

Teachers' and parents' perceptions of parent volunteering in the context of charter school
in the US public school setting

A THESIS

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Larysa Moroz

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my dear parents, my late father Ivan Moroz and my lovely mother Olga Moroz who introduced me to a magic world of reading and gave me a chance to obtain a classical education with an emphasis on foreign languages and Humanities since my early childhood enabling such research study to take place today.

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore and understand how teachers and parents perceive parent volunteering in the context of charter school in the US public school setting. The study strived to decipher the value of parent volunteering as parent involvement for the students' learning and social skills development in charter school setting and to elucidate the major factors that influence parent volunteering at school and how they affect the teachers' job performance. Eleven one-on-one, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and parents at one of the Twin Cities charter school to understand the role of parent volunteering in the education realm. Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence was used as a theoretical framework to understand and utilize the practices and activities that validate parental involvement at home, school and community. I examined the teachers' and parents' views on volunteering as one of the six types of parental involvement in Epstein's typology of parent involvement.

Keywords: parent volunteering, PTO, parents, teachers, charter school

Contents

Acknowledgements	i
Dedication	ii
Abstract	iii
Table of Contents	iv
List of Figures	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Background	1
Gaps in the Literature	4
Significance of the Problem.....	5
The Purpose of the Study.....	7
Definition of Key Terms.....	8
Chapter 2: Literature Review	10
The History of Parental Involvement and Why it is Important	10
The Concept of Parent Involvement.....	12
Epstein’s Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence	15
School and Teacher Factors Affecting Parent Volunteering.....	16
Factors that Affect Parent Volunteering.....	17
Charter Schools in Minnesota.....	20
Chapter 3: Methodology	23
Research Questions.....	23
Case Study Approach: Strengths and Limitations.....	24
Methods and Sample.....	25
The Selection of the Case and Data Gathering.....	26
Data Analysis.....	29
Chapter 4: The Findings	31
Overview.....	31
The School.....	31
Teacher Participants.....	34
Parent Participants.....	37
The Value of Parent Volunteering.....	40
Building a sense of community.....	40
Parents’ support of their children and education.....	41
Importance of the PTO at the charter school.....	42
Effects of Parent Volunteering on Students’ Learning and Social Skills Development.....	44
Parent volunteering major focuses: Reading, Math and field trips.....	44
Parent volunteering: “To be, or not to be” in higher grades.....	45
Parents’ view: social and nutritional wellbeing.....	47
Who are the leaders at school?.....	48
Effects of Parent Volunteering on Teachers’ Job Performance.....	49

Parent volunteering: Is it helpful or stressful?.....	49
Teachers’ perceptions on parent tension prevention strategies.....	52
Variations.....	54
Reasons of Parent Volunteering and Types of Parent Volunteering at the Charter School.....	54
Parent volunteering as a source of pleasure and satisfaction.....	55
Evidence of cultural volunteerism: Necessity and desire to help the school succeed.....	57
Variations.....	59
Concept of love and care.....	59
Concept of connectedness.....	60
School Factors that Foster Volunteering.....	61
The role of the school activities coordinator in promoting parent volunteering.....	61
School factors that could hinder parent volunteering at the charter school.....	63
Teachers on inviting and welcoming approach to the parents.....	64
How Is Parent Volunteering Integrated Into School Life?.....	65
The school curriculum and parent volunteering.....	66
Parent volunteering and students’ health and well-being	68
How to involve parents into volunteering.....	69
Influence of the Socio-Economic, Minority and Immigrant Statuses on Volunteering.....	70
“There is no money in volunteering”.....	71
“Minority parents are working majority of the time”.....	71
Minority and immigrant statuses factors: Language barrier, cultural background, and feeling of “otherness”.....	72
High socio-economic status factors: Time availability and stay-at-home mothers.....	75
Variations.....	76
Chapter 5:	
Discussion	78
Implication for School Policies and Practices.....	87
Future Research Findings.....	91
Limitations of My Study.....	93
Bibliography	96
Appendix A: Interview Protocols with the Parents of Charter School.....	109
Appendix B: Interview Protocols with the Teachers of Charter School.....	110
Appendix C: IRB Approval	111

List of Figures

Figure 1: Epstein's framework of six types of parent involvement.....12

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

When it comes to studying a new problem in a multifaceted social sciences research domain, it is clear that the researcher starts the investigation from his or her own personal life experience. The issue of volunteering as a type of parent involvement emerged for the first time in my life when my family moved to Canada in 2005. Questions about my preference in the type of volunteering at school were the first questions I was asked by a school representative after I had accompanied my son to his kindergarten class. During the Soviet Union era in the western part of Ukraine in the city where I come from, the term “volunteering” was not used in public school settings. Thus, I regarded volunteering at my son’s school as not only time given for some purpose, but also as a cultural, social and economic phenomenon, or as a way societies are organized. The term and essence of “parent volunteering” was unfamiliar to me and my family upon our arrival to Canada and later to the United States, where parent volunteering has been considered a key component to successful learning and school functioning.

The issue of parental involvement in volunteering is closely related to the work of teachers. Carlisle et al. (2006) suggest that parents who volunteer at school interact with teachers in supportive and cooperative ways to show their children what value parents put on the education of their children. As a former educator with more than 17 years of teaching experience, it was interesting for me to examine how teachers perceive volunteering of parents. Is it effective and encouraging for the learning process? How much and in what way must it be performed in order to facilitate better students’ learning outcomes? Is parent volunteering distracting or helpful to teacher performance? And as a

parent, I always question the adequacy of volunteering at school. I found it interesting to learn how strongly parent volunteering can affect the social and learning skills of students. If parents are at school, can it cause possible tension in parent-teacher relations?

Although a lot of educators underscore the significance of parental involvement with their child's learning both at home and at school, the research has not clarified the extent to which parent involvement helps students to do well at school or what aspect of parental involvement is the most important (Jeynes, 2001). Volunteering as a type of parental involvement is under-researched in the field of education. Hoge, Smit and Crist (1997), and Mau (1997) do not even include parent volunteering as a component of parental involvement. Due to the shortage of research literature on the issue of parent volunteering, this study tries to explore and understand the meaning and value of parent volunteering as a type of parental involvement in schooling practice through the teachers' and parents' perceptions on the issue in the context of a charter school in a Midwestern state in the United States.

The role of parent involvement has changed tremendously with the fast-moving social, political and economic changes that are transforming the structure of society in our present multicultural global community. Parents want their children to experience success in school, even though they may have neither substantial knowledge nor the resources to actualize their aspirations for their children (Banks, 2007).

Henderson and Berla (1994) reviewed 64 research studies on parent involvement and stated that students do better in school when parents are involved in their children's education at home, at school and in the community. Due to parent involvement students improve their academic achievements (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995) as well as

improve their behavioral and emotional development (Cai, Moyer, & Wang, 1997). Although consistent with the research, there are some factors that influence parents' involvement. Among them are parents' level of education (Baker & Stevenson, 1986), socio-economic and minority status (Ho & Williams, 1996), and parents' former experiences in school (Aronson, 1996). According to Barge and Loges (2003), teachers also have an effect on parental involvement levels. Such factors as teachers' lack of training (Moles, 1993), racial composition of teachers and parents (Kerbow & Bernhardt, 1993) and the amount of teacher–parent communication (Watkins, 1997) could be significant in shaping the level of parent involvement at schools. Parental involvement is affected by several school characteristics such as student-teacher ratio, number of minority teachers, school size, setting, academic focus, climate, and sense of community (Feuerstein, 2000) and school boards' and principals' attitudes towards parental involvement (Henderson, 1988). Lortie (1975) assumes that another critical reason to involve parents in school activities might be the job satisfaction of teachers and teacher efficacy. Studies by Kerbow and Bernhardt (1993) and Ho Sui-Chu and Willms (1996) show that in schools with a higher average socio-economic status (SES) and a larger minority composition, parents will contact the school to participate in volunteering and to attend the PTO meetings more often. However, all of these factors merit further investigation as only few studies have been conducted to date (Feuerstein 2000). Regarding parent volunteering at school, Christie (2005) identifies it to be on the lowest rung of the ladder of multiple levels of parental influence in contrast to the top rung as having parents' high expectations for their children's effort and behavior. However, importance of parent volunteering should not be minimized, as it does have a positive

impact on student achievement and self-confidence (Fan & Chen, 2001). Volunteering as a type of parental involvement needs to be researched in order to give guidance regarding its most appropriate form and the extent to which parent volunteering enhances student learning and social skills, improves school climate and encourages better teacher-parent-community partnership.

Gaps in the Literature

According to Henderson and Mapp (2002), there is a dearth of knowledge about which aspects of parent involvement help urban student achievements and what type of parent involvement is most important. Less research has been conducted at middle schools, as the effects of parent involvement on student learning are predominantly investigated at the elementary level of schooling (Balli, Demo & Wedman, 1998). Little research has explored which component of parental involvement had a greater impact on children's cognitive and social outcomes (Jeynes, 2003). Volunteering as a type of parental involvement is under-researched and needs to be examined to realize its effects on the academic and social achievements of students, as well as teacher-parent-community collaboration. Furthermore, the effects of parent volunteering activities on student behavior and social and learning outcomes are unclear. This study aims to fill these gaps in knowledge by asking teachers' and parents' views on volunteering as parent involvement to understand how parent volunteering activities in a public school setting are designed to improve students behavior, social and learning skills and how it could assist teachers in their jobs.

Significance of the Problem

In the light of six types of parent involvement suggested by Epstein (1995) that include parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaborating with community, the study examined the value of parent volunteering as a type of parent involvement at school through the perceptions of teachers and parents in charter school settings. By exploring the similarities and differences among the views of teachers and parents on parent volunteering at school, more informed policy decisions could be made that might encourage parents to be more involved with their child's life, enhance the value of the parents' volunteering at school, promote more trust in the school-family-community relations, build bridges rather than walls in teacher-parent-student communication. Another significant aspect of parent volunteering is that it is embedded in a social context. Social networks of parents might increase the chances of volunteering at school (Jackson et al., 1995). Parent volunteering could make a resource like "education capital" determined by the school context (Wilson, 2000, p. 223). The school context encourages parents to volunteer and could forge indirect influence on children volunteering that could afterward enrich the students' social capital. Drawing on James Coleman's social capital theory, parent volunteers who are living in marginalized communities are members of the working class or have immigrant status could also benefit from volunteering at school. Parents could become better suited to the cultivation of reciprocity, trust and individual voluntary action to give or help others (Smith, 2011). This study, with its emphasis on parents' and teachers' perceptions, explains the role parent volunteering has in building school community and running a successful school. As the research showed, by volunteering parents could promote their children's school

achievements. According to Lee and Bowen (2006), interaction with other parents while volunteering or attending parent-teacher organization meetings allows parents to gain access to useful information, improve parenting skills, and provide more attention to their children that might lead to improved school achievements and educational attainments in children. Assuming that many parents wish to know more about how they could be helpful in their child's learning by means of volunteering, I suggest that this study might be helpful for any parent. The research was interested in barriers to volunteering, particularly, the barriers that are related to parents' shortage of time, resources and ability to volunteer. Therefore, the study could be most helpful for urban families, especially, those who are under stress because of economic hardships, and for those parents who experience lack of time, financial resources, self-confidence, or English language proficiency, as well as for those parents who are fearful of schools because of past experience or cultural norms.

Volunteering as a type of parent involvement could foster the social and academic growth of children in any school setting (Davies, 1991). As Davies asserts, the tone and content of the teachers' and school administrators' conversations about parents and their multicultural communities might change when parents are physically present in the building.

I also want to make this study relevant to school administrators, teachers, parents, and community members in terms of further elaborating successful parent volunteering at any public school. As Epstein (1995) asserts, students learn from their parents, teachers, and community. The research study is based on Epstein's theory of an overlapping sphere of influence that emphasizes students' learning and development through the interaction

of family, school and community; and therefore, it suggests some useful recommendations that might facilitate partnership between school administration, teachers, parents and school community through effective parent volunteering implementation at school.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore and analyze the perceptions of teachers and parents of parent volunteering in the context of charter school as a type of US public school to understand one role of parent volunteering in the US public school setting. In addition, the objectives of the study were to clarify the factors that influence and induce parent volunteering and how parent volunteering is integrated into school community life and what are the advantages of parent volunteering for the students, teachers, and parents. The study employed a series of on-site, in-depth semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents to answer the following research questions on teachers' and parents' perceptions of parent volunteering in their charter school:

1. What is the value of parent volunteering?
 - 1a. Are there any effects of parent volunteering on students' learning and social skills development?
 - 1b. How does parent volunteering affect teachers' job performance?
2. Why do parents volunteer and in what way?
 - 2a. What school factors foster volunteering?
 - 2b. How is parent volunteering integrated into school life?

2c. Do such factors as socio-economic status, minority or immigration status of the parents somehow influence parent volunteering?

Definition of Key Terms

The study addressed issues of parent involvement, volunteering, parent volunteering, school community and charter schools. The following definitions will provide a common ground for the understanding of these concepts within the public charter school context.

Parent involvement is a function of a parent's beliefs about parental roles and responsibilities. It is a parent's sense that a parent can help children succeed in school where the opportunities for involvement are provided by the school or teacher (Education Encyclopedia, 2011).

Volunteering means “any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group, or organization” (Wilson, 2000, p.215).

Parent volunteering is volunteering of parents in the classroom, in the lunchroom, in the library, on field trips, at the parent-teacher organization meetings, tutoring programs, after-school enrichment programs, mentoring programs, and attendance at school performances or social events.

School community is a community of parents, students, teachers and all school personnel.

“**Charter schools** are independent public K-12 schools started by parents, teachers, and/or community members who apply for a "charter," which defines the

school's specific mission and goals, and how these goals will be measured” (MN Association of Charter Schools, 2011, p.1).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature on parent involvement and teachers' perceptions on different types of parental involvement both at school and home with the major focus on volunteering in the public school context. In this chapter, Epstein's typology of the six major types of parent involvement and Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence are introduced as conceptual framework of the study to scrutinize parent volunteering as a type of parent involvement in the context of public charter school setting.

The History of Parental Involvement and Why it is Important

Since the colonial era in America, parents at schools were expected to be involved with school governance, the support of curriculum, the selection of teachers, and the backing of religious teaching (Hiatt-Michael, 1994). With the advent of bureaucratization of schools and the rise of professionalism of school personnel during the late 1800s and early 1900s, this aspect of parental involvement in school governance decreased. A larger role for American parents became acceptable around the 1920s, but the earlier push toward professionalization of school personnel has diminished the role of parents (Zellman & Waterman, 1998). In fact, schools needed parents' support. Parents were encouraged to help with homework, join the PTA, provide merchandise for bake sales, and show up at times specified by the school, such as back-to-school night (Fruchter, Galletta, & White, 1992). However, this type of involvement has been criticized for its limited level of interaction (Lightfoot, 1978). Major cultural changes in the United States that stressed cultural pluralism and civil rights shifted the relationships between parents

and their children in the 1960s. According to Zellman and Waterman, in the early 1960s, during an era in which civil rights and desegregation were of profound national significance, Title I compensatory education federal policy was introduced. It legitimized and enabled more parent and community involvement in the schools. That was the dawn of compensatory education programs that served as an unprecedented symbol of the federal commitment to equality of educational opportunity (Borman, 2008).

In the era of globalization, most parents want their children to experience success in school even though they may have neither the knowledge nor the resources to actualize their aspirations for their children. Policy makers, teachers, and parents realized that successful educational interventions with low-income students and students of color, which now constitute a majority at American schools, are more likely to succeed if they have a parent-involvement component to their education (Banks, 2007). Therefore, policy makers incorporated federal legislation into the Goals 2000 Educate America Act. According to the act, every school has to “promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children” (National PTA, 2011, School’s Contribution section, para.1). In 1996, the Clinton administration reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), adding a new provision that required the nation’s poorest schools to spend at least one percent of their Title I supplementary federal funds to develop educational “compacts” between families and schools. Increasing parental involvement in schools was one of the six central goals of the Bush administration’s 2002 No Child Left Behind Act (Thurston, 2005). The Obama administration continues to regard parental involvement in their children’s education as a national priority (Jackson, 2009).

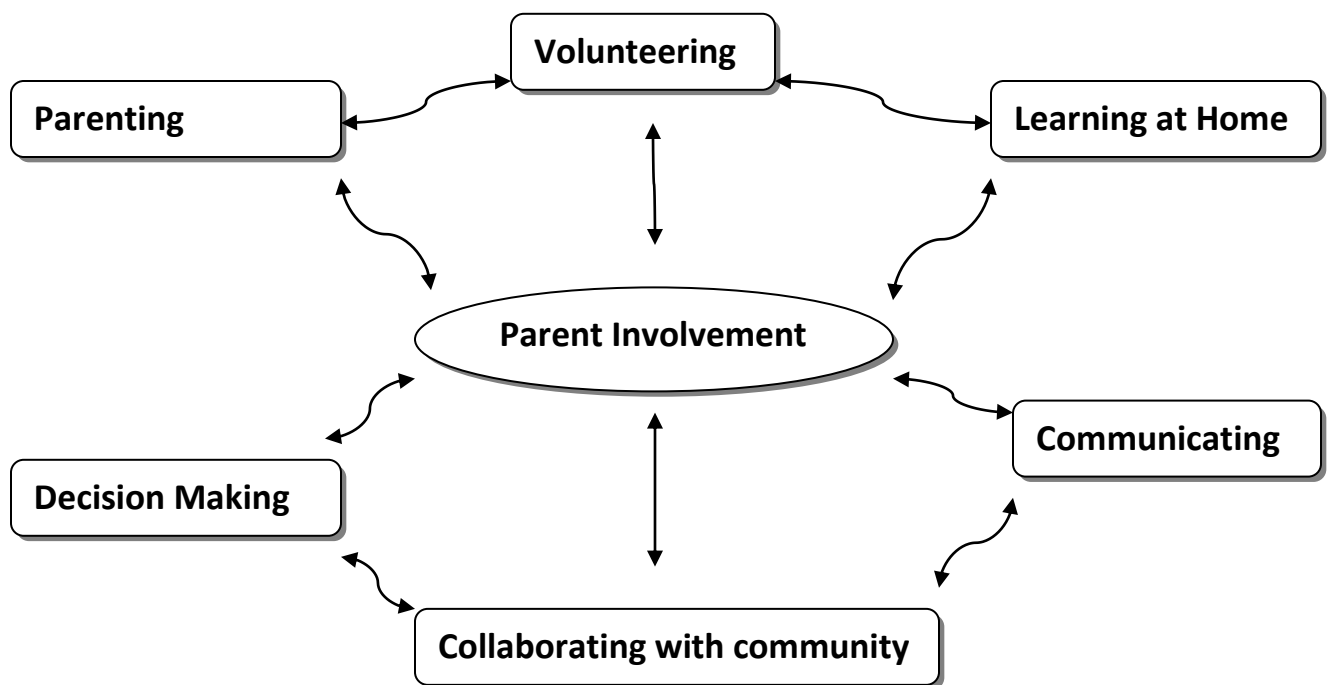
The Concept of Parent Involvement

It is not easy to devise a clear definition of parent involvement from the research literature as there are many factors that have impacted its characterization. Drawing from a growing body of empirical research related to parental involvement, *parent involvement* could be characterized as a multifaceted concept that encompasses a broad range of parenting behavior covering issues from helping out with homework, daily discussions about their children's every day school life at home to parents' attendance at parent-teacher organization meetings and parent volunteering at school (Feuerstein, 2000). For example, Wendy S. Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) conceptualize three dimensions of parental involvement based on how parent-child interactions affect students' schooling and motivation. According to Grolnick and Slowiaczek, parent involvement could be regarded as "the parent's behavioral involvement" (p.238), which refers to parents' public actions representing their interest in their child's education. A second dimension is "a personal parent involvement" (p.239), which includes parent-child interactions that transmit positive attitudes about school and the importance of education to the child. Finally, parent involvement is characterized as "cognitive or intellectual involvement" (p.239), which refers to behaviors that promote children's learning and social skills development and knowledge, such as reading books and going to the movies.

According to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995), parental involvement typically includes home-based activities (e.g., helping with homework, discussing school events or courses) and school-based activities (e.g., volunteering at school, coming to school events). They argue that parental involvement is a function of a parent's beliefs about parental roles and responsibilities. It is a parent's sense that a parent can help

children succeed in school where the opportunities for involvement are provided by the school or teacher (Education Encyclopedia, 2011). Because of multiple modes of defining parent involvement, many theorists have concentrated their efforts more on specific categorization of the different types of parent involvement. Epstein (1995) in her article presents her own vision of parent involvement.

Figure 1. Epstein’s framework of six types of parent involvement (Epstein, 1995).



According to Epstein (1995), there are six types of parent involvement.

Specifically, *parenting* implies parents who care for the health and safety of their children and prepare their children for school; *communicating* is a means of school-to-home and home-to-school communications with parents about school programs and children’s progress; *volunteering* includes recruitment, training, activities and schedules involving families as volunteers and audiences at the school, or in the other locations to support school programs; *learning at home* is the involvement of parents to help students at home

with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning; *decision making* constitutes parents' role in school decision and developing parent leaders, and *collaborating with the community* implies that schools should coordinate the work and resources of the community, businesses, colleges or universities to strengthen school programs, family practices and student learning and development.

Epstein suggested the six major types of parent involvement in order to encourage schools to create greater "overlap" between home, school, and community through the accomplishment of activities across six types of involvement. According to Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence when frequent interactions between school, home and community occur, the students are more likely "to receive common messages from various people about the importance of school, of working hard, of thinking creatively, of helping one another, and of staying at school" (Epstein, 1995, p.702).

The conceptual framework of the present study relied on Epstein's typology and on Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence to scrutinize parent volunteering as a type of involvement in the context of public charter school setting. Charter schools are run with the help of vigorous parent involvement where families and communities play a dominant role in students' education outcomes. An African proverb states that "it takes a village to raise a child". While conducting research in a relatively new and small charter school, I tried to trace the truism of the folk wisdom where community-minded parents and community-minded teachers shared their thoughts on parent volunteering as a type of parent involvement.

Epstein's Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence

The study drew on Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence relating students' learning and development to the interaction of family, school and community. According to Epstein, the occurrence of interaction depends on schools. Schools might conduct "only either a few interactions with families and communities, or many high-quality communications and interactions designed to bring three spheres of influence - the family, the school and the community - closer together" (Epstein, 1995, p.702). There are two models of overlapping spheres in the theory: the external and internal. In the external model of overlapping spheres of influence, "the three major contexts in which students learn and grow - the family, the school, and the community - may be drawn together or pushed apart" (p.702). According to Epstein, the internal model of the interaction of the three spheres of influence "shows where and how complex and essential interpersonal relations and patterns of influence occur between individuals at home, at school and in the community" (p.702). The central focus of the models is the student, in particular the student's development and success at school. The study aimed to understand the institutional and the individual level of school-family-community social relations. As said by Epstein, in a partnership teachers and administrators create a more *family-like* school, which recognizes each child's individuality and makes each child feel special and included. In a partnership, parents create more *school-like* families. Communities create *family-like* settings, *community-minded* families and students help their neighbors and other families. Schools and communities create programs and services that are "family-friendly", and that take into account the needs and realities of family life in the present time, are feasible to conduct and are equitable toward all

families. When all these concepts combine, children experience *learning communities* or *caring communities*. In my view, this theory helps understand how parents, teachers and school administrators build a partnership for a better school climate to improve students' outcomes, increase parents' skills and leadership, connect families with other families at school and in community.

School and Teacher Factors Affecting Parent Volunteering

Research shows the positive role of parent involvement in fostering social and academic growth of students in any public school setting (Davies, 1991). To this end, the schools need parents to invest time, skills and attention in their children's education. Fletcher, Greenwood and Parkhill (2009) assert that when schools develop a positive relationship with parents, this can help develop common understanding and goals for supporting students' learning. Feuerstein (2000) asserts that schools can and do influence the level of parent participation in their children's education. To develop effective parent-involvement programs, researchers should investigate how to help school leaders identify practices and policies that encourage parent trust and involvement in the process of schooling. However, teachers and parents may have very different views on the options of the significance of parent involvement. Drawing on empirical research related to parent involvement, Kerbow and Bernhardt's (1993) study on school-level influences on parental involvement define some influential factors for parental involvement, such as staff characteristics which may affect teachers' ability and desire to work with parents (for example, teachers' age, experience, racial composition, and disposition toward parents). Lortie (1975) assumes that another critical factor to involve parents in school

activities might be the job satisfaction and competence of teachers. Deslandes and Morin claim that teachers have formed their own mental models of what parents should do (as cited in Deslandes & Rousseau, 2007, p.109). Teachers do not always take the time to say what they expect from parents (Christenson and Sheridan, 2001). When teachers' and parents' expectations are not well communicated, it might lead to teacher-parent conflict (Baker, 2000; Lawson, 2003). Sometimes, teachers do not attempt to invite parents to school as they fear that the presence of parents in class might decrease their professional status (Sanders & Epstein, 2005). In order to avoid these misconceptions of parent involvement in public schools and its role for students' outcomes, Comer (1987) insists that teachers, school administrators and families are required to work together to promote social, emotional and academic growth of children. Teachers and parents can and should find ways for better cooperation (Bauch & Goldring, 1998).

Factors that Influence Parent Volunteering

According to Wilson (2000), volunteering means “any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group or organization” (p.215). There is no valid definition of what constitutes a parent volunteer activity because what is considered to be an excellent parent volunteer opportunity in one community might not match with the perceptions of volunteering in another community (Leistyna, 2002). The Bush Administration codified parent volunteering through No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2001) in order to ensure that schools presented parents with a wide range of volunteer opportunities. Some researchers claim that parental volunteering is regarded as a key factor in showing general community support for the schools, as well as, positively

affecting student performance (Lareau, 2000; Lee, Kushner, & Cho, 2007). With its focus on equal volunteer opportunities for all parents, Title I of NCLB specifically targets parents of “economically disadvantaged students; students from major racial and ethnic groups; students with disabilities; and students with limited English proficiency” (No Child Left Behind: The Legal Requirements, 2004, slide 11). However, the data from the Current Population Survey, Special Supplement on Volunteering proved that after a year from its beginning, considerably fewer parents reported themselves volunteering in their children’s schools (Fahey, 2010). The National Center for Educational Statistics, (NCES, 2001) through the Fast Response Survey System revealed that school districts with higher minority student populations report lower educator satisfaction with volunteers, allocate fewer resources to parent programs, and have lower rates of parent volunteering (Carey, Lewis, & Farris, 1998). On the contrary, Kerbow and Bernhardt (1993), and Ho Sui-Chu and Willms (1996) find that schools with higher average SES, and schools with larger minority composition parents will contact the school to participate in volunteering and to attend PTO meetings more often. According to Toch (2001), non-minority parents are more represented in the largest parent volunteering groups (e.g., PTO or PTA) since the leadership of local and national parent volunteering organizations has been mostly White. In addition, immigrant parents who come from other cultural backgrounds are not familiar with parent groups like the PTO and its role at school (Ji & Koblinsky, 2009). Although the socioeconomic gap between races is closing, but black parents do not volunteer at the same rate as white parents (Musick, Wilson & Bynum, 2000; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). According to Lareau (2000), socio-economic status of parents is also an important feature of parent volunteerism because school cultures often reflect dominant

middle class cultures. Therefore, parents of high socioeconomic status who have surpluses of time, financial resources and higher levels of education are more likely to be involved in parent volunteering than parents from low socio-economic status (Ho Sui-Chu & Willms 1996; Lareau 1987). Parents might also experience barriers to volunteer due to cultural or language differences, different structural constraints (e.g., school location), discrepancies between parents' and teachers' views on goals for children's education, dominant family commitments, lack of transportation or limited skills for helping in specific learning areas (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002). Despite the barriers to parent involvement, there is a substantial body of work (e.g., Clary et al., 1998; Penner & Finkelstein, 1998) that suggests that personal motives play an important role in volunteerism. Parents might engage in this behavior, at least in part, because it serves one or more of their goals and needs. Drawing from social capital theory, parents could be involved in volunteering because they have opportunities to socialize with other parents. Furthermore, Penner (2002) states that religiosity produced the strongest associations with volunteer activities. It was found that people who belonged to an organized religion or church groups were more likely to be volunteers (80 percent) than people who did not belong (62 percent) to any religious groups. In addition, Wilson and Janoski (1995) suggest that religious congregations are networks of social relations, and involvement in the social life of congregation increases opportunities to come into contact with others who already engaged in volunteer work (p.140). However, as Penner states, it would be premature to conclude from the research findings that "being religious is invariably positively associated with volunteerism" (p. 457).

Charter Schools in Minnesota

Since this study of parent volunteering is set in a charter school environment, it is important to consider how charter schools are organized and managed with regard to parents and teachers. The charter school movement began in 1988 when Albert Shanker, American Federation of Teachers President, called for the reform of the public schools by establishing “charter schools.” The basic charter concept is simple: a group of teachers or other would-be educators apply for permission to open a school. The school operates under a charter, a contract with the local school board or state. Exempt from most state and local laws and regulations, the school must prove that students have gained the educational skills specified in that initial contract in order to renew the charter. The funding for charter schools is the same as for public schools (Minnesota Legislative Reference Library, 2010).

Minnesota was the first state in the USA to pass a charter school law in 1991. The first charter school, City Academy in St. Paul, opened its doors in 1992. As of 2011, Minnesota had 149 registered charter schools, with over 35,000 students attending (Minnesota Association of Charter Schools [MACS], 2011, 2005). According to the MACS (2005), “charter schools are independent public K-12 schools started by parents, teachers, and/or community members who apply for a "charter," which defines the school's specific mission and goals, and how these goals will be measured” (p.2). As Malloy and Wohlstetter (2003) state “a key element of the charter school concept involves decentralizing management to the school site so that individual schools are self-governing” (p.220). Charter schools are accountable to their authorizers who are their

sponsors, parents and families, the state, and the public. According to Fusarelli (1999), educational reformers view charter school as “a way to provide effective education to the students who are ill-served by the public school system as it is currently structured” (p.20). Charter schools with their greater autonomy, their opportunities to introduce innovative reforms and educational programs, vigorous parent involvement, smaller than district-run school size, and with better teachers are attractive to parents who consider that traditional public school do not work for all students (Finn, Manno, and Vanourek, 2000). However, some critics of charter schools argue that charter schools have not been shown to be more effective (Buddin & Zimmer, 2005); in some cases charter school are not able to serve special needs students, they may lead to greater social stratification and racial segregation, and create fiscal strains for states and school districts (Wells, 1998). The U.S. Department of Education states that charter statuses differ significantly from state to state. By design, charter schools vary in their school curricula, classroom based instruction, educational programs, school settings and even the length of the school day. Teacher certification requirements also vary from state to state. Borsa et al., (1999) assert that in many states, the majority of charter schools do not require their teachers to be certified. Most importantly, charter schools are nonsectarian, free of charge and available to anyone. In Minnesota, charter schools are funded by the State of Minnesota on a per-pupil basis. Charter schools also receive up to three years of federal charter school start-up funding and state support for their facility expenses. They could be qualified for federal Title I funding, English Language Learning, and special education funds as well. In 2008, several analyses of Minnesota charter schools raised questions about the administration and performance of these schools. The Institute on Race and Poverty

found that Minnesota charter schools perform worse on average than comparable public schools, and that they have intensified racial and economic segregation in the Twin Cities schools. The 2009 Minnesota Legislature responded to these concerns by passing a law that provides additional oversight of charter school administration, operations, and finance (Information Policy Analysis Division, 2011). In general, research data on charter schools show that parents who use charter schools are satisfied with them as they are schools of their personal choice (Finn, Manno, & Vanourek, 2000). Parents favor charter schools for their children's culturally sensitive education and superior environment compared to traditional public schools (Schnaiberg, 2000). Teachers are much more involved in curricular and personnel decision making in charter schools. Parents are expected (sometimes required) to serve on campus committee boards with real decision-making authority. Due to lack of funding, charter schools require school personnel, teachers, and parents to be involved more in school operations to succeed in their management and provide alternative ways to success for their students (Fusarelli, 2002).

Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Questions

The research study addressed the issue of volunteering, as defined by Joyce Epstein, as a type of parent involvement in the context of charter school. The research study explored the value and meaning of parent volunteering through the lens of teachers' and parents' perceptions. The study employed a social constructivism perspective to understand the subjective meanings of the teachers' and parents' views on parent volunteering in the US public school setting. To this end, the case study approach was employed. This methodology provided the opportunity to ask astute questions and apprehend teachers' and parents' subjective perceptions to comprehend the meaning of parent volunteering. This qualitative research study implemented a series of on-site, in-depth semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents aimed to get their perceptions on the following research questions:

1. What is the value of parent volunteering?
 - 1a. What, if any, effects does parent volunteering have on students' learning and social skills development?
 - 1b. How does parent volunteering affect teachers' job performance?
2. Why do parents volunteer and in what way?
 - 2a. What school factors foster volunteering?
 - 2b. How is parent volunteering integrated into school life?
 - 2c. Do socio-economic status, minority or immigration status of the parents somehow influence parent volunteering?

Case Study Approach: Strengths and Limitations

Yin (2009) defines case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p.18). Case study approach is often appropriate in education domain because education is a process and “there is need for research methods, which are process-oriented, flexible and adaptable to changes in circumstances and an evolving context” (Anderson, 1990 p. 157).

In American research circles, there exists a view that single-case studies cannot contribute to scientific development because they provide little basis for scientific generalization, are less rigorous than quantitative methods, and are more subjective (Yin, 2009). However, Yin and Flyvbjerg (2006) do not agree with these arguments and suggest these common concerns as misunderstanding about the case study method. Flyvbjerg claims that the advantage of quantitative research large samples lies in their breadth but they critically lack depth of the qualitative in-depth data.

Case studies usually use a variety of methods to collect qualitative data. Qualitative data consist of “direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings and knowledge” obtained through different types of interviews; “detailed descriptions of peoples activities, behaviors, actions” recorded in field or participant observations; and “excerpts, quotations, or entire passages” extracted from various types of documents (Patton, 2002, p.4). While a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods would be ideal in answering my research questions, however I have decided due to the narrow scope and the time limitations of my research study to limit my study to the qualitative methods of data collection that would enable me to gain a deeper

understanding about volunteering. My bounded unit was the teachers and the parents of a public charter school who took part in my research. My case study is an instrumental single in-depth case study, as it provides insights into an issue of volunteering and facilitates our understanding of something else we haven't yet learned about volunteering as parent involvement. In my research study, I intended to explore how teachers and parents perceive volunteering as parental involvement in one of the charter schools in a Midwestern state in the United States.

Methods and Sample

My primary method of data collection was interviews with teachers and parents. In education, interviewing is probably the most common form of qualitative data collection. DeMarrais (2004) states that an interview as “a process in which a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on the questions related to a research study” (cited in Merriam, 2009, p.87). For the purpose of my research study, I conducted eleven in-depth semi-structured interviews with six teachers and five parents in order to analyze and understand their perceptions of parent volunteering and its role in the context of charter school setting. The advantages of conducting in-depth interviews in my research were as follows: 1) they involved face-to-face interaction between the researcher and the interviewee, and 2) they sought to understand the interviewee's personal perspectives.

I also collected data from other primary sources including parent-teacher organization (PTO) meeting minutes relevant to parent volunteer issues at school. I scrutinized school website information about school events where parents were invited to

be involved. I also conducted passive observations in the Lower and Upper campuses during my visits to the school sites. All these methods of selecting and collecting data helped me to provide contextual information about parent volunteering at school.

The research was based on purposeful sampling. Patton argues that, “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth” (as cited in Merriam, 2009, p.77). In my study, information-rich cases were the teachers who work in one of the charter schools and the parents whose children attend the same charter school.

The Selection of the Case and Data Gathering

I initiated my school search with the MN public charter schools website. The charter school I found met my school choice criteria. The charter school had its own school district IRB review, encompassed vigorous parent volunteering, possessed prominent ranking among charter schools in the Twin Cities area, was offering a demanding college preparatory, classical, liberal arts curriculum, and had K-12 student enrollment. According to the school website, 13 teachers and 3 educational assistants are working in K-5 (the Lower campus), and 22 teachers and 1 educational assistant are working in 6-12 (the Upper campus). All but 2 teachers are licensed and both of the 2 are in progress of their teacher certification. I decided to choose participants who were involved in parent volunteering from both lower and higher grades to obtain accuracy of my findings in the research study.

After the study was approved by the University of Minnesota IRB and the school district IRB, I sent personal emails to almost all teachers who worked at the school. In my email, I explained in detail the essence of my study and asked for the teacher's participation in my research, assuring anonymity and confidentiality to every participants. After obtaining initial agreement from the teacher to participate, I contacted the teacher by email to schedule the interview with that individual. The majority of the teachers I emailed did not reply to my initial message. A few teachers that did respond suggested conducting my interview via the Internet because they could not meet with me in person. Others, who declined their participation in the research study, recommended to me their colleagues who had been extensively involved in parent volunteering. Thus, from initial thirty five teachers, I selected six teachers out of those teachers who agreed to participate and who represented different departments at the Lower and Upper campuses, and who had different experience with parent volunteering and had the best information with which to address my research questions.

It was more difficult getting in contact with the parent participants because I did not have access to parents' email addresses as I had with the teacher participants. To reach this population, I asked via email the school assistant and activities coordinator, Mrs. Betsy (a pseudonym), and the dean of Lower campus, Mrs. Carol (a pseudonym), to assist me with my search for parent participants. Mrs. Betsy circulated an email about my research on a school website. However, after receiving no responses from any parent for a long time, I decided to I write my own spirit boosting invitation email to parents and asked Mrs. Betsy to post it on the school website. This tactics was more successful because I got agreements to participate from three parents. Additionally, one of the

teachers whom I interviewed later, helped me find two minority parents to participate in my research. Consequently, I was able to include five parent participants in my research study. All of my parent participants were eager to participate in an interview and had current and/or former experience in parent volunteering. Out of five parents, three parents had their children in the Lower campus, and two parents – in the Upper campus. Both teacher and parent participants had wide range of experiences with volunteering, allowing me to get information-rich personalized data. As Patton (2002) states, “When selecting a small sample of great diversity, the data collection analysis will yield two kinds of findings: 1) high-quality, detailed descriptions of each case which are useful for documenting uniqueness, and 2) important shared patterns that cut across cases and derive their significance from having emerged out of heterogeneity” (p.235).

Unfortunately, I didn’t get access to the PTO meetings to investigate parent volunteering. Also, it was not possible for me to participate as a volunteer during several school events organized by the PTO. Therefore, when I visited the school, I was a passive observer trying to feel the atmosphere in the school, to examine how the school responds to visitors, to observe what types of exhibits were displayed on the walls of the school halls, and what types of resources and technology they had in the school. Paying attention to such physical environment details helped me as a researcher to construct additional dimensions for understanding the motives of parent volunteering. I perused regularly the Internet resources for school newsletters on the PTO’s current events, and also from other Internet resources on how parent volunteering is organized in other schools to better understand the phenomenon of parent volunteering.

Data Analysis

Prior to IRB approval, I carefully developed two separate interview protocols (Appendices A and B, pp.109-110) for teachers and for parents. The interpretive open-ended questions were designed to allow me to gain an insight into the study's fundamental research questions. Because my interviews were semi-structured, the questions were predetermined but flexibly ordered to help participants express themselves openly and freely, inviting them to construct their own personal perspectives on parent volunteering. Some follow-up questions were designed to probe more deeply issues of interest to the interviewees. The interviews varied considerably in length, ranging from 20 minutes to one hour. The interview process took approximately a month and four days.

I took several steps while analyzing my data. First, I transcribed all the interviews. Then, I read the complete interview transcripts. Next, I developed a matrix of parents' and teachers' views on each of my research question, and after that I hand-analyzed my data. I read the responses to each of my research questions coding them for themes, simultaneously, writing notes about the meaning of these themes in relation to the whole interview. Subsequently, I looked for themes across each of the interviews before finally choosing representative quotes that revealed critical findings. My analysis was inductive in form, going from the detailed data to the general themes.

In order to avoid one-sided vision of parent volunteering issues at school, I synthesized the data gathered from the interviews with teachers and from the interviews with parents to analyze and understand different groups' perceptions. I assumed that

teachers' and parents' perceptions could be asymmetrical in terms of their different positions and responsibilities in regard to their children/students.

Chapter 4: The Findings

Overview

In this chapter, I will report the analysis of the data collected during eleven semi-structured one-on-one interviews with teachers and parents of a suburb charter school in the Twin Cities. These interviews were conducted to answer research questions related to parent volunteering in the particular charter school. The research questions are listed below:

1. What is the value of parent volunteering?
 - 1a. What, if any, effects does parent volunteering have on students' learning and social skills development?
 - 1b. How does parent volunteering affect teachers' job performance?
2. Why do parents volunteer and in what way?
 - 2a. What school factors foster volunteering?
 - 2b. How is parent volunteering integrated into school life?
 - 2c. Do socio-economic status, minority or immigration status of the parents somehow influence parent volunteering?

The School

The charter school was the first public charter school in one of the suburbs of the Twin Cities area. It was specifically dedicated to offering a demanding college-

preparatory, classical, liberal-arts curriculum. For the purpose of confidentiality, I will refer to the school as “the charter school”.

In 2004, the school was founded by several families and community members. It opened its doors to 108 students in grades 6, 7, and 8, expanding by one grade per year. In 2008, the school graduated the first class of seniors and served students in grades 6 through 12. In 2010, the school added Kindergarten through grade 5 for the school year 2010-2011. In 2010, the school made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Under No Child Left Behind, the school makes AYP if it achieves the minimum levels of improvement determined by the state of Minnesota in terms of student performance and other accountability measures. In total, the school serves 568 students in grades K - 12 from a variety of locations around the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area. The principal of the school projects that the next school year will see total student enrollment at more than 800 students because they will add 23 students per grade K-5 and 25 students per grade 6-9. As a consequence, the schools’ Board of Directors is currently searching for the edifice that can house the entire student body, Kindergarten through grade 12. The building in which the school was housed was a former office building. The school consists of middle and high schools. Both schools are located in different buildings not far away from each other.

The school receives government funding like any other public school. However, from the words of the school administration representative, they generally survive on less funding than other public schools. The school currently spends \$7,160 per pupil. The district spends 56% on instruction, 44% on support services, and 0% on other elementary and secondary expenditures. In 2008, the charter school had 15 students for every full-

time equivalent teacher. The Minnesota average is 16 students per full-time equivalent teacher.

The demographic composition of the school is made up of 87.5% White students, 2.7% African American, 5.5% Asian, 3.9% Hispanic, and 0.4% American Indian. Currently, about 5 percent (5%) of the district's student population uses the free and reduced-lunch program. Students receiving Special Education services make up almost five percent (5%) of the total student population.

The school is on the list of *U.S. News & World Report's* Best High Schools ranking of 2010. *U.S. News & World Report*—in collaboration with School Evaluation Services, a K-12 education and data research and analysis business that provides parents with education data—analyzed academic and enrollment data from more than 21,000 public high schools to find the very best across the country based on *the College Readiness Index* criteria. A particular charter school was placed into bronze category since the golden and silver awards are honored to those high schools which serve all their students well, using state proficiency standards in reading and math as the measuring benchmarks and possess high degree of students preparation for college-level work, using Advanced Placement data as the benchmark for success. Advanced Placement program is a College Board program that offers college-level courses at high schools across the country. According to the definition, the charter school is a bronze winner since it meets the two key performance indicator criteria but does not offer Advanced Placement program. However, the school principal assured me that they will have some Advanced Placement courses starting next year.

I intentionally selected my participants in the U.S. public charter school as the site of my research to learn and understand the phenomenon of parent volunteering. First, according to Patton (1990), these participants were information-rich for me in many aspects. Second, the United States is a global leader in volunteering at home and abroad (International Volunteering: Smart Power, 2011). Last of all, I had my former experience working in a Humanitarian Gymnasia in the city of Chernivtsy in Ukraine, but I have never experienced voluntary parental help in my teaching practice, especially, during our school field trips. In my experience, parental help was strictly required by school administration; and if parents failed to help the school, their children's academic scores and/or behavior reports were immediately affected. The parents were indirectly blamed at parent meetings in class or at the whole school parent gatherings. For these reasons, I was interested in understanding the phenomenon and value of parent volunteering in U.S. public school settings. The charter school was the best option for my research since parent involvement was expected to be higher in this particular context.

Teacher Participants

Three female and three male teachers were interviewed in the Lower and Upper campuses. All of the teacher participants are Caucasians. Each teacher holds either a Bachelor of Arts degree or a Bachelor of Science degree from different universities in the United States. One of the teachers has been pursuing her Master's degree in Education for the last two years. All teachers have attained Minnesota Teaching certification.

Four teachers work at the Upper campus, and two teachers work at the Lower campus. For three of the teachers, the 2010-2011 school year is their first year at this

charter school although they have had years of teaching experience at other schools prior to this charter school. Two of these new teachers work at the high school, while one works in the middle school. The remaining teachers have been working at charter school for more than two years and up to seven years. The ages of the teachers vary from mid-twenties to early fifties.

The six teachers teach in the following areas: Economics, History, Arts, Elementary Education, Humanities, and Special Education. I was interested to listen and understand the teachers' perceptions from various academic perspectives. Below is the list of teacher participants whom I assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities and to respect the privacy of each participant.

Teacher Hope

Hope is Caucasian, in her mid-twenties. She has been at the school for about 5 months. She teaches eleventh grade Humanities, which consists of history, literature, and philosophy. She has 32 students all together, with ranging academic abilities. The majority of her students are academically above average based on the teacher's statement. Hope also teaches several elective courses focused on developing writing skills. These classes are composed of roughly 12-18 students in grades 9-12. Her students are predominantly Caucasians.

Teacher James

James is Caucasian, and in his mid-thirties. He has been working for four years at the school. James has had experience teaching Economics, World History, Geography and American History. Currently, he is teaching World History, and American History in

Grades 6, 7 and 8. He has 24 to about 28 students in class. His students are mostly White, from upper middle class households. Ten percent of his students are minority students, some of mixed race. James has been very involved in the school communities that he has been a part of, including helping bring students to Mississippi to help with reconstruction efforts after Hurricane Katrina, and helping students create a documentary about their school. He founded a History club at the school and organizes several field trips for his students each year.

Teacher Michael

Michael is Caucasian, and in his early fifties. He is a Special Education teacher, and has worked in the Special Education field for eight years. He has been at this charter school for a little more than two years. He sees approximately 21 students throughout the day, including several Hispanic students. Being a Special Education teacher, Michael sees the children from low-income households, who are struggling academically. Michael speaks in a very brisk manner and has a good sense of humor.

Teacher Dorothy

Dorothy is Caucasian, in her early thirties. Dorothy helped start the Junior High Program at Life Academy in Bloomington and worked there for seven years before coming to this charter school this academic year. The last two years she has been pursuing her Master's degree in Education. She teaches fifth graders and has 22 students in her class. She has two Indian students, one African American student, and two Russian students. The remaining students are native Caucasians in her class.

Teacher Jeff

Jeff is Caucasian, and in his mid-thirties. This is his first year teaching full-time at the school. Prior to this, he was substituting for different teachers at the school for about half a year. This year he teaches Economics with 13 students in one class, and 9 students in another class. He is also the college advisor and the district coordinator, so his responsibilities also include administering different tests that students need to take, including Minnesota state tests. The majority of his students are Caucasians who come from upper middle class households.

Teacher Mary

Mary is Caucasian, in her late forties. She has over twenty years of professional teaching experience. She started teaching at this charter school when the school first opened in the fall of 2004. She teaches art in the middle school with the intention of finding the hidden talents in all of her students. Her classes are composed of roughly 19-25 students in grades K-5. She does not know about her students' socio-economic statuses or ethnic backgrounds. Upon observation, however, it appears as though approximately, 80% of her students are Caucasians. She organizes annual school ART XPO, a students' art work display, and she organizes field trips to the different museums in the state of Minnesota.

Parent Participants

Interviews were conducted with five parents, four of whom are female and one male. All of the parents are Caucasians, except one who originally comes from India. I

interviewed one Russian parent who immigrated to the United States many years ago. Most of the parents have two or more children in their homes but, surprisingly, only one of the siblings from each family studies at the charter school. The ages of the parents varies from mid-thirties to early forties. Below is a brief description of the parent participants. I have assigned pseudonyms for each participant to protect their identity and out of respect for their privacy.

Parent Reba

Reba is a single parent in her mid-thirties. She has a daughter who is in the seventh grade. She moved to the United States from India several years ago. Currently, Reba works in the Twin Cities area after obtaining her MBA degree from a Graduate school in the United States. She works during the day time and likes to volunteer during evening social events.

Parent Gleb

Gleb is of ethnic Russian heritage, and in his late thirties. He moved with his family to the USA from the USSR many years ago when he was a teenager. At present, Gleb is the primary income-earner in his household. He and his spouse volunteered at the charter school last year because it was a requirement from the school. Since there were no official school requirements to volunteer this school year, they have not volunteered yet but are planning to enroll their younger child in the school soon, and will volunteer again next year. I asked for an interview with Gleb because several of the teachers I

interviewed mentioned that there was a growing Russian population at the school.

Talking to Gleb allowed me to gain the perspective of one parent from this population.

Parent Stephanie

Stephanie is in her mid-thirties, and she is Caucasian. She has a fifth grader and a sixth grader. The younger of the siblings studies at the charter school. Both girls came from a Christian school where Stephanie helped out for five years while she was a stay-at-home mother. Now, she has a part-time job but it does not prevent her from volunteering at both of the schools that her daughters attend. Stephanie sees volunteering at her daughters' schools as her family duty.

Parent Becky

Becky is Caucasian, in her mid-twenties. She is a mother of a Kindergartener with special needs. Becky is also a former stay-at-home mother. In part due to her performance while volunteering at school she was hired by the school administration to work part-time at the school. At present, she continues to volunteer at the school.

Parent Katie

Katie is Caucasian, in her late thirties. She is a mother of two children. Her elder child is a Kindergartener at the charter school. Katie works for a large US company that has a special policy on volunteering. For each employee who volunteers for forty hours at any organization, the company gives a thousand dollar check to that organization. Consequently, she has the opportunity to volunteer at the charter school during work

hours which she has found particularly meaningful. In addition, Katie encourages her husband, who is of Japanese descent to volunteer at the school on a regular basis as well. Katie volunteers a lot and finds a huge satisfaction in giving her time, skills and talents doing something useful and meaningful for the school community.

The Value of Parent Volunteering

Building a sense of community

As substantial interview data showed, teachers and parents held the same views on the value of parent volunteering. Both groups of participants found the value of volunteering in its opportunity to generate a sense of community, family atmosphere, and safer home-like environment at school. Teachers claimed that students learn from their parents, from community, from anyone with whom they come in contact. Therefore, the school provides a lot of extra-curricular or community events to support the entire family (Teacher Hope). But, when the school is small, it is hard to attain a good community environment at school. As parent Katie said,

We are not a school based on geography. We are not a neighborhood school. We are pulling in from very many districts and locations. So, we don't have that neighborhood feel. We have to sort of create that artificially or maybe organically that feeling of neighborhood.

To this end, the school has to do a lot to get parents as involved as possible. It is a community effort if parents are involved in their children's education (Teacher Hope).

Volunteering at school is important because it facilitates parents to get a feeling of connectedness with the school and the classrooms in which their children study. Parent Katie thought while volunteering in the kindergarten classroom she could build a connection with the first, second and third grade teachers "as they get to know me and

my daughter.” Parents while volunteering could build “more of a community around them.” Parent Becky suggested that parent volunteering “is a type of communication, and it exemplifies a mutual partnership between parents and teachers.” Parent Becky claimed, “Parent volunteers who work in classroom or when they do parties in the class or at school are getting together and are building a community at school.”

In addition, when parents volunteer in class or outside the school it promotes rapport between teachers, parents, and students. By volunteering, parents build a sense of connectedness with their children, teachers, school administration and other parents.

They build a sense of big family, a sense of community. As teacher Mary added,

There is a better community when the teachers know who parents are and then community is so much more cohesive and involved. It runs better and you feel more about belonging when you know more people. When parents are at school it makes [the] environment safer and creates a family atmosphere.

Parents’ support of their children and education

Teachers believed that when parents volunteer they understand the type of learning that teachers want students to do. In addition, parent volunteering provides variety in what teachers are teaching, and offers some “diversity” depending on what is going on in class. Teacher Jeff said, “Whenever any adult is in the classroom- anyone would bring something new to the table, and it is always a learning experience.” Parent volunteering helps to enrich students’ knowledge, develop learning skills due to the opportunities parent volunteering provides through school field trips. Teacher Hope stated, “Children feel parents support and they see that parents care what type of education their children get at school.”

Parents believed that children feel more comfort and are more confident when parents are at school. Parent Becky argued that parent volunteering is valuable for the children with special needs who might feel anxious or shy without seeing their parents at school. Parent Stephanie assumed that sometimes students may feel their importance due to parent presence at school. The parent suggested,

When parents volunteer they could possibly touch the lives of kids just by getting to know their names, by getting to know who they are by saying “Hello” and just being able to acknowledge them. I think parent volunteer could help the kids to go through the day even by listening to their problems during the break or at lunch time.

The majority of parents thought when children see their parents volunteer at school they understand that parents are involved in their lives, in their education. As parent Katie stated, “Parent volunteering is crossing the bridge to reach achievements in the life of our children’s education”. All parents believed that by doing volunteering at school parents set a good example for their and other children that volunteering and being philanthropic, or to give back is an important virtue.

Importance of the PTO at the charter school

Drawing on teachers’ and parents’ perceptions, it is obvious that their charter school without parent volunteering and a parent-teacher organization (PTO) could hardly do better. Parent volunteering is integrated in the school life by conducting the PTO meetings where parents meet, brainstorm and come to significant decisions about implementing important school programs, innovative fundraising projects, exciting community-based and family-oriented big school events, helping teachers with their department wish lists purchases.

Parent volunteering is provided through the school website, the PTO meetings, and parent networking. An essential role in a proper school functioning is entrusted to the PTO where the role of parents is leading. According to all participants, the PTO was regarded as “a mediator”, “a liaison”, or “a bridge” between parents and school teachers. Parents from the PTO try to figure out what the teachers needs are and where the parent help is required.

All parents and teachers attached a great importance to the functions of the parent-teacher organization (PTO) at school. The PTO supports the school and teachers in a lot of ways. The PTO takes off some burden from the teachers’ shoulders, so “they are not overwhelmed with the organizational duties during the big school social events and they could concentrate more on academics and on teaching” (Parent Gleb). The organization makes the lives of teachers “a little bit easier through acquiring supplies for the teachers and by providing meals for the teachers during the conferences” (Parent Katie). The PTO is also raising money for important school programs, and is sponsoring “large scale social activities with a fundraising effort involvement” (Parent Katie). Due to the PTO fundraising efforts, the school could save its budget money not to hire extra people to do lunch or other programs/or projects at school. Both groups of participants agreed that parent-teacher organization is a big help in terms of fundraising activities at school that lacks extra funding for school equipment and supplies. In addition, parent Katie considered that “the PTO is not just about financial arrangements and support of school.” It also helps to build a community and the sense of it. The majority of the teachers and parents told they are lucky to have a parent-teacher organization at school since it is an intermediate organization, “a bridge between teachers and parents.” Some

teachers believed those schools that do not have parent-teacher organization might not be effective, and the absence of the PTO at school diminishes the importance of parent volunteering at school.

To conclude, all of the teachers and parents highly appreciated the value of parent volunteering in their school and understood its significance in public school settings.

Teacher Jeff said,

On a day- to - day basis, you could get by without parent volunteering. However, to run a successful school, year in and year out, it's important to have parent volunteers. So I, I mean, you know, today, we may not have a parent come in. It's a normal Thursday. But, Friday ... you know, we may have an assembly and having parents here is essential. So, you need to have parents here, to volunteer, to build a community and to build a great school.

Effects of Parent Volunteering on Students' Learning and Social Skills Development

Parent volunteering major focuses: Reading, Math and field trips

According to the data, parent volunteering affects students' learning and social skill in different ways. Teachers' and parents' perceptions on effects of parent volunteering on students' learning and social skills were not unanimous in some aspects.

Teacher Mary suggested that each child benefits from getting individualized attention and help with Reading and Math. It could be some impact on listening skills when the teacher has parent volunteers who work in groups in class, especially in lower grades. Drawing on several teachers' perceptions, without parent volunteering field trips would be impossible. Field trips in their school are not just for fun. They are related to the students' learning and are done for the educational purposes. Besides, during the field trips when students are divided into smaller groups and supervised by parent volunteers then there is a better chance that the students' behavior is better, "because you have more

eyes in charge of them” (Teacher Mary). In teachers’ view, parent volunteering is facilitating not only students’ discipline but indirectly promote cognitive, learning and social skills. The majority of the teachers held the view that learning skill could be improved owing to parents, who volunteer to print out copies of different learning materials. Teacher James believed the more resources a teacher has for students, the better learning opportunities the students will have in class.

Parent volunteering: “To be, or not to be” in higher grades

Most of the teachers held the view that students like to see their parents to be involved in school because they feel their support, and it is “more a community” (Teacher Dorothy). Students in lower grades love to see their parents at school. However, teacher Dorothy suggested that sometimes, kids in lower grades got embarrassed when seeing different parents in class at different times. Teacher Hope added, “When children grow up and are in higher grades they might get embarrassed to see their parents at school.” All parents, whose children were in grades 5 and 7, shared the same views on parent involvement in higher grades. In accord with parents’ views on parent volunteering in higher grades, teacher Hope claimed that “there is not a ton of volunteering” in her eleventh grade Humanities class. She did not see any effects of parent volunteering on students’ learning and social skills in her class. The teacher engaged parents to join their children on field trip to the theater only. Though, drawing on prior teacher Mary’s perceptions it might be assumed that parent volunteering is a sine qua non of the students’ good behavior during any school field trip. The majority of the parents shared the same views on parent involvement in higher grades. They were afraid

their kids “might not want them any more at school when they grow older” (Parent Stephanie & Parent Reba). Parent Gleb even felt doubt about the necessity of parent volunteering in higher grades because in his view students “become more responsible and can read without mother’s help.”

However, even in middle or high school, parent volunteering affects students’ discipline and behavior in several ways. As Teachers Jeff said, “Since teachers build an environment predicated on respect and having parents come in really allows the students to shine.” Several teachers thought that when parents volunteer students are on their best behavior that might facilitate learning skills of the students while learning in class, and social and learning skills during school field trips.

Another view was held by all participants that when parents volunteer, the students feel parents’ love, care and support. Sometimes, as teacher Michael said, it could lead to “trickle-down effect” on students’ behavior when they see some of the parents who volunteer in class. Students also want to engage their parents into volunteering seeing as other parents’ are doing it. However, teacher James expressed a concern that if parents are not trained to teach in class, parent volunteering might be stressful and harmful for some students. Parent Stephanie agreed with the teacher James’ view and considered that all depends how parents approach their volunteering duties, and how parents could be helpful for the students and teachers in class, instead of intimidating teachers and students in an authoritative manner.

To conclude, teachers’ views on parent volunteering effects on learning and social skill varied to some extent. For all respondents, it was doubtless that parent volunteering had positive effects on students’ school outcomes. However, the majority of participants

believed that parent volunteering might be unnecessary in higher grades or embarrassing for lower graders if parent volunteering is done sporadically and unsystematically.

Parents' view: Social and nutritional wellbeing

Parents believed that there are fewer behavioral or disciplinary issues within the classroom or on the field trips due to parent volunteering at school. Parents did not mention significant effects on learning skills but paid more attention to social skills development due to parent volunteering at school. For example, parent Gleb suggested,

Kids might behave themselves better when seeing parent at school. If parent does not volunteer the child could feel left alone if somehow the kid can see it.

Parent Katie suggested that for the students in lower grades presence of parent volunteer in class creates “awareness of their own situation.” The parent claimed,

Children are building relationships with their friends and involving their parents. That is a sense of pride for them. An experience with other parents is also important to develop all children and all the experiences that they get.

In parent Katie's view, lunch program provided by parent volunteers promotes the students' social and nutritional wellbeing. It also provides a little challenge in the students' nutrition habits, and helps with their responsibilities in the lunchroom. Since parent Katie has been actively involved in the PTO fundraising activities, she held the view that even financially supporting school by raising money for the library would also provide a lot of future opportunities for the students. The parent thought that raising money to build a playground for the kids will bring some dividends too, since “mind and body is the one whole”.

Who are the leaders at school?

In general, my assumptions related to asymmetrical teachers' and parents' perspectives on parent volunteering were partially corroborated. Teachers, who were more centered on teaching, found parent volunteering as facilitating students learning skills through getting more individualized attention from the teacher when parent volunteers free them from teaching the whole class. In their view, parent volunteering could enhance Reading, Math, and sometimes listening skills. Parent volunteers' chaperoning on the school field trips that are done for the educational purposes is facilitating not only students' discipline but indirectly promote cognitive, learning and social skills. Learning skill could be improved owing to parents, who volunteer to print out copies of different learning materials. According to the data, parent volunteering affects students' discipline and behavior in middle or high school. Sometimes, parent volunteering might be stressful if parents are not trained.

Parents, who were more concerned about the well-being of their children, did not mention significant effects of parent volunteering on the students' learning skills. Parents paid more attention to social skills development and were more focused on social and nutritional wellbeing of their children than on their learning or cognitive outcomes. Parents were supporting school, teachers, and their children in several ways, but more in a serving, caring manner. None of the parents told about direct impact of parent volunteering on students' reading, writing or listening skills. In addition, parents, whose children were in fifth and sixth grades, felt doubt about the necessity of parent volunteering in higher grades at school. From all above mentioned findings, the question aroused: Did parents have such an assumption because they underestimated their leaders'

role in lives of their children or they decided that teachers had more professional competence in teaching their children? However, one of the parents suggested that parents could influence the students learning and cognitive skills in middle and high schools if teachers allow parents to come in as guest speakers and share their experiences and expertise with the students during a school period called advisory, which students have after their lunch time. Parent Reba said,

Kids have an hour to eat their lunch in the beginning, and the rest of 25 minutes ...is simply just sitting. If parents could be given a couple of minutes to come and speak about different careers during this time, when they have their advisory period, it would be beneficial for the students, especially the high school seniors. Parents could give a 10 minute presentation and the children can ask questions. And, that's another way of, you know, parent helping.

My point is that parent volunteering sometimes might be limited only to fundraising activities at school or attending social gatherings and PTO meetings. The leading role of parents as tutors and mentors of their children at school was underestimated in the middle and high school grades at the particular charter school.

Effects of Parent Volunteering on Teachers' Job Performance

Parent volunteering: Is it helpful or stressful?

Both groups of participant found that "parent volunteering has so many different effects in so many different ways." The majority of the teachers and parents found parent volunteering helpful. It allows provide field trips and helps enjoy the field trip in a safe and quiet environment. Teacher James said, "Parent volunteering makes the day easier, more effective and quicker during the field trip. There is more discipline and structure." Teacher James also stated that teachers could get more resources for students if parents are making copies and other things for the teacher. It means, the teacher can focus more

on his students, and “the teacher is not as stressed about getting things accomplished because the teacher knows that it’s going to be done by someone else.” All teachers found doing copying and cutting papers for teachers as a useful type of parent volunteering since it saves teachers’ time for teaching students. Some of the teachers had fewer papers to grade due to parent volunteering. It is beneficial, because “when parent helps to grade tests teacher can do more with the students” (Teacher Michael). The interviewed parents held the similar views as teachers. However, parents considered that parent volunteers could assist in grading papers in lower grades better than in higher grades. Parent Becky thought that parent volunteers who are doing some office and paper job like cutting, stapling, copying facilitate teachers’ possibilities to focus more on teaching those kids who need more personal attention and care while studying. This is very beneficial for the children with special needs. Parent Becky also suggested that teachers feel support of parents, their care and appreciation on behalf of parent which add more energy and initiatives into their teaching. Teacher Dorothy held the same view that if parents are helping out in class the teacher feels support and it makes teacher feel “as a big family, as a community.” Teacher Jeff said, “When parents are in class classroom discipline and classroom environment show up.” The atmosphere in class is pretty good and teacher has students’ attention instantly. Teacher Jeff reflected,

Parent coming out to volunteer in class provides a new perspective; it’s a new learning tool. Parent volunteering adds to environment and it does not distract students. It creates a sense of community.

However, not all teachers shared teacher Jeff’s views. There was a big discrepancy between teachers’ perceptions. Teacher Dorothy suggested that occasionally, volunteering could help in facilitating teaching or class management. However,

sometimes class management is “harder with the parent in room.” Parent Katie shared teacher Dorothy’s view. The parent said,

The one challenge is the distraction that teachers and parents can have within the classroom. Children need consistency. They do better when there is a regular schedule and sameness. When a parent comes in, it could create a little chaos.

Teacher Dorothy and teacher Mary suggested that younger teachers are afraid of parents who volunteer. Several teachers claimed that teachers who are insecure in their teaching do not want parents questioning them. However, parent Stephanie assumed that the teachers who are confident in themselves would not be distracted by parent volunteers.

Some teachers found that “parent volunteering is not always helping the teacher specifically”. For this reason, teacher Dorothy suggested that she only wanted parents for particular events in class or at school. She added, “Perhaps, having parents in class once in a week for paper work or some grading would be fine for me.” One of the teachers simply didn’t know what to do with parent volunteers in her class. Therefore, several teachers do not need parent volunteers much. Some teachers thought that parent volunteering can distract teacher from teaching in some situations. In that vein, parent Stephanie assumed, “There are parents out there that maybe teachers wouldn’t want them here.” Therefore, teacher Dorothy considered that tension with the parents who volunteer could be present even during the school field trip, because “the teacher doesn’t always choose which parent will volunteer.” Some teachers suggested that it could be a problem if the teacher doesn’t have good relationship with a parent or if the teacher doesn’t trust a parent. Teacher James found parent volunteering in some situations as stressful. The teacher reflected,

It can be stressful and overwhelming because parents come up with their own ideas or programs when teacher has too many working hours at school and can't work extra time since they have families and other responsibilities.

In addition, the teacher mentioned some parents who volunteer are not supporting the teacher but observing the teacher. Since there is no union or protection for the teachers at school, in such situations parent volunteering could be stressful for educators though they have nothing to hide. Teacher James, who had a lot of parent volunteering outside his class, suggested that parent volunteering might harass the teacher or make the teacher feel uncomfortable when parents try to push their religious agenda, morals or values onto everyone who doesn't share their views and beliefs. Sometimes, parents' comments or their personal beliefs might ruin the student's self-esteem. He reflected,

One parent just made me feel really uncomfortable in front of the class, some of the comments she made, especially with like religion and other things, assuming everybody's Christian, and stuff like that, which is not true. And, I really feel sometimes that parents are trying to push their religious agenda onto everyone, or just their morals and values which might not be the morals and values of everyone else. We have to be understanding of culture. And we gotta work with that. And as a teacher, I understand *more* where my students are coming from, more about what their needs are. Somebody [a parent] just coming in might not know about that. I think... I went to college for 4 years to help identify some of those things, which are really important. Everybody has experiences with teachers. But, not everybody knows what it's like to be a teacher—it's more than just being at the front of a classroom and teach- and it's trying to build up interactions with people, and stuff like that, and comments and things like that can really ruin the students' self-esteem if it's done not in a positive way.

Teachers' perceptions on parent tension prevention strategies

Teachers in their interviews revealed some ideas on how to avoid tension between parents and teachers when volunteering takes place in class or outside the school. Teacher James introduced idea of "a buddy system" when a teacher should be partnered with one other parent who a teacher could trust, who is really supportive and giving his or her time

to help a teacher and all students. That parent could be a liaison between a teacher and other parents. Teacher James proposed,

As a teacher you're not interacting with 20 parents, you're interacting with 1 or 2 parents. Because, otherwise you feel overwhelmed, 'cause, you know all the e-mails and things like that. And, I think too, as a parent, if talking to another parent might be easier than talking to another teacher or so. I'd almost want to come up with "a buddy system", and you'd have a trained parent with a trained teacher and they could interact, and help out, and plan things out.

Parent Katie completely shared the teacher's view. The parent thought that this type of interaction between parent and teacher will make volunteering in class more effective and organized both for the educator and the parents. Actually, drawing on parent Katie's views, some teachers in K-5 maintained such type of parent-teacher relationships.

Teacher Mary suggested that school administration can provide training for the teachers how to do parent volunteering in class in a way of workshops. It can be counted as a community and "that would be helpful." Though, teacher Dorothy didn't agree with teacher Mary's point of view. The teacher considered mentorship on behalf of school administration would be a better way to facilitate parent involvement at school instead of formal training for teachers. She thought that teachers could learn from one another through a round-table discussions or mentorship. Teachers who involve parents into volunteering can share their experiences "on how to do it best" with those teachers who do not engage parent volunteers in class. Several teachers agreed if the school personnel would be trained to facilitate parent volunteering at school it probably would be helpful for all.

Variations

Not all teachers supported the idea of teacher training strategies to escape tension between parents and teachers when parents volunteer in class or outside the school.

Teacher Hope suggested,

Since the school is new and relied on good parent-teacher relations from the very beginning till nowadays, we do not need training at school. In *this* school it is not a problem.

On the other hand, Teacher Jeff suggested that training may be beneficial for the teachers, but he thought it is useless “when the teacher sticks to the standards and particular direction the teacher wants to go when he or she is working with the people.” Therefore, drawing on parent Stephanie’s view, some teachers might think they do not need any training to conduct parent volunteering in their classrooms because they are confident in their teaching expertise. However, the teachers who do not have many, or any parent volunteers in their classrooms could regard training on parent volunteering as useless, relying only on overall good parent-volunteering relations in their school.

Reasons of Parent Volunteering and Types of Parent Volunteering at the Charter School

There are various reasons why parents volunteer in the charter school. The most common *raison d'être* of parent volunteering is parents’ desire to show kids the value they put on education. Another important reason is that parents want to be engaged in their students’ lives. It is also important for the students to see their parents at school, to feel their support, to see them involved in their every day school lives. Teacher Hope believed parents have to do it because it is their duty. She stated,

The students know that they are getting a good education if the parents are behind it, and parents have to show their support to kids in a real coming into school to see what kids do, not just sitting at home that fills up the parent's day. It is what you have to do as a parent. It's really important for kids to see that their parents support, specifically *the* education that they are getting.

The teacher's frame of reference matched the parent Stephanie's standpoint who said that "it is her duty to volunteer at school because it was her choice as a parent to have children, and volunteering is what any parent should be doing for the family."

Teacher Michael suggested that parent volunteering is important for *any* school to get the parent involvement. It is especially important in their charter school. The teacher said,

Since our main focus is a college preparation we have a big emphasis on students' grades. Parental involvement is necessary in order for the students to be successful academically. That plays a big part.

Teacher Mary shared that view as well. She specified that parents mostly volunteer with the intention of being able to have direct influence on the education of their own child. That is why, parents want to come in and help with the Reading groups, or Math groups in her kindergartner's class. She also thought that some parents enjoy coming in regularly to help in the lunchroom, and to get to know who their children's friends are. The same thoughts were traced in almost all parents' interviews.

Parent volunteering as a source of pleasure and satisfaction

In general, all parents enjoyed volunteering at school. For the majority of them volunteering is a pleasure, a source of satisfaction. Parent Stephanie said that volunteering at both of her daughters' schools is "what she should be doing for her family." Therefore, it brings her a great pleasure to volunteer. Currently, she is doing

lunch, because it all works with her schedule and she is looking forward to volunteer more. Parent Becky preferred “paper aspect work.” She helps with doing copies for all the teachers in the Lower campus, and she also has started doing lunches twice a week. She helped in the class of her daughter but not as much, and once a week she did Thursday Folders, a way of sending home all of assignments or art work of the student from the previous week. Parent Gleb favored baking cookies for the teachers’ conferences last year. He is looking forward to enroll all his children in the charter school very soon, and then he and his wife will be more engaged in social events volunteering activities because they like to socialize a lot. Parent Reba enjoys after school social community events, fundraising potlucks, or baking cookies for the teachers during teacher conferences. Sometimes, she cleaned up after potluck dinners. Parent Katie volunteers in the lunchroom, and does Thursday Folders every two weeks depending on her schedule at work. Her husband often volunteers in class with her. Katie also favored help in class doing Mystery Reader (or reading to the students), or Math with kids, or helped out with class parties or projects. Currently, parent Katie has started with a group of other women some ground-breaking fundraising activities such as Playground fundraiser and Playground Online Auction 2011 for the school financial support. The parent derives a lot of satisfaction by raising money “to procure or buy something that is always going to be here.” For Katie, volunteering is not only helping in class or in lunchroom. She believed, “There are so many ways to give that are financial too: to give up your time, experiences, and skills. There are ways of doing things that may involve writing a check, too.” The parent explained that by volunteering for forty hours the company where Katie works would give that organization one thousand dollar check.

This is Katie's personal way to help buy school a playground for kids. Parent Katie enjoyed volunteering to build rapport with teachers, school administration and other parents. Building rapport helped her to make sure that she knew what was going on in her daughter's daily life at school.

Therefore, there are numerous ways for parents to volunteer at school. Both parent and teacher participants perceived parent volunteering as an important, influential, helpful and positive venture for the students, teachers, parents and school in general.

Evidence of cultural volunteerism: Necessity and desire to help the school succeed

Several teachers indicated that school needs parent's support "for things to function properly." Since the school is short of funds, and they do not have a special lunchroom staff, the school relies upon a lot of parent volunteers. Teacher Mary said, "We really couldn't have lunch at school without parent volunteers. That is why most of the parents help out at lunchroom because it is really needed." Teacher Dorothy argued that some parents volunteer in the lunchroom, because it is needed, and it is a set period of time which works well for some parents' work schedule. Thus, parent volunteers value structure and consistency in their volunteering. All parents suggested that by volunteering parents could save a lot of money for their school. There is no need to hire extra personnel at school if there are parents who are able, and available to volunteer.

The most important reason why parents volunteer at school was a suggestion made by teacher James. The teacher said, "A big part in parent volunteering plays [into] parents' desire to give time, to donate time a lot of times to their school community

because they want to give it back.” Teacher Michael had some personal explanations on the reason of parent volunteering. He said,

There's a lot of cultural volunteerism in these days. So, they [parents] kinda just buy into that. Minnesota probably leads if not at the top of the list, but leads the nation in volunteering. It's just the way people are born and raised up in Minnesota to give up their time to others, that kind of thing. People can't live without it. It's like in your blood.

Parent Katie enthusiastically shared teacher Michael's viewpoint. She said,

My DNA, my make-up...teaching, education is in my blood. And, volunteering is the type of it, too. I saw my parents, the former educators did a lot of things they've never received money for that has never been called “volunteering”. They just did it, and now I do it.

Teacher James argued that some parents might enjoy coming regularly to help out with community. In addition, he considered availability of time as a huge and very important factor to be involved in parent volunteering. The teacher suggested that stay-at-home mothers, who have a lot of spare time, want to be involved in volunteering to help somehow their kids, donate their time as gratitude for the education their kids get at school, and to help school as well. The majority of the teachers regarded the availability of time, parents' desire to be involved in their kids' education, understanding of importance of parent volunteering, and gratitude to school as the foremost factors to spur parent volunteering in their school. Most of the parents shared the teachers' views about parents' gratitude for the education their kids get at school as a motivation to volunteer. Parents decided to volunteer because they wanted to support their teachers and wanted to be grateful for all the time the teachers put into their children. Parent Becky stated,

Volunteering is my personal way of saying “Thanks” on doing great job for my kid on behalf of teachers.

Variations

Teacher Jeff thought a *raison d'être* of parent volunteering probably depends on each individual. The teacher stated, "If you start volunteering at a young age, you're probably more likely to volunteer as you get older." He maintained that spur for parent volunteering probably depends "if there's a certain teacher the parents get along with." Parents might be more likely to volunteer "if there's a program that they're really interested in." Field trips possibilities could spur parents to volunteer because in teacher Jeff's view, "it's nice to get away and to take a field trip." However, teacher Jeff confirmed that volunteering for parents is based on their child and being involved with their kids' education and that would be an important factor.

Concept of love and care

One of the teachers felt, though the teacher had never really thought about it before, that parent volunteers who have children with special needs are the most consistent volunteers. It is hard not to agree with the teacher's point of view, because parent Becky, a mother of a kindergartener with special needs is a vivid example of such a parent who is overwhelmingly involved in volunteering at school. As Parent Becky told, "Volunteering is a comfort for me because my daughter feels more secure when her mother is at school."

Teacher Michael suggested that parents volunteer to show their children that they care about them. The teacher reflected that even though a parent all day long is thinking "I love them", it is also nice to tell their children about it personally while volunteering.

Therefore, parents' care, love and moral support are as important as a hot lunch program at school. That is why some parents are very willing to come in and support their own and other children at school. The majority of parents shared the same view on parent volunteering as a symbol of love and parents' care in their interviews.

Concept of connectedness

Parents found the same reasons of parent volunteering as teachers did. However, parents' perceptions were enriched by some new ideas that teachers haven't mentioned in their answers during the interview process. Different from teachers' ideas, parents viewed their connectedness with school, other parents, their kids and other kids as a reason to volunteer. Parent Stephanie suggested that it is critical for the parent "just to be connected with school, children, teachers and other parents." As an immigrant, parent Reba wanted to find other people in the neighborhood communities just "to build a support system", or "to find a friend." In addition, the parent said, "I want my daughter to see that Mom is engaged in the school, and then she will get more engaged." She believed that by volunteering parents help the school and themselves as they get better informed about what is going on at school, and they can meet and make friends with other parents, and be more connected with each other. Parent Reba added, "Volunteering puts a parent in a better place with other parents, and also with school as they understand that a parent cares about her child."

According to the data, parents who volunteered at the charter school helped to develop sense of community, built their rapport with teachers, students, school administration

relying on their sense of connectedness with school, their children and their children's friends and parents and the whole school community.

School Factors that Foster Parent Volunteering

The school by its structure needs parent involvement to provide education according to their mission and Minnesota's K-12 state standards. Consequently, the school encourages a strong sense of community through family events and social activities. Here are several school factors that foster parent volunteering at the charter school.

First, the school provides location for parents to volunteer. Currently, the school administration and parents are planning to develop a new school location that will house all of their students and staff under one roof and it would be easier for parents to volunteer in one building. Second, the school has its own functioning parent-teacher organization (PTO). Third, there is a special person, the school activities coordinator at school who is in charge of almost all school activities events and parent volunteering in both school campuses. Her name is Mrs. Betsy. Fourth, the school community developed its own website to track school needs, sign up volunteers, and electronically remind parent volunteers of their commitments. Mrs. Betsy administers the site.

The role of the school activities coordinator in promoting parent volunteering

From Mrs. Betsy's words, it is her duty to write and send out a school newsletter to every family to keep informed through the school website each week on Friday. She is

planning and organizing school yearly community building event, a carnival type day with food, music, and games where parents, teachers, school administration and the whole community socialize and meet each other. She is researching and implementing school volunteer program because “parents might be apt to more structure and appreciate consistency of volunteering activities.” As the school activities coordinator, Mrs. Betsy interacts with parent volunteers in various ways that brings up more structure in parent volunteering process. She coordinates the lunch program at the Lower Campus and relies on parent volunteers to help serve lunch and clean up following service. Thus, parents feel that their volunteering has a value, meaning and an impact on kids and that also could be a factor to foster parent volunteering. She has trained parent volunteers according to Minnesota health code regulations. Therefore, parents might appreciate their self-efficiency and knowledge on nutrition well-being skills. In addition, when parents are familiar with their job responsibilities during their volunteering hours they feel more confident.

Mrs. Betsy runs monthly Friday Flicks movie nights for the students which also require staff and/or parents to help supervise kids and sell popcorn, pop, and candy for a small profit which goes to the PTO. Parents socialize while kids are watching movies. That creates a feeling of one big family when parents are having potluck foods and communicate with teachers and other parents. Mrs. Betsy considered that the PTO organization engages parent volunteers to do volunteering in different aspects of school life. As their school website announces, “All families are encouraged to donate time to school activities. Any parent is invited to help at any event even if the child is not participating in the event.” The whole school structure is targeted at building a sense of

community through the encouragement of parents' involvement in their individual children lives, education, class, and school. Teacher Mary, when reflecting on volunteering at the school said,

Parent volunteering is like a part of the car gear in a machine. And at our school, being a charter school you really think that parent involvement is important as part of one the wheels in the machine that help make the educational system work with the students, the parents and the teachers and staff being the other wheels.

School factors that could hinder parent volunteering at the charter school

According to the data, there are several school factors that could hinder parent volunteering at the particular school. Parent Katie considered that volunteering at the school is the manner in which parents sign up. According to parent Katie, the school employs a great system, an Internet-based tool to sign up but some parents might not have access to the Internet all the time or do not have a computer at home. Some parents don't have sufficient background knowledge of computer. Parent Katie said, "My husband doesn't know how to use the tool because he is not technologically advanced. If I taught him two, three, four times, eventually he'll get it." That might be an obstacle for parents to volunteer because without access to the Internet or lack of knowledge how to use the tool parents could miss important information about the coming school events where parent volunteers' help is needed.

Language barriers could also impede parent volunteering. The school newsletter is written in English. If a parent can't read or speak English it would be difficult for a parent to be involved in volunteering at school. Parent Stephanie told that she knew some families from the former Soviet Union and their English was not proficient. In Stephanie's view, language barrier could be an obstacle for these parents to volunteer.

She said, “You have to be able to communicate, to be able to understand what you need to do if you want to volunteer.” Teacher Dorothy confirmed, “None of my parents for whom English is not their first language are volunteering.”

All parents and teachers held the view that shortage of time due to several jobs parents are doing to afford the type of education their children get at school is the most critical for parents to be involved in volunteering. The school maintains an official standard of dress, complete with a school uniform that must be worn every day. Some parents have to work at several jobs to pay for the school uniform, textbooks, school bus fees for the students who do not live in the school neighborhood, for participation in different school field trips which are mandatory. For example, the school currently charges \$400.00 per student per academic year for bus service for those students living outside the Lower and Upper school districts. Therefore, some parents have to earn a lot of money to send their children to the charter school. Little or no time is left for these parents to volunteer at school.

Teacher Dorothy found lack of transportation and lack of childcare as factors that might hinder parent volunteering at their school. The charter school does not provide transportation or childcare for the younger siblings if parents want to volunteer in the school lunch program or during Friday Flicks movie nights.

Teachers on inviting and welcoming approach to the parents

Parent volunteering was regarded as important for running a successful school, but at the same time, teacher James suggested that the teachers can't expect every parent to volunteer. He said,

We have kids who need the most help here, ones that are poor and this is their chance to get a better education and more opportunity and their parents are working very, very hard to make that happen for them through working multiple jobs. So, we can't expect every parent to volunteer- that would be ridiculous!

However, teacher James believed that all teachers have to be more open, more welcoming towards parents of their students. Teachers have to “get out the word that parents are encouraged to come into your class.” The teacher suggested,

If you want to send out a newsletter- like I do History Club, so I specifically say that chaperones are welcome, parents are welcome to come in and deserve to help out- to get involved in the classroom.

In my view, such appreciation of parents by teachers could motivate parents to be more involved. This is very important because as teacher Mary put it, “When parents come in we have a better community here. When the teachers know who the parents are, and when they know one another and you [a teacher] know a name and a little bit about them [parents], your community just runs better and you feel more about belonging when you know more people.”

How Is Parent Volunteering Integrated Into School Life?

Parent volunteering is very important to run the school given the fact that the charter school has fewer resources and less staff members. In all my teachers' and parents' interviews, a unanimous thought was expressed by all participants that “without parent volunteering in school things wouldn't get done.” The most significant manifestation of parent volunteering integration into school life is implementation of a hot lunch program at school, expected parent assistance in frequent field trips that extend the learning environment, customary parent volunteers' help in class with paperwork or sometimes with teaching aspect, like doing Math or Reading groups in

lower grades, organization and participation in various fundraising activities to support the school financially, and creation of innovative community-based school families events to foster the sense of one big family, a sense of community.

The school curriculum and parent volunteering

The school uses in the middle school the Core Knowledge Sequence curriculum to help students establish strong foundations of knowledge, grade by grade. English, History, Art, and Music are taught in an integrated fashion. The time periods studied in History drive the curriculum, and the objectives covered in English, Music and Art are designed to complete the study of the time period covered in History. The high school curriculum combines a classical framework and Socratic seminars. This curriculum is taught in a Humane Letters seminar format where students study with the great books (not textbook) of the Western (classical) tradition in historical sequence beginning with the ancient Greeks in 9th grade and finishing in 12th grade with modern American and European history. The Fine Arts curriculum is integrated as much as possible with the student's other studies in History and Literature.

As teacher participants suggested, without parent volunteering these rigorous curricula couldn't be implemented in a proper way since the students also study through visiting art exhibitions, historical and science museums, famous historical places, and by participating in the school Art XPO. For example, this year, at the beginning of May, Mr. Holiday (a pseudonym), the teacher who teaches astronomy and physics classes invited 4 parent chaperones to look after 37 high school students on a journey to the Fermi Labs, the Museum of Science and Industry and the Adler Planetarium in Chicago. Students

from the middle school are looking forward to take part in the following field trips as Minnesota Landscape Arboretum, Gibbs Museum of Pioneer & Dakotah Life, Sea Life at the Mall of America, Mississippi River Boat Cruise. All these trips are provided due to the parent volunteers' initiatives, their financial support and willingness to help teachers to supervise students in the field trips for the educational purposes. To make these educational trips happen, parents not only chaperone their students but also raise extra funds to organize these trips for their students.

Teacher Mary, the head of the Art department at the Lower school, said that "Parent volunteers always help to provide a famous school Art Expo Juried Student Art Show because art is a big part of the school curriculum." The teacher reflected,

One of the big events that we have in our Art department each year, since the last three years, is an ART XPO exhibition of students' art works. We hang up art work from students. We have judges come. We have awards and a big ceremony and gallery opening and even allow the students to sell their works, like in a gallery with all that hanging up of the works and advertising, and having things like treats, and sound systems, and taping things up on the wall which just takes a lot of parent help.

Teacher Mary said that annually they have two field trips to the art museums for the various grades. For each field trip, she usually has six to eight parent volunteers come along, so that the groups of students in the museum could be divided into less than ten student groups each, and in this way each parent volunteer leads a group and makes sure that all students stay together at the art museum and monitors students' discipline.

Some of the interviewed parents expressed the idea that parent volunteering could be integrated into classroom if the teacher feels the parents' knowledge, or experience can fit the curriculum. According to the data, parents found it beneficial to use parent volunteers' help in continuing to bridge their students' education. Parent Katie suggested,

As a parent, I would assume that there are many ways of teaching kids with parents' assistance, knowledge and experience. Because our classroom is represented by different countries, why not integrate them more into the teaching aspect?

However, not every teacher supported completely the parent's view. In teachers' view, parents' should be trained first, and then they could be more involved in the teaching aspect than in paper work aspect. Teacher Michael suggested,

If parents have some formal training teachers would have more parent involvement in class. They could help the teacher conduct the lesson or take a discussion group.

Parent volunteering and students' health and well-being

According to the school wellness policy, nutrition activity and physical activity are essential components of the educational process. The school encourages parents' involvement in implementing and monitoring hot lunch nutrition program because consuming of healthy foods on a regular basis at a set period of time promotes children's physical growth, enhances learning capabilities of kids, improves students' attendance. Therefore, parents are willing to volunteer at the lunchroom to help serve lunch and clean up. Parent Katie volunteers every two weeks in the lunchroom, depending on her work schedule. The parent found most of her volunteering hours spent in the lunchroom "as the biggest area of support that is needed by the school." Parent Stephanie considered her volunteering in the lunchroom as a mentoring opportunity for her. She teaches students good table manners and healthy eating habits.

How to involve parents into volunteering

All teachers and parents appreciated the value of parent volunteering and its extensive integration in the charter school life and students' education. However, there were several concerns on behalf of both groups of participants that the PTO should work better in engaging parents in volunteering for better students' outcomes and better school functioning. According to the data, minority student parents' voice was not vocalized at the PTO meetings because they were not represented there. Teacher Hope admitted, "It would be difficult to get minority parents involved since they have the same 4 to 5 parents on average in the PTO, who continue to care and giving back without asking other parents to engage in school life."

Teacher Michael suggested that "the PTO has to make sure that every parent knows about the organization and its major objectives." The teacher believed that the school has to advertize the PTO more and provide more personal invitations for the parents to be engaged in volunteering. Parents would be more apt to accept these personal invitations as opposed to impersonal announcement or impersonal emails.

Parent Gleb thought the problem which the PTO experienced with the engagement of minority parents or other parents who did not volunteer at school could be solved by an official school requirement to volunteer that was practiced by school administration last year, but not this school year. The parent said,

School should make a requirement where each parent should volunteer at least once in a school year. That will create a sense of community. School personnel have to show and stress enough that volunteering is important in their kid's life. Then, there will be more parent volunteering at school.

Parent Katie shared the teachers' view that sometimes parents need to be asked to volunteer to have some aspect of involvement. The parent also thought that the PTO is

not as effective in engaging parents perhaps because “of the age that we are in now.” The parent said,

Our lives are so much busier than the lives of our parents twenty, thirty years ago. I think we have higher expectations. Our children are involved in more and more activities, sports and or other enrichment opportunities that to find time even just once a month for two hours to go to a meeting in person is difficult.

Parent Katie stated that there are parents who are willing to participate in volunteer opportunities and be engaged in their children school but they do not know how to start it. School has to reach them out in other ways than the PTO meetings or via emails on their school website. However, she suggested that the PTO meetings and a PTO umbrella as an organization need to find different ways to contact parents for participation in volunteering activities and build strategies on how to become more effective. To this end, the parent believed that the PTO needs to find different communication vehicles. In parent Katie’s view, school personnel could be more welcoming. She believed it would be nice if the school could do it through “the open arms and welcome policy whether it is through a focus on languages we speak, or the foods that we eat.” For example, teacher Mary also found a welcoming approach useful for building a sense of community which is the biggest priority of the school. Teacher Mary reflected,

I think you have community when each person whether it’s the parent that walks into the school, the teachers and staff working at school or the students who go to the school, they all feel like they belong here and are welcome. And, the teachers do not just walk by in a rush but have to be interested in welcoming parents.

Influence of the Socio-Economic, Minority and Immigrant Statuses on Volunteering

Taking into account the fact that the school is located in a suburb area close to Minneapolis in the area that is affluent, there are few students from low-income

households. According to the data, approximately eighty to ninety percent of the school is Caucasian. Therefore, volunteering of Caucasian parents is primarily predominant.

“There is no money in volunteering”

Some teachers did not think they had low income students in their classes, and therefore they were “not seeing them.” Literally, it is hard to identify socio-economic status of the students’ as all of them are wearing a school uniform. However, those teachers who taught low-income students in their classes held the view that “socio-economic status is a huge factor in parent volunteering” (Teacher James). These students are very few at school, but “socio-economic difference between parents exists” (Teacher Michael). Teacher James explained that parents from low socio-economic status households usually do not volunteer because “there is no money in volunteering.”

“Minority parents are working majority of the time”

Since the school is very low on minority students, not as many as a non-charter school would have, minority factor could also be influential in parent involvement. As the teacher Michael said,

Minority parents are working majority of the time. They are not available to volunteer during the day because most of the time both parents are working or if they are a single parent household, the single parent is working. Their work does not afford them the opportunity to come in and volunteer.

Teacher Hope suggested that minority students’ parents are “definitely [as] not involved as others.” The teacher also thought that religious background of parents is a crucial factor for parent involvement in their school. They have a good 75 to 80 percent students come from specifically Christian home. The teacher said, “Since we have a high number

of students that come from the households of religious background there are a lot of these parents who are involved in volunteering at school.” The school also has a burgeoning Russian population. The majority of them are Russian immigrants, who attend a church in local community, and by word of mouth they learned about the school and enrolled their children in it. They are from a particular religious background, and also they have to work a lot to meet their financial needs. In addition, all teacher and parent participants, unanimously considered location or distance to school, absence of transportation, getting the childcare for the younger children as factors that influence parent volunteering “if the family is poor.”

Minority and immigrant statuses factors: Language barrier, cultural background, and feeling of “otherness”

In parents’ view, language barrier was an influential factor on parent volunteering. Parents, who were not born in the USA and immigrated to the country several years ago, considered language barrier as a potential factor preventing parent volunteering. Parent Reba revealed her thoughts,

I feel like people might see me as a remote and aloof, while I am actually just uncomfortable or shy. I think, overall Americans are much more engaged. Other cultures are more, you know, they sort of hesitate before speaking...It is much harder for Asian cultures to start interacting, and not only Asian, other cultures as well.

Those parents who came from different cultural backgrounds regarded cultural background as a factor that could influence parent volunteering at school. For example, parent Gleb moved to the USA from the USSR many years ago. The parent said that his family didn’t have anything like volunteering in the past. The very term “volunteering” in

some ways was new to the parent, but after they have been living for many years in the USA, the parent “got used to the idea of volunteering”. Parent Reba, who came to the USA from India recalled,

I don't think we had stuff like that we have in the US now when we were growing up. It was just school and a gym and a hall, you know... Here, volunteering is more casual. But a lot of new parents, especially those who are coming from other cultures don't quite know that volunteering is a necessary part of the school life.

Parent Katie suggested another influential factor that was very important. She called it “parent's level of comfort to volunteer.” The parent thought that language barrier could be influential factor but it is not a critical obstacle to volunteer. The parent believed that “the parent has to begin, to start volunteering than it will be easier to be involved.” Parent Stephanie supported parent Katie's thought but she didn't reject the view that “language barrier could be a factor because a parent doesn't feel comfortable if a person isn't able to interact due to poor knowledge of English.” Parent Gleb believed that “parent has to be able to communicate, to be able to understand what he or she needs to do if a parent wants to volunteer.”

Interestingly, two teachers out of six didn't mention language barrier as an influential factor in parent volunteering. The rest of the teachers considered language barrier of minority or immigrant statuses parents as “a major factor” or “it might be a factor” that influences parent volunteering. Teacher Hope found language barrier as a major factor to hinder parent volunteering. She said,

If the parent is coming from a little bit different background and English isn't his or her first language it might be a problem for a parent to know what to do, to know how the parent could be helpful in volunteering without being intimidated.

The majority of the teachers shared their views with parents on language barrier as a factor that could influence parent volunteering. Especially, it might be hard if the parent had no prior experience in volunteering. Teacher Jeff suggested,

Maybe somebody's parents haven't volunteered before, and I can imagine...It's scary. It can be scary for some people to walk into a classroom and volunteer.

Another factor that influence minority parent volunteering is the feeling of their "otherness". Teacher James suggested,

Being of a different race at, especially when minority parent is coming into predominantly White school where people might see them differently can be very difficult. There could be a perception if you are a minority parent you don't look the same as everybody else, or they could be perceived as "hard to reach parents". And, even being White, but of another ethnicity doesn't mean that minority parent is culturally and religiously are the same as the majority of others.

Teacher James tried to further explain his point of view by saying that "it is difficult to be a student and a parent of ethnic Russian descent at the school, and it is also important whether the parent was a second generation or a third generation representative and how well he or she speaks English." In the teacher's view, "it has to be such a struggle" for parents of ethnic Russian students to be involved in parent volunteering. But, despite all the factors that influence minority parent engagement in volunteering, teacher James claimed that there are minority and a couple of mixed race students' parents who are very involved in volunteering and are doing great things for school. Teacher Dorothy also supported teacher James' view and said that minority parents occasionally volunteer at the charter school, but for them "volunteering is a sacrifice."

High socio-economic status factors: Time availability and stay-at-home mothers

In the teachers' view, time availability was strongly related to high socio-economic status of parents. Parents of high socio-economic status could afford more time for parent volunteering activities. Teacher Hope claimed, "When only one of the parents is working and the other stays at home, in this case the parent can dedicate more time to school. So, mothers who are staying at home have more time to come in and volunteer." All parents found availability of time as the major factor that influence parent volunteering at their charter school. Parent Becky said that a lot of parents due to the economy can have two to three jobs and they have no time availability to do volunteering. The majority of the parents thought that stay-at-home mothers are more involved in volunteering. Parent Katie resumed, "Our society is more a stay-at-home mothers, and for that reason mothers generally tend to volunteer more." Parent Katie also thought that "mothers are more apt to volunteer because of nurturing tendency, and because of the traditions that mothers volunteer in that capacity." Parent Gleb shared parent Katie's views, and added that women are more inclined to volunteer. He said,

Women have a tendency to be more social than men. Basically, volunteering means that you meet new people .You are in a new environment, and maybe for the women it's [a] little bit easier to do that than for the men. But, that's my view.

Therefore, I could conclude that socio-economic factor, time availability, and language barrier, or cultural barrier factor are the most influential factors to volunteer in the particular charter school. Some variables of socio-economic status as lack of transportation, difficulties with getting childcare for the younger children, both parents working reality are also influential factors for parents to volunteer at school. Therefore,

minority and immigrant statuses to some extent could be influential factors that might hinder parent volunteering at the particular public charter school.

Variations

Parent Katie also suggested that one attribute of our modern busy life is that “parents have higher expectations towards their children.” She assumed, “Even to attend a PTO meeting once a month for some busy parents who are engaged in their kids’ after school activities is a problem.” Parent Gleb confirmed parent Katie’s hypothesis. He told that his three children are involved in different extracurricular activities seven days a week.

Parent Reba argued that even membership in the church groups could be a factor that could influence parent volunteering. Parent Reba said,

I think a lot of people who volunteer are actually prior friends at church groups. So, they might talk about some volunteer activity during their church meetings and then they bring it to the school, but you already know they’ve talked about it earlier. So, these people are much more involved in that activity already that the other people who are just trying to join in later feel left out. They [who do not belong to church groups] feel like they are not as, you know, into the network.

To conclude, the divergence of thoughts is traced in both group participants.

Within the group, socio-economic status was regarded by the teachers as “it exists” or “I do not see it.” Four out of six teachers agreed that language barrier factor exists, though the other teachers didn’t share their views. Both parent and teacher groups found availability of time as the most critical factor in parent volunteering. All participants unanimously considered location or distance to school, absence of transportation, getting the childcare for the younger children as factors that influence parent volunteering. Two

parents who come from different backgrounds thought cultural background and immigrant status could be the factors that influence parent decision to volunteer. Only two teachers supported this idea. Parents were not unanimous in their perceptions on language barrier as a factor not to volunteer at school. Some of them thought that parents themselves must be initiators of parent volunteering. However, the data showed they can't start volunteering without English proficiency, background knowledge of computer or access to the Internet. Some teachers held the view that parents lack sufficient information and teachers' invitations to volunteer.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Since the first charter school appeared in 1992 in Minnesota, few qualitative research studies on parent volunteering in charter schools have appeared. The research study of Becker, Nakagawa & Corwin (1997) was one of the few early studies of charter schools that compared charter school parent involvement to that of traditional public schools in the same neighborhood, and reported greater parent involvement in charter schools.

The present study was conducted in one of the charter schools in the Twin Cities area to uncover the importance and value of parent volunteering at charter schools. Little information is currently available to attest that this study's findings are congruent or divergent with the findings from other studies. Even after almost two decades since the inception of charter schools in the US education system, there is much left to investigate and explore in the field in-depth (Bulkley, Fisler, 2003).

The findings from this study corroborate that parent involvement is particularly significant at public charter schools. Consistent with Bifulco and Ladd (2005) research findings, the present research study findings show that the extent of parent involvement is shaped by parents' choice of the school. The successful running of the charter school, which is public school of choice, is attributed to vigorous parent involvement through volunteering at school, and outside the school. Most of the parents in the present study decided to volunteer in order to be involved in their children's lives, and the type of education their children receive at school. Since charter schools are striving to provide innovative or unique types of education, they are generally relying on less funding than other public schools (Nelson et al., 2000). Therefore, charter schools are mostly run with

the help of parent involvement, and families and community members play a dominant role in students' educational outcomes.

Drawing on the perceptions of parents and teachers from the interview data, the concept of parent volunteering was coined that defines parent volunteering as a manifestation of active parent support, care and desire to support the school, teachers, students and their education, by giving free time, energy, skills and talents, and sometimes money to benefit the whole school community. The research findings demonstrate that the reasons for parent volunteers' involvement rest on the ground of parents' desire to give their children a better education than they had, or the education they put a value on. As the data showed, parents were not indifferent to the education their children receive at the charter school, to their school climate, to their children's friends and parents, to what is happening in their school community life.

However, among the findings the most surprising for me was that parents 'did weigh costs and benefits when considering volunteering at school' (Wilson, 2000, p. 222). Some exchange theorists could argue that the majority of the parents did volunteering because they had some stake in their volunteer work. For example, parent Reba wanted to make friends and create a support system (Leighley, 1996). Parent Katie was not indifferent to recognition for her efforts in doing 40 hours of volunteering at school (Field & Johnson, 1993). Parents Becky and Stephanie wanted to give back to their teachers for "doing their great job with their kids." However, competing theory advocates might argue that people's identity is important, and that many people think of themselves as those who help others without being praised (Hart et al., 1996). For

example, parent Stephanie said, “A simple “Thank you” would be a motivation for me to do my job, my duty, - to volunteer.”

In my view, the key benefit for students when parents volunteer at school is that students could gain social capital through their social networks with different parents (Coleman, 1987). The majority of the parent participants mentioned about social networks’ benefits both for the students and parents themselves. Parent volunteering in the charter school by a means of social networking enhances parents’ and teachers’ efforts to help students to obtain a success at school, and to accumulate students’ social capital. Epstein’s (1987) theory of overlapping spheres of influence emphasizes the significance of school, families and communities working together to meet the need of children. I think, parents, who volunteer at the charter school help to develop partnership between parents, teachers and school community to run a successful family-like school, and create family-like settings to attain students’ academic success which could be best achieved through parent-teacher-school community cooperative action and support. However, it is not an easy task to achieve effective partnership between all parents, teachers and school community members on their path to every student academic success. As prior research findings on parent involvement indicated, parents of diverse races and ethnicities are not considered as potential volunteers at the same rate as Caucasians (Musick, Wilson & Bynum, 2000). Present research study findings confirm that parents who did not have availability of time, mostly parents from low-socio economic, minority or immigrant statuses, were less involved in parent volunteering. For some parents from low-socio economic status, parent volunteering was regarded as a sacrifice. Sometimes, these parents helped in lunchrooms, cleaned up after potlucks, and

participated in school fundraisers sharing volunteer responsibilities with other parents who could afford to volunteer at school more due to their higher economic status (Lamont & Laureau, 1998). Parent volunteering for the middle and upper middle class parents was regarded as a source of pleasure and moral satisfaction (Wuthnow, 1998). Some of the parents found it to be a family duty. Some parents volunteered because of their gratitude to the school, to the teachers' caring teaching of the students. The most active and serving parent volunteers at the charter school were stay-at-home mothers, or former stay-at-home mothers. However, the respondents noted several cases of fathers volunteering at school despite the traditional provider role of fathers in American society. The participants attributed these changes in gender roles when men become as involved at school as women to recent changes in the economy.

Parents from other cultural backgrounds, especially, those who immigrated to the United States encountered language and cultural barriers that led to a lack of confidence, sense of discomfort and incompetence with respect to volunteering in the school or outside of it. For example, for parents who come from India and Russia, volunteering was a challenge because the parents have not experienced it in their former cultural and social backgrounds.

According to the present research findings, volunteering brings a sense of comfort for those parents who have a child with mild special needs as their child feels more confident when parents volunteer at school. In the study of Lange and Lehr (2000), based on the findings of the University of Minnesota's Enrollment Options Project, parents who had children with disabilities reported that their children improved their motivation to learn and obtained greater confidence in their abilities. The present research study

findings corroborate the beneficial effect on children's social and learning skills due to parent involvement in class, at school, and outside the school. In addition, the research findings underscore a new dimension of the intrinsic meaning of parent volunteering: it is a symbol of love, care, and connectedness to one's own children, children's friends, teachers, other parents, and the whole school community.

In accordance with teachers' and parents' perceptions, parent volunteering is valuable because it creates a sense of community. It is very important for parents, teachers, and school administration to generate a sense of community at school. Most respondents were of the opinion that students learn from their parents, teachers and community members, from anybody they come in contact with. Therefore, parent volunteering was perceived as one gear in the machine that makes the educational system work, while the students, parents, teachers and staff were perceived as the other parts of the machine. In my view, "the educational machine's" work is efficient if only it is fueled with a strong "infusion" of partnership between students, parents, school and community. Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence, with its central focus on the student and the student's development and success at school, could be a beacon for those schools that strive to achieve success in educating students counting on strong parent involvement at school.

However, as the present research findings show, there are some hardships on the way to successful parent volunteering. For example, although the school under research provided a lot of opportunities for parents to volunteer, and parents had a leading role in the parent-teacher organization at school, four out of five parents were not satisfied with some aspect of the PTO's work. The organization is really useful and valuable for the

school because it helps to provide a hot lunch program at school where the focus on students' nutrition and well-being is a *sine qua non* of good growth, learning and physical development of the students. However, the manner of engaging parents is not effective since the same parents who are permanent activists in the organization accept the "hard to reach" status quo of other parents. The findings confirmed that networking, word of mouth or electronic communication could bring more people to volunteering than the PTO meeting attendance. However, there is still a dilemma: How could the PTO reach out to minority or low socio-economic status parents if they lack computer knowledge or access to computers? How could parents, who immigrated to the United States from other countries, understand the instructions to sign up for volunteering if they are typed in a language other than their first language? Are these parents culturally aware of the importance of parent volunteering in the US public school context? New vehicles of communication on behalf of the PTO might change the situation with the involvement of all parents at school. It is not necessary for all parents to volunteer, but those parents whose voices have not been heard at school need to be vocalized. This thought echoes with Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence, which is based on the equity of all partners in the home-school-community model.

I found it interesting that parents who shared one of the teacher's views on cultural volunteerism did not view the language barrier as an obstacle to volunteering for minority or immigrant parents. They believed that only personal initiative on the part of these parents is required to start volunteering at school. Otherwise, in their view, parents who do not volunteer simply do not care about their children's education. In my view, this standpoint is incorrect because there is a discrepancy between an initiative to

volunteer and having financial opportunities or necessary capabilities (e.g., good communication skills in spoken English) to do so. Although the majority of the parents regarded volunteering at school as rewarding for them, some middle class parents suggested providing some kind of remuneration for those parents who volunteered at least some hours would be a good motivation for parents to volunteer, to be involved, and to feel they are valued at school.

The findings demonstrate that some teachers, though they found parent volunteering important to build a sense of community at their school, did not want parent volunteers in their classrooms. Teachers explained it by previously experienced tension with parents when “observing”, “not supportive” and even indoctrinating vulnerable students parents volunteered in their classes. Also, teachers held the view that parent volunteering is useless in higher grades, and could be embarrassing for younger students in lower grades if volunteering is done sporadically by different parents. Some teachers simply did not know what to do with the parents who wanted to volunteer.

However, the present research findings show that in general, teachers appreciate some types of parent volunteering and find them helpful at school. In teachers’ view, parent volunteering was considered helpful when it was done on the teacher’s request, when it was needed and time-framed. The teacher decides personally how much volunteering is needed, and sets up the viable timeframe for the parent volunteering activity. According to the research findings, teachers appreciate paperwork aspects, like cutting and copying learning materials. They need help with classroom projects or parties, and with Thursday Folders. Teachers value parents’ help in grading papers, or doing Reading or Math groups in class. Teachers need help with school field trips. In

addition, teachers do not refuse their leading role at school, and they are willing to have supportive parents who are not questioning their teaching rather than parents who impose their own agendas in class while volunteering. Teachers were not sure if they could trust parents to teach in class without special training for parents. Some teachers thought that teachers also need special training or monitoring by the school administration regarding how to conduct parent volunteering effectively. However, not all of the teachers found that training for teachers is useful in their particular school with already established good parent relationships. Some teachers considered training as useless for them as they believed they were confident in their teaching expertise, and did not need any type of training on parent volunteering in their classrooms. Teacher training in their view might be beneficial, but not for them.

According to all participants' perceptions, parent volunteering is a process of communication between the teachers, parents, students, and school administration. Relying on the theoretical literature (Dowling & Osborne, 1994), those parents who had bad experiences when they were at school, or had bad experiences communicating with their child's school in the past might approach the school with a defensive or angry attitude. Such an attitude can impede communication and does not help create trustful relations and partnership between teachers and parents. In my view, teachers and parents have to be trained to become good partners to build family-school-community partnership. With an increasing ethnic diversity at the charter school under the research, the needs of different students will change, and the school administration and teachers need to be on the cutting edge to promote better learning and social outcomes of the students who belong to different cultures. Therefore, I think teachers have to be trained

some general and specific techniques to invite *all* parents in their children's education. Teachers must not be afraid of parents, or be frustrated when parents bring in their own ideas in class. Parents need to be trained to realize the importance of their role in education of their children. Concomitantly, parents have to be introduced by the school personnel to multicultural education (Banks & Banks, 1995). In doing that, school will foster parents' awareness of other cultures. By promoting multicultural education and trainings for parents, school administration could eliminate parents' religious, cultural or social agendas while parents volunteer in classroom, at school or outside the school.

The majority of teachers and parents thought that parent involvement is most rigorous in lower grades. Prior research studies suggested that the decline in parental participation for secondary students, in part, reflects weaker family involvement practices at the secondary school level (Epstein, 1998). According to Dornbusch and Ritter (1988), the majority of high school teachers reported contacting almost none or few parents. In my study, some teachers assumed they didn't need parents in class when students are old enough to be responsible and accountable for their learning and discipline. Parents shared the same views, ascribing to their children's unwillingness to see parents at school in higher grades. However, according to Flaxman and Inger (1991), parent involvement at all grade levels is important. "The benefits of parent involvement are not confined to early childhood or the elementary grades. There are strong positive effects from involving parents continuously through high school" (p. 5). I suggest, it would be well-received by parents if the school organizes some educating programs or workshops for those parents whose children are in higher grades to enhance parents' involvement in their children's education, especially, in the particular charter school which is a college

preparatory high school. Studies and field tests indicated that teachers' and families' negative attitudes about each other become more positive after partnership practices are implemented (Epstein 1986).

To conclude, parent volunteering in the charter school is important and beneficial for successfully running the school. According to Epstein (1995), students are the key to successful school and family partnerships. Therefore, partnership activities have to be designed to engage, guide and motivate students to gain their own achievements. When children feel cared for and encouraged to work hard, they are more likely to do their best academically. Drawing on the research findings, it would be a difficult task to implement such partnership activities without care and support of parents which is translated into parent volunteering as a means of building a sense of community, as well as rapport between students, parents, teachers and the community.

Implication for School Policies and Practices

From research study findings and through the lens of Epstein's model, parent volunteering should be focused on the partnership of families, school and local communities. Since the school district is still in search of a new school location, it is irrelevant at present to address immediate partnership strategies for the families, school and local community. Therefore, the implications for strategies and policies will be targeted at the development of partnerships between parents, students, and school administration. By partnership, I mean trustful relationships between parents, students, teachers and school administration that involve collaboration focusing on partners' needs

and expectations, and ensuring that differing needs are recognized and addressed (Billett et al, 2007).

In the charter school setting, teachers, administrators, parents, and school community members should work together to design and implement involvement activities linked to school improvement goals with a major focus on every student, the student's development and success at school. To this end:

- The school administration is recommended to promote parent volunteering at school aimed to develop partnership between the students, parents, teachers and school community. Volunteers should be widely recruited so that *all* families, especially those families from low socio-economic, minority and immigrant statuses know that their time and talents are welcome.
- The school administration and the school activities coordinator in partnership with all teachers and classroom parent representatives are advised to create school and classroom volunteer programs for the school year period to assist teachers, administrators, students, and the parents, especially those who are from minority and low-income households to help run the education process successfully. The programs should cover different aspects of parents' support at school, like networking, parent interest class, parent supporting group, parent-child program, parent's multicultural diversity appreciation, serving in the PTO, peer counseling.
- The school staff should organize parent volunteer work to match time and talents with school, teacher and students needs. To this end, every teacher is recommended to create his or her classroom telephone tree, or other structures (e.g., personal blog) to provide *all* families with needed information.

- Teachers should arrange flexible schedules for volunteers, assemblies, and events to enable parents who work to participate.
- The school administration and the school activities coordinator are recommended to recognize parent volunteers' efforts, so that participants will be productive and feel that their volunteering is appreciated by school staff and school administration.
- When the school will be relocated into a new building, the school administration has to provide a special room for parents. Since the student population is continuously growing, parent volunteers would be in great demand. Parents need a special welcoming room or family center for volunteer work, meetings, and resources for families that could be a place of their own. Teachers and school administrators could use the welcoming room or family center as a resource room, too.
- The school administration should provide an annual postcard survey to identify all available talents, times, and locations of volunteers.
- The school administration and school staff should provide training in managing parent volunteering for parents and for teachers, especially to young teachers, or those teachers who do not know how to facilitate parent volunteering in their classes.
- To avoid the indoctrination of vulnerable students with parents' own religious or cultural agendas when volunteering, the school administration is advised to provide special training or workshops on multicultural education for parents. Explaining to parents the issues of multicultural diversity will promote parents' awareness of ethnic diversity at school and will reinforce rapport, trust and respect towards all students and teachers at school. If parents are trained in this manner, they could be involved in teaching children and be mentors for children at school.

- Teachers that teach higher grades at school need to organize a parent-teacher liaison system for sustainable, helpful and effective parent volunteering in class, at school, and outside the school.
- Special training or workshops, or senior teacher mentoring should to be administered for young teachers, or for those teachers who have not experienced successful parent volunteering in their classes. Otherwise, these teachers might miss the value of parent volunteering that is aimed to help and support the teacher, to ease the teacher's life at school, to bring diversity into teaching, to help with copying and grading, to help with teaching materials, to help manage and monitor a discipline in class, or on field trips.
- Students in higher grades should be involved in publicizing the value of parent volunteering at school by writing articles on parent volunteering in the school newspaper, advertising parent help through the school radio communication system, or videotaping parent volunteering during big social events at school. Students could be volunteers themselves during the PTO meetings, for example, by babysitting younger students while parents are at meetings. The school activities' coordinator could organize a Student Volunteering Action team that would reinforce the partnership between parents, students and teachers.
- It would be beneficial if translators are present at school meetings, the PTO meetings, and teacher-parent conferences throughout the school year. For example, high school students could act as translators during school events when needed.
- To build stronger bridges between home, school and community the school staff is advised to get help from the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University (Sanders & Epstein, 2000).

- The school administration, relying on the importance of parent volunteering for effective school running, might require some hours of obligatory parent volunteering at school at the student enrollment stage. Parents could sign a contract, or an agreement to volunteer an exact amount of time during the school year. In this way, parents will know their responsibilities and their contribution to the school.
- To build partnership between families, schools and community, the school needs to find links to local businesses, to create proper conditions for providing parent volunteering, to demonstrate that parent volunteering is a *sine qua non* of positive school climate, improved student discipline, enhanced learning and social skills outcomes of students, and better school community.

Future Research Findings

The results of this study could contribute to the current research studies and literature on how schools employ parent volunteering, what effect parent volunteering has on children's social skills development, students' learning outcomes and discipline, and why parent volunteering is important and to what extent and what type of parent volunteering is best needed for teachers in their work. Future research is recommended to explain the influence of parent volunteering on students' learning outcomes through the lens of students' perceptions. The new research should focus on students' perceptions of parent volunteering as a type of parent involvement in their education. How do students perceive their parents' help at school? Why do children want or do not want to see their parents volunteering in class? What effects, if any, does parent volunteering have on students' learning skills, on students' efficacy during tests at school, on their desire to

volunteer in their future, on their level of self-confidence, on their physical, social and cultural development? How does parent volunteering promote partnership within the family? How is parent volunteering interconnected with other types of parent involvement according to Epstein's typology of parent involvement? How could correlation between different types of parent involvement make parent volunteering more effective?

The issue of parent volunteering in higher grades should be investigated to explain the reasons why students do not appreciate their parents' involvement in high school. If so, why do students believe they do not need their parents at school? What is the role of teachers in student-parent interaction at school? Why do parents have doubts about volunteering in higher grades? What are the factors that hinder parent volunteering in high school? How do school administration and teachers promote parents' involvement in higher grades? What effect do school administration and school staff have on parent volunteering at school? The research findings could clarify the extent and type of parent volunteering the students in lower and higher grades need and appreciate best in their education and social attainments.

Since partnership implies that parents, teachers, and school administration are partners in assisting their children's academic progress, future research findings should explain ways to develop effective teacher-parent-school administration collaboration in parent volunteering. The next research inquiry is recommended to be focused on the development, implementation and effective use of training programs or workshops that school administrations could provide for parents and teachers to avoid plausible tension when parents volunteer at school or outside the school, and to promote trust between

teachers and parents. Training programs could cover issues of multicultural diversity, parents' possible teaching or mentorship in class, parents' leadership at school, trust building practices and policies. Further study is needed to determine the effects of these training programs on the teacher-parent partnership, development of parents' leadership skills, and students' learning outcomes when parents become more knowledgeable in multicultural education and could bring in "new ideas to the table" when they volunteer.

Additional research is needed to compare the research data collected from the larger public schools and different charter schools and private schools. The question emerges whether the type of school (public, private, urban or rural charter schools or private school) matters in the context of parent volunteering. How does parent-school-community partnership vary in different types of schools? Why is parent volunteering important in different school settings and how is it organized and implemented for the students' success at different types of schools?

The findings of the proposed future research could help school administrations, teachers, parents, and community members to identify the best policies and practices to encourage parent volunteering for the students' success in learning and social outcomes, community building, and establishment of trust, equity and partnership of school, home and community.

Limitations of My Study

The study was limited to participants in an affluent suburban area charter school in a metropolitan city. The study was limited in design through the use of self reporting

data during interviews aimed at teachers' and parents' perceptions of parent volunteering at a single charter school. The study lacks the students' perceptions on the value and impact of parent volunteering in their daily school lives and in the development of learning and social skills.

For the purpose of verifying or triangulating statements collected, field observations of parent volunteering would have been useful. In my case, observations of parent volunteering would be an invaluable aid to understand the actual meaning of volunteering during field trips or in class volunteering (Yin, 2009). However, the researcher could not spend a substantial amount of time in the school setting. Therefore, due to the narrow scope and the time limitations of the research study, the researcher did not use methods of data triangulation. Conversely, the researcher used multiple forms of data collection, and when needed received feedback from the participants using the strategy of member checking to validate the accuracy of the findings (Key, 1997). Another limitation of the study was the external validity of the study, as it focused only on six different teachers and five different parents in a charter school that serves 568 students in grades K - 12 from a variety of locations around the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area. It is difficult to generalize the data from the findings, although Merriam (Merriam, 1997) pointed out that qualitative research is not intended to generalize, but simply interpret events.

While limited, the data collected could be used to compare parent volunteering in other urban and suburban charter schools that are providing parent volunteering for successful functioning of the school to attain progress in students' social and learning

skills. The study could be useful for school administrators, teachers and parents who are interested in parent involvement at school.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol with the Parents of Charter School

1. How many children are there in your household?
2. How long has your child attended charter school?
3. How often do you volunteer at school and in your child/children's class or classes?
4. Why do you think volunteering is important for your school?
5. In your view, what are the factors that might influence parent's decision to volunteer at school?
6. In what way, if any is volunteering helpful for your child/children?
7. In your view, how does parent volunteering affect the child?
8. From your view, what types of volunteering are most popular at your school?
9. As a parent, what is your preferred type of volunteering? Why do you favor this type of volunteering?
10. What is the role of parents in the PTO meetings in your school? How effective are these meetings to engage parents in volunteering?
11. In your view, are there any obstacles that might prevent parents from volunteering at school? In terms of obstacles, what are they?
12. In your view, how could parent volunteering promote rapport between students, teachers, and school administration? Could you give me an example from your volunteering experience, please?
13. What would you suggest to make volunteering of parents more effective in charter school? How could parent volunteering be more integrated into classroom teaching?

Dear Mrs/Ms/Mr. _____

Thank you for your time to answer my interview questions. I highly appreciate your reflections on volunteering as parent involvement in your charter school.

Appendix B

Interview Protocol with the Teachers of Charter School

1. How long have you been working at this school?
2. How many students do you have in class?
3. What is the demographic composition of your class (i.e., Are there students from various socio-economic and ethnic statuses?)
4. What does parent volunteering in your school mean to you?
5. In your view, why is it important for your school?
6. How does parent volunteering affect students in your class? In what way, if any is volunteering helpful for your students?
7. In your view, are there any advantages from parent volunteering in facilitating your teaching activities and/ or class management? Give me some examples, please.
8. What are the factors that spur parent's decision to volunteer at school?
9. Which factor is the most critical for encouraging parents to be involved in volunteering in your class?
10. Are there any differences among parents who are involved in volunteering? Which ones seem to be involved more? Why do you think this is so?
11. From your view, what types of volunteering are most popular at your school/ in your class?
12. What do volunteers do for you in your classroom?
13. Does volunteering distract from your teaching in some situation? Have you ever experienced tensions with parent volunteering? If so, in what cases and why?
14. How often, does the PTO meet to discuss current problems at your school? What is the role of parents in these meetings? How effective are these meetings in engaging parents in volunteering?
15. Are there obstacles preventing minority students' parents volunteering? What might these obstacles be?
16. Do you think school personnel have to be trained to facilitate parent volunteering at school? If yes, how could it be maintained for the teachers' benefits?

Dear Mrs/Ms/Mr. _____

Thank you for your time to answer my interview questions. I highly appreciate your reflections on volunteering as parent involvement in your charter school.

Appendix C

IRB approval

TO : deja0003@umn.edu, moroz014@umn.edu,

The IRB: Human Subjects Committee determined that the referenced study is exempt from review under federal guidelines 45 CFR Part 46.101(b) category #2 SURVEYS/INTERVIEWS; STANDARDIZED EDUCATIONAL TESTS; OBSERVATION OF PUBLIC BEHAVIOR.

Study Number: 1101E94838

Principal Investigator: Larysa Moroz

Title(s):

Teachers' and parents' perceptions of parent volunteering in the context of charter school in the US public school setting

This e-mail confirmation is your official University of Minnesota RSPP notification of exemption from full committee review. You will not receive a hard copy or letter.

This secure electronic notification between password protected authentications has been deemed by the University of Minnesota to constitute a legal signature.

The study number above is assigned to your research. That number and the title of your study must be used in all communication with the IRB office.

Research that involves observation can be approved under this category without obtaining consent.

SURVEY OR INTERVIEW RESEARCH APPROVED AS EXEMPT UNDER THIS CATEGORY IS LIMITED TO ADULT SUBJECTS.

This exemption is valid for five years from the date of this correspondence and will be filed inactive at that time. You will receive a notification prior to inactivation. If this research will extend beyond five years, you must submit a new application to the IRB before the study's expiration date.

Upon receipt of this email, you may begin your research. If you have questions, please call the IRB office at (612) 626-5654.

You may go to the View Completed section of eResearch Central at <http://eresearch.umn.edu/> to view further details on your study.

The IRB wishes you success with this research.

We have created a short survey that will only take a couple of minutes to complete. The questions are basic but will give us guidance on what areas are showing improvement and what areas we need to focus on:

<https://umsurvey.umn.edu/index.php?sid=36122&lang=um>