transportation was an issue and with long waitlists, it would be nice to be part of a district in which students can be transferred/accommodated when her program was full. Respondent 3F was an administrator in school-based program and she felt that it was the district that made it possible for her to maintain her programs with early childhood program funds was cut at the state-level. She had hoped for more full-day programs so that parents would not have to worry about childcare.

Lastly, Respondent 3G spoke of the importance of preschool infrastructure expressing her frustrations in being a school-based program. She said that the district required constant screening of preschool children to determine the level of risk but this task created long waitlist that were ingenuous to parents. Risk may be identified in their children but there was no space in the program for children to attend. Respondent 3G further noted that the preschool component was a very small part of the larger district and that she hoped the district would create a more permanent place for preschool programs. She saw this as a necessary step to diminish the threat of closing preschool classrooms

when state-preschool funding was not available. Respondent 3G also felt this would help the transition for students from preschool to kindergarten and would make it more seamless for children.

Explanation of the findings

The inverse relationships noted in Categories II and III participants helped to address the research questions and address new areas of inquiry not reflected in the survey findings. The interview sample for the two groups also helped to confirm the quantitative results to a certain extent. The interviews helped to confirm several discrepancies between responses on the survey and what was currently happening in the program. Respondent 2E noted low parent involvement in the survey but her interview remarks suggested high levels of parent involvement, while Respondent 3G who noted high levels of parent involvement on the survey but her interview remarks suggested low levels of parent involvement. This type of confirmation was one strength of the mixed methods design as survey responses were confirmed and in-depth information on the inverse relationship could be better understood.

The Category II and II interview analysis reflected a perspective contrary to the hypothesis yet provided depth of information to address the research questions. The remarks from these two groups spoke directly to what this study ultimately confirmed: The relationship between social resources and levels of parent involvement is highly complex and so many other factors must be considered in order to explain the interplay between variables. As alluded to in the Category I and IV discussion, factors such as family circumstances, culture, staff composition, and even funding all influenced the

extent to which resources were made available and used, as well as, the levels of parent involvement.

Category II administrators reported high numbers of resources and low levels of parent involvement on the *Evaluation* survey. Although a high number of resources were reported on the survey, the question to address was whether or not these resources were the ones needed by program participants. The interviews from Category II administrators illustrated parent involvement levels were not simply about having social resources. They discussed the barriers to using resources to be considered such as a lack of transportation, language barriers, or even fear of accessing resources. This consideration went beyond a program simply having a high number of social resources. The criterion for Category II supports this point. Despite the program's high provisions of social resources, its levels of parent involvement were reported as low and the interviews sought to reconcile this finding.

Category II administrators placed an emphasis on looking at the family and the relationships that family has with the program because it is within these contexts that parent involvement levels could be better understood. For children and families in their programs, parent involvement levels remained low because of circumstances that went beyond the number of resources available in their respective PreK/PFA program. Issues around isolation, unemployment, low parent education among other factors contributed to why parents didn't get involved despite the availability of resources that could be believed to support their engagement. When resources were targeted at these needs, then involvement was seen to improve.

For programs that find themselves in this situation, attention must be directed at the needs of the family versus concerns over what blanket resources are standard in a program. Category II administrators believed the resources were of no use if they did not meet the needs of participants and in a time of fiscal constraints, monies should be better spent in other areas that would help to support families more effectively. For instance, the parent resource library was noted as rarely used. Funding to support these resources was being channeled into a specific service/program option that would be of greater utility such as parent-child activities.

An important point that came out of the Category II interviews was this idea that the decisions for what social resources can and cannot be offered is sometimes arbitrary and programs do not always have control. Funding constraints and approval processes within the district and program could be inhibitors to offering the types of social resources that participating families need and ask for. Despite this, there should still be a concerted effort to match the resources available with those that are needed. This could be useful for engaging parents and may contribute to the types of outcome evident in Category I programs.

In contrast to the Category II sample, Category III administrators reported low numbers of resources and high levels of parent involvement on the *Evaluation* survey and this finding also depicted the complexity of understanding the relationship studied in this dissertation. Analysis of the interviews for this group illustrated that the issues was whether or not the programs provided the *right* resources – not necessarily the *quantity* of the resources – that mattered most to the effects on parent involvement levels. For the

resources that were provided in Category III programs, those resources were well used such as the parent-child activities and the parent education programs.

Insofar as the levels of parent involvement, Category III administrators from this group were adamant about the importance of understanding the culture of the participants as this understanding was what contributed to the high levels of engagement. The use of social resources like parent-child activities and linking to community resources, were seen as opportunities for building relationships between families and the program, an essential component of increasing parent involvement. At the same time, Category III administrators emphasized looking at the needs of the family and seeing what social resources were available to them in the community as well. This was an alternate strategy for getting assistance to program participants that could not be provided by the PreK/PFA program otherwise. When the early childhood programs collaborated with community resources, parents could be assisted even if not directly by the PreK/PFA program.

Overall, the information from the Category II and III interviews provided more in-depth information on the inverse relationship that was not present in the survey analysis. The interviews illustrated that the relationship between the number of resources and levels of parent involvement was widely influenced by other factors such as funding, cultural understanding, staff composition, preschool infrastructure, and unique family circumstances. These compounded influences also spoke more to why parents do and do not engage in the program with or without respect to the use of resources provided by that program.

As a result, different programs used different approaches and strategies for increasing parent involvement and use of the available resources in their respective sites. Some adjusted the format and timing of resources like the parent-child activities and parent education programs to match parent schedules. Other administrators allowed parents to play a more active role in the planning and type of engagement the program would have with participants such as changing the language spoken in the meeting and having a parent committee coordinate/direct parent activities. In sum, the Category II and III interviews demonstrated the dynamic interplay between family circumstances, the use of social resources and parent involvement in PreK/PFA programs. Tuning into the families needs and background was critical to relationship-building that could contribute to higher levels of parent involvement in the programs.

Limitations

The qualitative component presented a number of strengths in the mixed methods design but there were limitations as well. A total of ten administrators participated in the administrative interviews, three each from Category I and Category IV, and two each from Category II and Category III. Each respondent provided a wealth of information of what was happening illustrating that the relationship being studied in this dissertation cannot be over-simplified to one linear explanation. Ten administrators represented a very small sample consideration when over 800 surveys were completed. Although the sample attempted to reflect the diversity in programs (school-based versus community based) and different regions in the state (Regions 2, 4, and 5), this was still a relatively small sample making it difficult to produce general remarks across all early childhood

programs in Illinois. There was enough diversity in program settings to reflect the difference available in programs but that also presented challenges in making generalized statements to a certain extent.

There were also discrepancies between the survey responses and interview remarks for Respondents 2E, 3G, and 4J, which could be seen as a limitation of the participant sample pool. Triangulation of the findings was limited for these categories because of the disconnected responses between survey and interview data. Replacement candidates should have been added to help support the research findings but there were no additional participants to sample given the small number of administrators that fell under these two categories. Most poignantly, the remarks reflect program-level understanding of the preschool programs from the perspective of administrators and the administrators only. We lose the voice of the teachers and the parent participants in the program since they are not included in the sample. The input of both groups – teachers/staff and parents – would need to be included to get a better-rounded picture of the relationship being studied in this dissertation.

Specific research needed to extend the findings

Administrators were more than happy to share information about their programs and the challenges in running a program within the context of the current economy and the challenges facing program participants. Greater understanding of the relationships between parents and teachers needed to be better understood since it was this component that seemed to be the most relevant in parent involvement in the preschool programs. Teachers/staff and parents should be surveyed and interviewed to further support the

survey findings and administrative interviews. Parents, in particular, need to be included because they are the essential component of discussing parent involvement not considered. This extra step would create a more holistic understanding of the relationship between levels of resources and levels of parent involvement in preschool program. This study would be better rounded if it included four components – parent, teacher and program surveys, administrative interviews, teacher/staff interviews, and parent interviews – designed to address the research questions.

Additionally, and specific to Categories II and III, a more in-depth look at the relationships between parents and teachers/school would be vital for understanding the relationship between variables. All respondents attributed success in parent engagement and use of resources in part to the close relationships within the program. Therefore further investigation of what these parent-teacher-school relationships look like, how they were developed, and how the relationships were maintained would be very informative to understanding the inverse outcomes for these two groups.

Summary of the Mixed Methods Findings

This mixed method study was designed to examine the relationship between two variables – social resources and parent involvement – on the *Evaluation* study. This study was not intended to test for a causal relationship between social resources and levels of parent involvement or social resources and positive child outcomes. Instead, this study proposed to examine a non-causal relationship that suggested a possible connection between resources and parent involvement in Illinois PreK/PFA programs. The study's goal was also to introduce more areas of inquiry that could build on the

quantitative findings, providing entrée into research on the impact of social resources on child outcomes in the future. These goals were achieved in the current study.

The significant relationship between the number of resources and levels of parent involvement in Illinois PreK/PFA programs was better understood by analyzing *Evaluation* survey data and triangulating the findings with the administrator interview data. The mixed methods approach aided in lessening the limitations presented from the use of the survey data set alone and provided new information not otherwise gained in the original study. Furthermore, the analysis in this study resulted in empirical evidence of a positive relationship between the number of resources a program provided and the levels of parent involvement in Illinois PreK and PFA programs.

In sum, the hypothesis was supported: *programs that offer more resources to parents will demonstrate more success in levels of parent involvement in their programs.* Additionally, the all research questions were addressed in the administrator interviews. Programs did offer resources above what was noted on the survey including transportation, service coordination, childcare, mental health consultation and food. Programs would like to offer enrollment to more children eligible for PreK/PFA programs as well as offer more staff development in the area of child development. And funding and family circumstances were just some of the barriers for getting families to use available resources or offer more social resources in the program. Despite these challenges, administrators said resourcefulness, good planning, and extensive outreach was the strategies used to support use and acquisition of resources for program participants (Research Question 1).

Additionally, parent involvement was described to varying degrees depending on the levels of resources in the program (Research Question 2). Category II and III administrators addressed the factors around why parent involvement may be high in programs offering few resources and vice versa (Research Question 3). The findings suggested unique family circumstances and the goodness of fit between the resources offered and the needs of the participants were what mattered most. It was not the quantity of the resources but the quality and appropriateness to what was needed in the program that had the greatest influence of parent involvement and use of resources. Together, the mixed methods study addressed all of these points and goals for the current study.

In summation, the following points are take-away messages from this study:

- 1) In addition to the prevalence of needed social resources in a program, other factors such as unique family circumstances and culture also have an important influence on levels of parent involvement
- 2) Definitions of parent involvement vary widely among administrators and across programs.
- 3) Strong relationships between programs and program participants had the greatest influence on the program's ability to engage parents and were evident in programs with high levels of parent involvement.
- 4) Reassessment of participant needs and adaptation of the program are constant endeavors for administrators seeking to support the changing academic and non-academic needs of program participants.

Indeed, *social resources were just one factor that influenced levels of parent involvement in Illinois PreK/PFA programs*. Specifically, the quantitative analysis confirmed more resources does not have a direct association with higher levels of parent involvement; low numbers of resources were tied to high levels of parent involvement in

some cases. The qualitative analysis provided the necessary support of the above statement. Administrators discussed their programs in great length and in no way was social resources considered the primary influence on levels of parent involvement. Parent involvement levels were described to varying degrees depending on the number of resources noted in the survey. More importantly, the levels of parent involvement varied based on the specific populations served by a program, the environment within which participating families lived, and the unique qualities and make-up of the program that influenced the extent to which parents did or did not use

When discussing the topic of social resources, administrators honed in on the appropriateness of the resources and the goodness of fit for the resource with the needs of program participants. The sheer number of available social support outlets was not a focus. Most notably, respondents discussed the unique family circumstances that had implications for participation levels. Administrators were serving high-risk families including those tied to the military, which created an entirely new, unique set of needs and the availability of social resources would not be the only solution to addressing the needs and getting families engaged.

Parent involvement and the definitions attributed to that involvement were also at the crux of the interviews. This suggested that survey provided an oversimplification of what parent involvement in preschool programs entailed. Administrators were very clear that involvement looks very different depending on the characteristics of the population, the region of the state, and the general needs of the community. For example, a single mother of two children living in a rural town with no transportation could be considered

highly involved if she was able to get her preschooler to school every day and attend programs infrequently. Given her circumstances, achieving this level of attendance would be a feat and demonstrated a level of engagement that may be lacking in parents who do have quick access to cars and programs. Respondents also spoke to the difference in parent involvement based on ethnic background. Ultimately, the take-away message from administrators was: *Definitions of parent involvement vary widely among administrators and across programs.* Resources are just one outlet for reaching them but were by no means the panacea for dealing with low levels of parent engagement in the program.

Strong relationships between programs and program participants had the greatest influence on the program's ability to engage parents and were evident in programs with high levels of parent involvement. Regardless of whether a program had a high number or low number of resources, it was the relationships between the administrator/teacher and the child/parents that was the best determinant of whether families would be engaged in the program. Administrators communicated it was the 'personal invitation' and the accountability of the program staff that made families feel connected to the program and encouraged involvement inside the classroom and in the community.

There was recognition that not all families can or want to be helped but there was a general sense that early childhood programs must be open and focused on meeting the educational and non-educational needs of participating families as best they can. Maintaining strong relationships allowed programs to achieve these ends. Programs that

demonstrated the high levels of parent involvement in the survey and interviews all noted that they firmly understood their community and the participants they worked with, making the program work for them through open communication and strong, safe, supportive relationships.

Reassessment of participant needs and adaptation of the program are constant endeavors for administrators seeking to support the changing academic and non-academic needs of program participants. Administrators who reported high levels of parent involvement consistently recognized the changing needs of the program and had tried to reassess and readjust their programs even when funding limits made it more difficult. When different needs were presented, administrators got creative and conducted extensive outreach programs in the community to get PreK/PFA participants what they need. The result was families who felt deeply connected to the program, families who felt valued, and families who were more involved in the various program activities and who used recommended services.

Administrators also spoke to the importance of the preschool infrastructure and its fit with the larger community because this goodness of fit influenced the extent to which parent used resources and/or was engaged in the preschool programs. This was another component of reassessment and adaptation that was needed in the program. Having stronger connections with the larger school district made transitions from preschool to kindergarten more seamless and could help to maintain relationships that were developed in preschool through the child's school-age years. Building this infrastructure was seen as a strategy to ensure preschool classrooms could be maintained even when funding cuts

threaten to close the programs which would help children and parent navigate between preschool and kindergarten classrooms. Having preschool as a secure program option would also be an additional method to support both the academic and non-academic needs of participants through a system familiar to preschool families.

Together, the materials in the interviews spoke to the variety of factors that need to be considered when discussing the connection between resources and parent involvement. While there are no easy answers, the survey data and interviews highlighted important considerations for getting parents engaged and using the available resources. The relationship presented in this dissertation was complex and there were a variety of factors relevant to each particular preschool setting but overall, a positive relationship is indeed present between resources and levels of parent involvement in Illinois programs.

On a broader context, the study illustrated a place for interdisciplinary learning in the fields of social work and early childhood education when working with at-risk populations. Increased collaboration and information exchange between early childhood professionals and social work professionals could streamline the process of providing the appropriate services to at-risk children and families particularly those accessing and using early learning settings. Early childhood settings connect families with social resources inside the program and within the community. Helping professionals like social workers should see early childhood programs also as a social resource to support children and families they encounter in their respective sites, and refer them to such programs.

When a child is identified as needing a safe environment to develop social-emotional and academic skills, he/she should refer to state-funded preschools like PreK/PFA programs. The benefits to children and families have been illustrated in this study thus professionals in social work and other helping professions should use early childhood programs as a viable intervention tool and resource for further supporting at-risk clients, particularly young children, found in their respective settings.

Implications of Findings

Research implications

Initially, this study sought to examine what was a seemingly simple relationships: social resources and levels of parent involvement in PreK/PFA programs. The findings from both the quantitative and qualitative components clearly evidenced that the relationships is far more complex. Other factors such as culture, unique family circumstances, and staff composition played an influential role and a variety of systems interplayed as well. The family system, the school systems, and the community systems all intersected in this study and each had the ability to influence the extent to which resources were available, the extent to which resources were used, and whether or not parents would engage in their child's preschool program.

As previously discussed, there are some options to extend the findings of the current study. One could isolate specific social resources and study the relationships of that specific resource with the levels of parent involvement, controlling for the various factors mentioned. One could also focus on a specific system – for example, the family unit – and study changes in the family unit based on input of resources. Most importantly,

the findings illustrated the need for parent input in this study that focuses on levels of parent involvement. This group was omitted in the current study and illustrated the need for research to include all relevant participants when studying a social phenomenon like parent involvement.

This study also demonstrated the limitations of conducting analysis on quantitative data that wasn't designed for bivariate analysis. This is evidenced in the effect size calculations that were inflated. The use of standardized measures could help as well. Moreover, the uniqueness of the secondary data also had implications to the extent to which findings could be generalized across all early childhood programs national. The survey data was unique to PreK/PFA programs but on the other hand, one can use the findings as a reference for other early childhood programs facing similar challenges.

Applied implications

The findings helped to illustrate possible gaps in the connection between social services agencies and early childhood programs serving the same population. Early childhood programs may be able to identify needs in the classroom but in making referrals to services, those referrals may either interfere or duplicate with what an affiliate caseworker may be recommending outside of the preschool program. Early childhood professionals and social work professionals need to streamline the connections between the two systems so that resources given in the early childhood program are not duplicated elsewhere. Early childhood programs use social resources in the program and the community as a tool to support the non-educational needs of participating families. In the same token, social service agencies can use early childhood programs as a valuable

intervention tool to support at-risk children in the community. In this way, early childhood programs and social services compliment each other and this collaboration can be used as a method of providing wrap-around services that are linked to families regardless of the setting.

Lastly, this study implied a new value placed on the role of social resources in PreK/PFA programs. Social resources are a means of addressing the non-educational needs but also, it is a tool for building relationships, a factor tied to levels of parent involvement. Additionally, the study highlighted the importance of quality over quantity of social resources and goodness of fit. Programs need to pay attention to the how the resources fit with the needs of participants as that has implications for the use of the social resources and levels of engagement.

Policy implications

Society is facing a time of fiscal cuts wherein accountability, efficiency, and cost-benefit analysis are the bottom-line for which issues are attended to and which are not. Understanding the dynamic relationship between social support and parent involvement in early childhood programs can provide insight to areas needing greater focus – and money – that have long-standing implications for families using public resources and federally/state-funded preschool programs.

This study makes specific policy recommendations to the Illinois State Board of Education and Illinois school district administrators that can be used to support early childhood programs and the at-risk families who participate in them:

1. *There needs to be standards and guidelines that require the provision and evaluation of social resources in preschool programs that are appropriate to*

program participants and determined through a systematic review of participant needs.

2. *Funding needs to be secured to ensure that the non-educational needs of program participants can be met through the provision of social resources.*
3. *To ensure the coordination of services and minimize duplication of efforts in meeting the non-educational needs of participants, community-based programs should be tied to school-based programs and services through a coordinated electronic database that can indicate points of service.*
4. *Professional development training should be provided to program staff to ensure greater skills in addressing the role of culture in preschool programs and using cultural understanding to connect with parents of ethnically diverse backgrounds in preschool programs.*

Support from higher administration could help establish and stabilize PreK/PFA programs throughout the state. Currently, PreK/PFA programs need stable funding, administrative support for addressing the non-educational needs of participant, and staff training so that these programs can in turn support the children and families they serve. Programs need more guidance in creating standard connections between early childhood programs and services in the community. Community-based programs need to be tied to the school district to ensure seamless transition for preschoolers into kindergarten while ensuring that services put in place during preschool are continued during the school-age years. A coordinated, electronic database could fulfill this gap in ensuring duplication of services is not occurring in preschool programs. And all of these infrastructure qualities fall under the discretion and direction of higher administration, a group better position to make programmatic guidelines and requirements that can be implemented state and district-wide.

Additionally, best practice policies for high quality early learning settings must include the reassessment of social resources in the program and allow programs to adapt

to the needs of the current participants. This way, it can be assured that funding for maintaining social resources is more effectively spent on those resources that make the most difference for participating families. Moreover, administrators and staff should have funding and access to support and training for working with culturally diverse populations and for addressing unique family circumstances in their respective programs. Professional development opportunities to help programs understand their program participants will support the programs capacity to meet educational and non-educational needs more efficiently and effectively.

These policy recommendations reflect the needs and concerns presented by the administrators interviewed in this study. The availability of social resources inside the program and within the surrounding community was seen as a valuable addition to the program that helped strengthen relationships with participants. These strengthened relationships resulted in higher levels of parent involvement which is tied to diverse benefits for both the child and family.

Additionally, ensuring that programs are tailored to meet the educational and non-educational needs of families is a best practice ideology and could be better met with continuous re-evaluation, training, and program adaptation. Such changes would support families in the program and would ensure that transitions from the preschool settings would be less abrupt and jarring to families already struggling with diverse challenges. There is a need for systems-building and connections between the preschool system and the elementary school systems, as well as, connections to social services systems in the community at large. These policy recommendations are intended to help bridge the

connections and build a unified system for working with at-risk children and families participating in early childhood programs like PreK and PFA.

Future Directions

This dissertation provided entrée into thinking about the diverse purpose of social resources and the role of parent involvement in early childhood programs, and the relationship between the two. The study highlighted the complexity of this relationships and the need to expand the scope of factors that influence the interplay between social resources and parent involvement levels. Moving forward, greater attention needs to be paid to the various areas suggested in this study including family circumstances, the role of culture, and even the program infrastructure in order to understand the social phenomenon being studied.

Ultimately, early intervention matters and early childhood programs are a pivotal intervention tool that can change the trajectory of a child considered at-risk for school failure. With coordination between early learning settings and social resources within the program and in the community, one can support children and families in a way that has both academic and non-academic benefits that will have a long-lasting impact throughout the lifespan. Additional research on the relationship considered in this study will further contribute to evidence supporting the importance of early development and family systems in our community.

APPENDIX A:
ILLINOIS REGIONAL MAP

APPENDIX B:
ERIKSON INSTITUTE & LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO IRB
APPROVAL LETTERS

Erikson Institute IRB Approval Letter for use of secondary data and interview component

451 North LaSalle Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60654
312-755-2250 | 312-755-0928 f
www.erikson.edu
Founded by Irving B. Harris

September 1, 2009

Re: 09-007

Aimee Hilado
Erikson Institute
451 North LaSalle Avenue
Chicago, IL, 60654

PROJECT INVESTIGATORS: Aimee Hilado

PROPOSAL TITLE: Understanding the Impact of Social Resources on Levels of parental Involvement in Illinois EC Programs

TYPE OF REVIEW: Expedited

Dear Ms. Hilado:

The Erikson Institute Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects has reviewed your response to our concerns and we are satisfied that you have addressed them appropriately. Approval is granted for a year.

Sincerely,



Molly F. Collins, Ed.D.
Acting Chair, Institutional Review Board for the
Protection of Human Subjects

09-007



Research Services
Institutional Review Board for The Protection of Human Subjects
Lakeside
Lake Shore Campus
1032 W. Sheridan Road | Chicago, Illinois 60660

November 3, 2009

Dear Ms. Aimee Hilado,

Thank you for submitting the research project entitled: Understanding the Relationship Between Social Resources and Levels of parent Involvement in Illinois Early Childhood Programs: A Program-Level Perspective, for *expedited review* by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects. After careful examination of the materials you submitted, we have **approved** this project as described for a period of one year.

Approximately eleven months from your initial review date, you will receive a renewal notice stating that approval of your project is about to expire. This notice will give you detailed instructions for submitting a renewal application. If you do not submit a renewal application prior to November 3, 2010, your approval will automatically lapse and your project will be suspended. **When a project is suspended, no more research or writing regarding human subjects may be done until the project is reevaluated and re-approved.** I recommend that you respond to these annual renewals in a complete and timely fashion.

This review procedure, administered by the IRB, in no way absolves you, the researcher, from the obligation to immediately inform the IRB in writing if you would like to change aspects of your approved project (please consult our website for specific instructions). You, the researcher, are respectfully reminded that the University's ability to support its researchers in litigation is dependent upon conformity with continuing approval for their work. Should you have questions regarding this letter or general procedures, please contact the Compliance Manager at (773) 508-2689. Please quote File #74247 if this project is specifically involved.

With best wishes for the success of your work,

Dr. Raymond H. Dye, Jr.
Chair, Institutional Review Board

CC: Dr. Marta Lundy -Social Work

http://www.luc.edu/ors/irb_home.shtml

APPENDIX C:
CHI-SQUARE ANALYSIS CHARTS

Chi-square Analysis: Social Resources vs. Levels of Parent Involvement

Chi-square for Question 32a: Parent staff and parents have effective meaningful two-way communication on a regular basis

Frequency Percent Row % Column %	(1) Completely Successful	(2) Mostly Successful	(3) Somewhat Successful	TOTAL
High Resource Provider	188 26.55 48.83 54.49	187 26.41 48.57 57.19	10 1.41 2.60 27.78	385 54.38
Low Resource Provider	157 22.18 48.61 45.51	140 19.77 43.34 42.81	26 3.67 8.05 72.22	323 45.62
Total	345 48.73	327 46.19	36 5.08	708 100.00

Frequency Missing = 48

$\chi^2=11.31$, df=2, p<.004

Chi-square for Question 32b: Our program helps promote and support parenting skills

Frequency Percent Row % Column %	(1) Completely Successful	(2) Mostly Successful	(3) Somewhat Successful	TOTAL
High Resource Provider	147 20.79 38.08 64.19	205 29.00 53.11 57.42	34 4.81 8.81 28.10	386 54.60
Low Resource Provider	82 11.60 25.55 35.81	152 21.50 47.35 42.58	87 12.31 27.10 71.90	321 45.40
Total	229 32.39	357 50.50	121 17.11	707 100.00

Frequency Missing = 48

$\chi^2=43.93$, df=2, p<.0001

Chi-square for Question 32c: Our program integrally involves parents in assisting their children's learning

Frequency Percent Row % Column %	(1) Completely Successful	(2) Mostly Successful	(3) Somewhat Successful	TOTAL
High Resource Provider	162 22.85 41.97 57.04	190 26.80 49.22 57.06	34 4.80 8.81 36.96	386 54.44
Low Resource Provider	122 17.21 37.77 42.96	143 20.17 44.27 42.94	58 8.18 17.96 63.04	323 45.56
Total	284 40.06	333 46.97	92 12.98	709 100.00

Frequency Missing = 48

$\chi^2=13.03$, df=2, $p<.002$

Chi-square for Question 32d: Parents feel welcome in the program

Frequency Percent Row % Column %	(1) Completely Successful	(2) Mostly Successful	(3) Somewhat Successful	TOTAL
High Resource Provider	266 37.52 68.91 54.07	117 16.50 30.31 56.52	3 0.42 0.78 30.00	386 54.44
Low Resource Provider	226 31.88 69.97 45.93	90 12.69 27.86 43.48	7 0.99 2.17 70.00	323 45.56
Total	492 69.39	207 29.20	10 1.41	709 100.00

Frequency Missing = 48

$\chi^2=2.80$, df=2, $p<.247$

Chi-square for Question 32e; Program staff actively seeks parents' support and involvement

Frequency Percent Row % Column %	(1) Completely Successful	(2) Mostly Successful	(3) Somewhat Successful	TOTAL
High Resource Provider	239 33.71 61.92 57.59	137 19.32 35.49 55.02	10 1.41 2.59 22.22	386 54.44
Low Resource Provider	176 24.82 54.49 42.41	112 15.80 34.67 44.98	35 4.94 10.84 77.78	323 45.56
Total	415 58.53	249 35.12	45 6.35	709 100.00

Frequency Missing = 48

$\chi^2=20.53$, df=2, p<0001

APPENDIX D:
NOTIFICATION LETTER TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS



Herr Research Center for Children and Social Policy at Erikson Institute

Dear «FIRSTNAME» «LASTNAME»:

The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) contracted with the Herr Research Center for Children and Social Policy at Erikson Institute to conduct a statewide evaluation of the programs funded by Illinois' Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG). This study is known as the *Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation* and we thank you again for your participation in completing the Web-Survey distributed in 2008.

To build on the information you provided in your survey responses, I would like to invite you to participate in a follow-up administrator interview so that we can further understand your program, the services and resources you offer to participants, and the successes and challenges you've faced in engaging parents in your work. This sub-study of the *Evaluation* is being done with full support from the *Evaluation's* Principal Investigator and the Illinois State Board of Education as part of a my dissertation. I am a doctoral student at Loyola University Chicago School of Social Work, in addition to being a member of the *Evaluation* team, and this portion of the study will be conducted for partial fulfillment for the requirements of my program. All findings will be shared and disseminated to the Herr Research Center, Loyola University Chicago, and ISBE upon completion of the study.

If you participate, you will be one of 10 Illinois PreK /PFA administrators I will interview across the state. The interview will last about 45-60 minutes, either in person or on the telephone, and can be scheduled at a time that is convenient for you. It will consist of a mix of specific questions, informal conversation and questions to allow you to discuss topics that are of greatest concern to you. The conversation and all information you provide will be kept completely confidential.

I will be contacting you over the next week to see about your willingness and availability to meet. You may also communicate your interest by contacting me at (312) 893-7207 or ahilado@erikson.edu. Interviews will take place between now and November 1st. I very much value your input and look forward to speaking with you soon.

Sincerely,

Aimee V. Hilado, M.S., M.S.W.

Research Analyst, Herr Research Center for Children and Social Policy
Doctoral Candidate, Loyola University Chicago – School of Social Work

Erikson Institute

[Graduate school in child development](#)

451 North LaSalle Street, Chicago, Illinois 60654

312 893-7207 (Tel) 312 855-0928 (Fax)

APPENDIX E:
DESCRIPTION OF STUDY & INFORMED VERBAL CONSENT FORM



Herr Research Center for Children and Social Policy at Erikson Institute

ADMINISTRATOR INTERVIEW *A sub-study of the Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation* **Informed Verbal Consent Form**

What is this study?

The Herr Research Center for Children and Social Policy at Erikson Institute has been contracted by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) to conduct a statewide evaluation of programs funded by the Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) entitled the *Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation FY09* study. Your program has already participated in part of Phase 1 of the evaluation study involving completion of a Web-survey distributed statewide. The current sub-study will be used to complement the information you provided in the original Web-survey and aims to better understand the children and families being served by your program, the social resources and referrals offered to your program participants, barriers to families using services, and successes and challenges to increasing parent involvement.

What will I ask you to do?

If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you questions about the greatest needs of the children and families you serve, the social resources and referrals you can or would like to provide, and questions around parent involvement in your program. This interview will take about 45-60 minutes to complete. There are no physical or emotional risks beyond the risks of daily life in completing the interview. There are no direct benefits to you, but it is an opportunity to further inform on the workings of your program.

Will my interview responses be confidential?

Yes, your interview responses are completely confidential and will only be reported as part of summarized findings. Your name or other identifying information will not be reported in any publications. I will protect your identity by using a code number instead of personal names to identify each interviewee. Any personal names, organizations, phone numbers or email addresses will be deleted at the end of the study to protect your identity. I would like to tape the interview so that I can accurately record your views and so that I can focus on talking with you rather than on taking notes. You may ask the interviewer to turn off the tape recorder at any time during the interview and the interviews will be stored to ensure confidentiality.

Do have to complete this interview?

No, your participation is completely voluntary. During the interview, you also may skip any questions you do not wish to answer and stop the interview at any time.

Furthermore, your willingness to participate or not will have no bearing on your employment or agency's funding from ISBE.

Who do I contact if I have questions?

Please contact Aimee Hilado, the Principal Investigator on the study, at (312) 893-7207 or ahilado@erikson.edu. You may also contact the Chairperson of study: Marta Lundy, Ph.D., LCSW at (312)915-7007 or mlundy@luc.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Compliance Manager in Loyola's Office of Research Services at (773) 508-2689 or the Erikson Institute Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at (312) 755-2250.

APPENDIX F:
ADMINISTRATOR INTERVIEW PROTOCOL



Herr Research Center for Children and Social Policy
at Erikson Institute

ADMINISTRATOR INTERVIEW
A sub-study of the Illinois Birth To Five Evaluation
Interview Protocol

Tasks: Review *Informed Consent* Form & request permission to record the interview

Length of Interview: 45-60 minutes

Purpose: To understand the greatest needs of children and families in early childhood programs, the social resources and referrals offered to program participants, barriers to families using services and parent involvement.

General information

1. Tell me about the families you serve.
Probe: What makes your families different than families in other programs? (e.g. SES, ethnicity, languages spoken etc.)
2. What are the greatest strengths of the families you serve? What are the greatest needs of the families you serve?

Understanding parents and parent involvement

3. Tell me about the levels of parent involvement in your program?
4. Tell me about some of the successes and challenges you've faced in engaging parents?
Probe: What have been some helpful strategies for getting parents involved?
5. Do you serve immigrants in your programs? Refugees? English-language learners? What are levels of parent involvement for these different groups?
Probe: Is there a difference in their participation levels compared to other parents? Is there a difference in the strategies you use to engage them?

Information about social resources and referrals

NOTE: I will have their responses from the web-survey

6. Based on the resources and referrals you noted on the web-survey, how widely used are those resources?
7. Could you describe some of the successes and barriers to getting families to use/access the resources you provide?
Probe: Are there issues with other forces – family dynamics, language, domestic violence, immigration status, etc.? What else comes to mind?
8. What have been some helpful strategies for supporting the success of program use? What are some strategies for overcoming these barriers (if any)?
Probe: In what ways have you been able to increase the use of resources?
9. I'd like to ask you about specific resources and services that were not mentioned in the survey. Some may tie into the responses you've already given.
Probe: Do you offer the following? Are there any others resources/services that you provide that I have not mentioned?
- a. Transportation
 - b. Service coordination/case management
 - c. Communication about resources and services
 - d. Child Care
 - e. Food (lunch/dinners)
 - f. Mental health consultation
 - g. Other: _____
 - h. Other: _____
 - i. Other: _____
10. What child/parent indicators (if any) prompted the decision to offer these resources? What does each resource/service entail?
Probe: Which are the most in demand?

<i>Types of Service</i>	<i>Demand</i>	<i>Description</i>
Transportation		
Service coordination/case management		
Communication about services		
Child Care		
Food (lunch/dinners)		

Mental health consultation		
Other:		
Other:		
Other:		

11. Are there any resources you would like to provide but can't at this time?

Probe: What keeps you from offering them?

What prohibits you – transportation, location, coordination?

In what ways do you think they would be helpful?

Wrap-up questions

12. **Scenario 1:** Can you think of a family who has diverse needs and you are able to cater to every request concern they have (e.g. transportation, parent education, child care, etc.) but the levels of parent involvement are still low? What do you think are some of the reasons for this outcome?

Probe: What are other barriers that aren't being considered when it comes to parent involvement?

13. **Scenario 2:** Can you think of a family that is very involved in your program although the program offers limited resources? What do you think are some reasons for that outcome?

Probe: What are other barriers that aren't being considered when it comes to parent involvement?

APPENDIX G:
DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW SAMPLE

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW SAMPLE

CATEGORY 1: HIGH RESOURCES/ HIGH PARENT INVOLVEMENT
<p><u>Participant 1A:</u> This participant was an Administrator in a local elementary school within in a school-based preschool program located in Region 2. Her program consisted of eight blended classrooms and three special education classrooms funded in part by ISBE. The program was located in a rural area serving low-income families. Her program serviced a number of English-language learners as well. Transportation was an issue because the program was located in a rural area and public transportation was not an option for participants. Given the state-funding cuts, the school district was been able to support the program because the district supplemented funds that were not provided by ISBE. This participant said that her program would not have survived without the district funds. She further commented that she had a full program and carried a long waitlist of preschoolers who wanted to get into the program but there was no space to open enrollment. This participant consistently cited strong relationships with families as a strength and support for family engagement in her program.</p>
<p><u>Participant 1B:</u> This participant was the Early Childhood Coordinator who operated her programs on behalf of her area's regional office of education (ROE) and provided prekindergarten programs for four small districts that were too small to run preschool programs on their own. This program was not tied directly to any one school-district but funds were received from the ROE, thus the program operated relatively similar to a school-based program. This participant cited all her programs were located in very rural areas that were outside town limits and were very small with 20-200 students in each district. She further noted that most of the families are very low income with limited transportation and limited access to public resources such as public libraries and museums which were either too far or required money to access. The participant said that many of her program participants were very isolated and it was an issue of coordinating programs to fit the needs of family participants. She said her program rents space in other districts in order to provide the venue for the preschool programs, which has cost implications. It also limits her ability to offer full-day preschool programs because amenities such as a kitchen are not available to her program. This participant also commented that there were many factory jobs in the area but those factories have closed in recent years, forcing families to move out of state for work or commute 45-60 minutes to the nearest factory jobs. She further cited strong relationships with families that help increase levels of engagement in the program.</p>

Participant 1C: This participant is the Director of Instructional Services in a school-based preschool program housed in a Middle School building. Her program is located at a local Lutheran Church and is staffed with bi-lingual teachers, aides, and a parent educator who all speak Spanish because the preschool program heavily caters to a Hispanic population. The participant said that many of her participants are single-parent households, young parents, low-income families and families in which the grandparents play a large role in raising children. She also cited strong family matriarchs and that these families are very isolated although most have access to transportation. She also cited limited access to computers and technology unless these families go to the local library. This participant further cited strong community support for the preschool program in which different businesses and organizations donate to the various activities and causes hosted by the preschool program. She also cited a very strong parent community that helps to mobilize activities and which hold meetings held in Spanish to accommodate the large Hispanic population using the program. The participant also shared that the program has become a safe space for family members to bring young children not in the program and this has helped cultivate stronger relationships with the program staff, which in turn have resulted in higher engagement levels. She further cited the strength of her program laid in having the right people in the right positions. She said having a bi-lingual staff and a parent educator whose primary role is to support the families has been key in keeping the program connected with the families and community, thus resulting in such high levels of engagement within the program.

CATEGORY 2: HIGH RESOURCES/LOW PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Participant 2D: This participant was an Administrator and business owner of a community-based preschool program. The participant took over a failing child care center, re-licensed/revamped the program and currently provide programming for infants toddlers and preschoolers with a capacity for 38 preschoolers and 20 school-age children. The program is located across the street from a public school and an early childhood center that houses early intervention programs. The participant shared her program is well connected with the school district thus children transition easily from her private program to the public school system. It was also shared that this program serves very low income families with 70-75% being African American, 20% Caucasian and the remaining being Hispanic or of mixed ethnicity. This participant noted that personal barriers were the main reasons why parents were not involved as many were low-income families who work evenings as well as young teen parents. This participant also cited pride as a reason for the lack of participation in the program despite the provision of diverse resources. In such cases, it was the strong teacher-parent relationships that help to keep families in the program.

Participant 2E: This participant was a Program Coordinator for a community-based preschool and family resource program. This participant discussed the importance of creating a network of services in the community and then helping to building the family into that support network. She also shared that they serve a range of families who present different risks and it is open to all families who are in the preschool program or those who have children who are younger. It was also shared that the program serves ELL-

learners as $\frac{1}{4}$ of the population served are Hispanic. The services and resources that were provided by this program were based on needs presented in the community. When a need was presented, the program could build connections in the community to meet that need. The approach of this program was also different. This program proactively sought to recruit families into the preschool programs which in turn would grant the family access to the various resources that the program offered. The program also had the ideology of meeting the parents where the parents were at and making the programs work for the families. Despite survey responses that would indicate low parent involvement, the interviews suggested that parent involvement was high. This was a result of the strong relationships building between program and participant, and having a program that met the diverse needs presented by families.

CATEGORY 3: LOW RESOURCES/HIGH PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Participant 3F: This participant was the Coordinator of a school-based preschool program. She manages PFA-funded preschool programs for 240 children spread across 7 rural districts. This participant shared her programs serve a diverse range of need including low-income, ELL-learners, those who need intensive Head Start services, and families living in rural areas. The school district provides transportation thus the preschool programs are all full-day because this would allow for the highest number of enrollment since the district cannot provide transportation for half-day programs and parents need full-day programs since they are working. The coordinator shared that evening programs were well-attended because parents work during the day and it was the strong teacher-parent relationships that further contributed to high turn-out rates. This participant shared limits to the resources that she could provide program participants. She said that she could only give education services that are part of the district but her program would proactively look for additional services for families if a need were presented. This participant further commented that the reason for challenges with parent involvement were tied to the families simply being ill-equipped to handle the situations they find themselves in. It had nothing to do with care for the child or interest in the child's needs. It was more a matter of personal barriers.

Participant 3G: This participant was the Director for Early Childhood in a school-based preschool program. Her program currently served 40 preschool children and given the state-cuts in budget, she said her program would not have survived if it had not been housed within a school district. The school district provided in-kind supports but her program was at risk of being cut because state-funding may fall through in the coming fiscal year. She shared that the preschool program is so small in comparison to the 14,000 students served by the entire district but the importance of preschool was evident particular to the teacher who receive the students in their kindergarten classrooms. The participant shared he serves low-SES families with low levels of education and many English language learners. She also cited serving single families, families who are experience homelessness, and who may have a member incarcerated. This was a participant who discussed the relevance of culture as her program serves a high Hispanic population. She said she incorporate cultural themes into the activities and it has helped in getting families more involved. She further discussed the importance of cultural

understanding and the need for staff training in this area in order to connect with program participants.

CATEGORY 4: LOW RESOURCES/LOW PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Participant 4H: This participant was the Center Director of a community-based, private KinderCare Learning Center. She described her participants as single families of low-SES and some English-language learners. She further cited it being a strength that her program was funded by a private company (Kindercare) because Kindercare has been able to shoulder the costs when state-funding was cut. For example, the facilities and supplies were still provided and maintained despite funding cuts. The participant communicated challenges to having a PFA program in a private center as well. She said that parents associate her program as simply child care, which she confirmed it is not, and that has been a challenge. She said that parents who cannot access PFA at-risk preschool programs in the district can access her program but they aren't aware of the availability. This participant also discussed the need for cultural understanding and the implications of cultural upbringing on the child's ability to acquire skills in her setting. She further communicated that it is her strong relationships with families that helps her stay connected but there is still a lack of understanding on the part of parents for the importance of early development. This participant also shared that if she were to expand the program in any way, she would have to get approval from the administration of the private company, which is a barrier to tailoring this program to meet the unique needs of program participants.

Participant 4I: This participant was the Early Childhood Coordinator and a teacher at a Regional Office of Education, school-based preschool program. She shared that program has two preschool classrooms and that given the area in which her program is located, all children who are interested in entering are able to access the program. She noted serving higher income families who were all Caucasian. This participant shared that despite these characteristics, participation in her program remains low. Her program has diverse services provided by the district but her parents remain unengaged and she expressed a need for additional training on ways to connect with program participants. This respondent was difficult to engage during the interview which contributed to a more restricted picture of her preschool program.

Participant 4J: This participant was the Director of an early childhood development center located on a military base. Her program in total serves 176 children ages 6 weeks to 5 years of age. She serves families in the air force, army, navy, national guard, marines, and reservist. This participant described the families are diverse and primarily English-speakers although she did serve Spanish-speaking families. She further commented that families tied to the military are connected with a whole range of services that go beyond early childhood programs and this is standard for those tied to the base. They are provided mental health consultants, medical services, family readiness classes, a commissary, and even a military life consultant/parent educator who helps families with deployment and other familial needs. She further commented that since we are currently in two wars, participation in the preschool and early childhood programs have not been a

priority for families even if they recognize the importance of such programming. It is these personal and environmental circumstances that had implications on the extent to which families used resources and were involved in the offered early childhood programs.

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VITA

Aimee Victoria Hilado was born and raised in Diamond Bar, California. Before pursuing her graduate studies, she attended the University of California, San Diego where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and minor in Communications, with Honors Cum Laude, in 2001. Aimee was a member of the Golden Key National Honor Society and Pi Sigma Alpha, Political Science Honor Society, and she was recognized as a UC San Diego Undergraduate Research Scholar in 2001.

From 2004 to 2007, she attended the Erikson Institute and Loyola University Chicago to complete a dual-degree Master's program in child development and clinical social work. Aimee was a recipient of the Barbara T. Bowman scholarship and the Irving B. Harris Scholarship for academic excellence during the 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 academic years. She graduated with a Master of Science in Applied Child Development in 2006 from the Erikson Institute and a Master of Social Work degree from Loyola University Chicago in 2007.

In 2007, Aimee began the doctoral program in social work at Loyola University Chicago. Aimee was the recipient of the School of Social Work Graduate Merit Fellowship and Research Assistantship Award for two years. She was also awarded the Graduate School Academic Council (GSAC) Interdisciplinary Research Award in 2009 for her work in social work and child development studies. While at Loyola, Aimee

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Currently, Aimee is a Research Analyst at the Herr Research Center for Children and Social Policy at Erikson Institute. She is also an adjunct professor at Kendall College and Loyola University Chicago. She lives in Chicago, Illinois.

DISSERTATION APPROVAL SHEET

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The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval by the committee with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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