Reimagining Parent-Teacher Relationships Through Human Centered Design

Andrea Lynn Lance

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REIMAGINING PARENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN

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DEDICATION

This dissertation would not have been possible without my faith and my family. First, I give praise to my Lord and Savior for the talents and abilities he has given me and for giving me the fortitude to embark on this endeavor. Thank you to my parents, Shirley, and Amos, and my son Kyran, for their endless prayers, encouragement, and emotional support. I appreciate my friends and family, who have provided a helping hand and been my cheerleaders along the way.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The University of South Carolina provided me with an opportunity to engage in advanced studies to learn about social justice in education. The information I learned in this program has made me a better educator, scholar, and advocate for all children. I appreciate Dr. Yasha Becton, who has been dedicated to seeing me through this process to the end. I appreciate your guidance, patience, and expertise, which allowed me to fulfill my dream of completing my doctorate degree.
ABSTRACT

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent learning disruptions have had an impact on standardized test scores, with schools in low-income communities falling further behind. Since parental engagement has been identified as a high-impact strategy to improve the academic success of students, school communities should explore ways to increase engagement and develop new strategies to problem solve academic challenges.

In this mixed methods study, 10 teachers and 10 parents, with students in schools classified as Title I, learned asset-based approaches to problem-solving and used design thinking processes to address school-based problems. Human-centered design is one approach to problem-solving. This design places people at the heart of issues by engaging participants in problem-solving utilizing empathy-inducing activities first before attempting to develop a solution. Using Epstein’s Model for Parental Involvement (Epstein, 2013) as a baseline, parents and teachers examined their core beliefs on the parent-teacher relationship and learned how to use human-centered design tools such as empathy and asset mapping to improve parent-teacher relationships. Interviews, surveys, and reflection prompts were used to evaluate the effectiveness of design thinking tools in changing the perceptions of parents and teachers. The findings showed that empathy and asset-based approaches used during problem-solving were positively accepted by parents and teachers, and the intervention improved the perceptions of groups on common parent-school conflicts.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABCD .................................................................................................................. Asset-Based Community Development
CRT ...................................................................................................................... Critical Race Theory
ESSA ..................................................................................................................... Every Student Succeeds Act
HCD .................................................................................................................... Human-Centered Design
NCLB ................................................................................................................... No Child Left Behind
PD ......................................................................................................................... Professional Development
PTA ........................................................................................................................ Parent Teacher Association
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“That moment during a parent-teacher conference when...you discover apples don’t fall too far from the tree.”

"How teachers look when trying to call a student's parents but...none of the numbers are working, including mama, daddy, big mama, stepdaddy 2014, stepdaddy 2015, auntie, children services, and 911!"

The examples above are just a few of the many educational-themed memes on social media teachers share about parents. Memes can comically convey a message that can range from the lighthearted, such as summer breaks being too short or having too many papers to grade, to more serious, detrimental microaggressions. Microaggressions are routine slights, snubs, and insults that degrade minorities because of their group membership (Sue, 2010). Educational memes on parental engagement often depict parents as aggressive, lazy, uncaring, and stupid. Hardly any images reflect parents as who they truly are, the most influential people in our elementary students' lives. Parents are our students' first teachers, from providing instructions on chores, modeling how to tie shoes, or practicing pronunciation (Kelley, 2020).

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the challenges faced by school communities to connect, communicate, and strengthen relationships with families
While research about the effects of the pandemic are still emerging, school closures created more barriers to human connection and further strained the parent-teacher relationship. (Treviño et al., 2021). Worldwide school closures during the pandemic impacted 94% of the world's student population (United Nations, 2020), and in response, 90% of schools implemented some form of remote learning (UNICEF, 2021). During remote learning, parents were called on to be co-teachers, assisting with lessons at home, thereby reinforcing the need for more vital school and home communication.

In my role as a South Carolina educational consultant, it has been found that school communities are eager to find resources that teachers and parents can use at school or home to maximize instructional time and address learning loss. The term learning loss is commonly used to describe the declines in student knowledge and skills (Pier et al., 2021). Based on data from the South Carolina Educational Oversight Committee (2022), in which learning loss is now also referred to as the "Covid Slide," schools statewide experienced a dramatic drop in mathematics proficiency among both elementary students and students who are often identified as vulnerable, such as those living in high-poverty households or those without reliable internet access. The South Carolina Education Oversight Committee Annual Report (2022) further reflected that only four in 10 students in grades three through eight in the state met standards in Math and ELA in 2021, and nearly one-third of students scored at the "Does Not Meet Level," which is approximately two years below average. As school communities strive to recover from the learning losses of COVID-19, parental engagement may be a critical component to improve academic outcomes.
Family engagement in COVID-19 relief spending has been outlined as a priority for the Biden-Harris administration, with guidelines suggesting that schools and families reach new levels of communication and transparency to ensure students receive the support needed (Stanford, 2022). According to recent data, schools and districts have listed family engagement and communications as a priority for spending within their COVID-19 plans (FutureEd, 2022). For example, some education policy experts have suggested that districts consider an opt-out policy in schools where parent engagement is low, making parental involvement mandatory (Perera et al., 2022). However, before making family engagement mandatory, school leaders and educators may need to examine parent participation through new and innovative strategies.

**Problem of Practice**

The problem of practice guiding this research embodies the need for more solid parent-teacher relationships within low-income elementary schools based upon factors related to bias and deficit-thinking. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, school communities will need to expand their reach to address learning loss and improve the outcomes for students (Stanford, 2022). However, classism, racism, and deficit-thinking must be explicitly addressed as we explore strategies to support the most vulnerable students (Valencia & Solórzano, 1997). Valencia (2010) argued, "The deficit-thinking model, at its core, is an endogenous theory — positing that the student who fails in school does so because of his/her internal deficits or deficiencies" (p. 6). This type of narrative, which is highlighted in *Critical Race Theory* (CRT), creates a system of power that reinforces racism and classism to uphold the status quo (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Wilson & Massey, 2020). Although laws have been enacted, such as No Child Left Behind, which mandated that low-income schools have parent policies to embrace family involvement
and professional development resources to improve instruction, race and class biases still impact parent-teacher relationships (Hirschman & Bosk, 2019).

Tomas A. Arciniega (1977) posited,

Public education has successfully shifted the blame for the failure of schools to meet the needs of minority students onto the shoulders of the clients they purport to serve. They have pulled off the perfect crime, for they can never be held accountable since the reason for failure in school is said to be the fault of poor homes, cultural handicaps, linguistic deficiencies, and deprived neighborhoods. The fact that schools are geared primarily to serve monolingual, White, middle-class, and Anglo clients is never questioned (p. 123).

A historical perspective has also been provided on the evolving relationship in communities based on factors such as race and the widening gap between middle-class and poor communities (Pew Research Center, 2015; Putnam, 2001, 2005).

**Research Questions**

This research study explored the following two research questions:

RQ1: How does the Designed for Success program, which incorporates human-centered design, impact the tools and strategies that teachers and parents use to foster increased parental engagement in Title 1 elementary schools?

RQ2: How does the Designed for Success program, which incorporates human-centered design, impact teachers' perceptions of parental engagement at Title 1 elementary schools?

**Theoretical Frameworks**

This study utilizes critical race theory as its theoretical framework while asset-based community development undergirds it as a conceptual framework. These
frameworks provide additional context to the problem and are utilized as lenses to analyze and interpret the data gathered. While an overview is provided here, a more in-depth examination of these theories is provided in Chapter 2.

Research has established that partnership among school, family, and community plays an essential role in the educational development of students (Epstein, 1991, 1996; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jones & Palikara, 2023; Roberts, 2021; Yang & Chen, 2023). Engaging in two-way communication between home and school has led to improved grades and standardized test scores (Byungmo et al., 2021; Epstein et al., 1997; Gartmeier et al., 2017; Leenders et al., 2019; Westat et al., 2001), more consistent school attendance (Epstein et al., 1997; Smythe-Leistico & Page, 2018), increased expectations of college enrollment (Lessard & Juvonen, 2022), and more general positive attitudes about school (Walsh et al., 2018). As a result, through asset-based approaches, inclusive practices have been explored in educational settings to better understand the values and cultures of students and their families.

Asset-based pedagogies such as funds of knowledge, culturally relevant pedagogy, and culturally responsive teaching (Ladson-Billings, 2008; Moll & Gonzalez, 2005) are used by educators as effective practices and strategies to engage students in learning. With the asset-based approach, every student, and the community in which they live are viewed as strong, valuable, and having potential. An educator using the asset-based framework in the classroom environment would seek to unlock a student's potential by focusing on their talents. This form of strengths-based teaching contrasts with the more commonly used deficit-based style of teaching, which highlights students' inadequacies as the center of the teacher-student relationship.
The Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach is a framework used to provide a strengths-oriented perspective to build the community relationships needed to improve the lives of children (Agdal & Meidell, 2019; Butterfield et al., 2016;). This framework shifts stakeholders' perspectives from highlighting deficits to highlighting the strengths and assets needed to advance social change (Nel, 2018). ABCD provides strategies for groups to assess local strengths and determine how those assets can advance the well-being of families, neighborhoods, and institutions (Harrison et al., 2019; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1996). Participants in ABCD can collaborate and develop resources to bring about positive change to support children in need (Ebersohn & Eloff, 2006; Agdal & Meidell, 2019). McKnight and Block (2012) also shared that the ABCD approach, when done well, can create a storehouse of strengths, capacities, capabilities, and know-how. The components of the ABCD framework, when used within a school community, may help to improve the way school staff perceive the communities they serve, and families may be empowered to make changes for their students in and outside of school. Also, the ABCD framework may set the stage for stakeholders to develop new narratives and stories about the communities in which they live.

The tenets of critical race theory were explored to examine further how perceptions can be shaped and changed through storytelling. CRT is based on the works of Derrick Bell and Richard Delgado (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) and is grounded in the study of public policy and laws that shape society based on hidden race and class interests. The tenets of CRT include ordinariness, interest convergence, social construction, differential racialization, and storytelling (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Lynn & Dixson, 2021). CRT's first tenet, ordinariness, is grounded in the notion that racism in society is an everyday experience for people and that racism is normal, not unusual, and
deeply embedded in legal, political, economic, and social structures and institutions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT scholars draw meaning from experiential knowledge and storytelling of racialized people at the bottom of the racial order (Bell, 1987; Wilson & Massey, 2020). Counter-storytelling is used as a lens in CRT to analyze how marginalized groups may challenge power structures and amplify the voices of disadvantaged students and their families (Lindemann, 2020).

According to Solórzano and Yosso (2002), counter-stories challenge the status quo in educational research and can be used "as theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical tools to challenge racism, sexism, and classism and work toward social justice" (p. 1). Researchers who engage in participatory research with marginalized populations strive to address the power dynamics that may affect their research with diverse groups by using a critical race praxis (Hauber-Özer et al., 2021). Counter-stories within low-income school communities that allow marginalized groups to be center stage in 'naming one's reality' and using one's 'voice' (Ladson-Billings, 1998) can be transformative. Therefore, the counter-stories offered in this study provide an alternative way of understanding the experience of parents with students in low-income school communities.

**Purpose of Study**

This study aimed to develop a professional learning program for educators that would set the expectation of positive parent-teacher relationships as an academic success criterion. Further, the study investigated whether educators and parents who participated in the Designed for Success program were able to improve their perceptions of the parent-teacher relationship and develop new strategies that could lead to improved academic
success. This study took place with educators who serve in Title I schools in South Carolina and with parents and caregivers with students in low-income Title I schools.

Title I, Part A is a federally funded program under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to improve teaching and learning in high-poverty schools (Every Student Succeeds Act. [ESSA], 2015). Title I legislation aims to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education (ESSA, 2015). The ESSA legislation (2015) contains requirements for states, districts, and Title I schools to enhance parent and family engagement efforts. Per Section 1116(a) of the Every Student Succeeds Act, Local Education Agencies (LEAs) must conduct outreach to all parents and family members and implement programs, activities, and procedures with meaningful consultation with parents and family members of participating children. To support and ensure compliance with the law, LEAs must reserve at least one percent of Title I allocation to assist schools with carrying out parent and family engagement efforts (ESSA, 2015). Based on these requirements, Title I schools must engage in parent outreach activities through engagement teams which are comprised of teachers and parents (ESSA, 2015).

Dynarski and Kainz (2015) examined Title I school professional development practices and shared that most professional training is focused on strategies to improve instruction in math and reading, which require a lengthy amount of time to implement. The authors also shared that despite the massive expenditures on professional development, even more than any other professional field, "there was evidence that teachers mostly disliked professional development activities and did not feel the activities were tailored to their needs." (Dynarski & Kainz, 2015, p. 3). These findings highlighted how the significant financial investments being made to improve the lives of students
living in poverty are deemed ineffective by teachers, and thus, not making an impact. As a result, new training approaches were used in the Designed for Success program that were customized to the needs of educators in low-income communities.

This research study incorporated an alternative approach to problem-solving educational challenges by embedding Human-Centered Design (HCD) principles within professional development. HCD is a cyclical process that requires designers/teachers to empathize with their users by engaging in observation interviews, brainstorming new ideas with users, and prototyping and testing innovative solutions (IDEO.org, 2015). The HCD model is primarily used in business settings as an approach for "designing products, systems, and services which are physically, perceptually, cognitively, and emotionally intuitive" (Giacomin, 2014, p. 1). However, HCD, or design thinking, has been used in educational spaces to address complex problems and provide voices to often overlooked stakeholders, such as marginalized groups (Raz, 2018). Through the Designed for Success program, teachers were able to learn design tools and strategies to address school-based problems and improve relationships with parents.

**Figure 1.1**

*Human-Centered Design. (Institute of Design at Stanford)*

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*Note.* From *Design thinking*, by Institute of Design at Stanford. Creative Commons Attribution – 4.0 International. ([https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)). Copyright 2022 by Stanford Institute of Design.
Overview of Methodology

This study utilized action research, which allows researchers to study their environment to gather information about how their school operates (Mills, 2007). This inquiry approach used by educators allows teachers to advance their practice and improve their students' learning (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Overall, action research aims to study environments to gain context on problems and improve practice (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

A mixed methods approach was used in this study to collect data using qualitative and quantitative research tools. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that researchers conduct qualitative research to explore complex phenomena within their context. By using qualitative research, the researcher can gather a personal perspective about the participant. The unrestricted nature of a qualitative approach further allows the researcher to gather firsthand accounts of situations and interactions that can provide unique insights (Mat et al., 2020; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This method allowed the researcher to gather data and explore the quality of school communication through the lens of race and class by allowing individuals or groups to share their thoughts and experiences. The "direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions and knowledge" obtained through interviews helped the researcher gather data on teacher and parent perceptions and biases (Patton, 2015, p. 14).

Quantitative data through pre- and post-surveys influenced the structure of the workshop activities during the six-week study. Post-survey responses were used to note the changes in parent and teacher perceptions and to identify the HCD tools deemed most effective. The survey used a Likert scale for teachers and parents to rate the effectiveness of HCD tools and strategies. Both teachers and parents were interviewed before and after
the study to determine if thoughts, attitudes, and perceptions had changed throughout the program.

Quantitative data was also used in this study to better understand the effectiveness of the professional learning program using human-centered design. "Quantitative methods are generally used to construct theory or test a theory" (Mat et al., 2019, p. 11). In this study, professional learning was facilitated to test whether the Designed for Success program effectively changed teacher and parent perceptions. The quantitative instruments used were researcher-constructed surveys to gather the data needed to explain trends and relationships between professional learning using human-centered design and the improved perceptions between parents and teachers. Also, workshop observation checklists were used to analyze parent and teacher talk time during workshops to determine if effective listening and power-sharing occurred, which is needed for effective collaboration.

The study benefited educators by including different ways for teachers and parents to engage in professional learning and collaborative research. The professional learning opportunity allowed teachers to engage in meaningful work with parents during a face-to-face workshop. In addition, the study gathered data using various sources, including cloud-based video recording tools, that allowed the researcher and participants to closely examine the meaning behind words and check for personal biases as narratives were developed.

**Positionality**

I am a Black female who grew up in a low-income community in New York City. Although the neighborhood I lived in was diverse, the staff in my public school was not,
with a primarily all-White staff teaching mainly Black and Latino children. My experience in K-12 public schools was in specialized programs with experienced teachers who held high expectations and facilitated rigorous learning assignments. Specifically, during my critical years of development in middle school, I was taught by the same team of teachers who knew the names of my parents and siblings, understood me as a student, and could explain to others what I wanted to be when I grew up. My belief that parents and teachers from different backgrounds can come together as partners in an urban, low-income community was shaped by this middle school experience.

As an adult, I understand that my school experience was atypical, and I was privileged to have high-quality, experienced teachers throughout public school. My academic learning needs were adequately met because I was a minority student in a specialized program in a well-funded school system in a metropolitan city. Most of my teachers were White, and they did not strive to nurture and shape my identity as a Black student through their lessons. Still, I benefited from high-quality instruction and smaller class sizes that supported above-average relationship-building. It is important that I acknowledge that my background shaped my beliefs on how positive parent-teacher relationships can be maintained in a low-income public school. However, I cannot accept these beliefs as universal truths (Takacs, 2002). Therefore, as I designed the indicators of success for increasing positive parent-teacher interactions in my study, I considered that the time and resources available to teachers to cultivate strong parent relationships at most traditional urban or rural schools in South Carolina may differ from those that teach in New York City.

Also, I examined my position as a parent of a Black male who has struggled to connect with teachers about my son's progress in school. As I inquire about grades, I have
repeatedly encountered classroom teachers who do not return emails until an administrator is included or the teacher learns that I am an educator. In addition, I have experienced challenges working with parents, mainly as a classroom teacher, in which caregivers held an underlying belief that there should be no shared responsibility between teachers and parents, which made relationship-building difficult. "Within positionality theory, it is acknowledged that people have multiple overlapping identities" (Kezar, 2002, p. 96), and my identity as a parent and educator makes this study complex. I can see the parent-teacher relationship from the lens of a parent and educator and deeply understand the challenges and frustrations faced in both roles. I believe this dual perspective enhanced the study, but since I have not been a classroom teacher for over five years, I understand that I may have more biases as a parent.

**Significance of the Study**

The National Education Association indicates that no matter their income or background, students with involved parents are more likely to have higher grades and test scores, attend school regularly, have better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school (National Education Association, 2022). Such data demonstrates the importance of parent engagement for student success, regardless of the school's socio-economic status. There is minimal dispute that schools and families share a common task in educating and socializing students, but there is a great debate on the role and responsibility of parents and teachers (Kim et al., 2013; Spear et al., 2022). Some share that parents and teachers have unique but complementary contributions to make in the students' lives (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Wanders et al., 2021), while others state that parents should provide informal education, such as soft skills needed to succeed in a formal education setting (Bronfenbrenner, 1991; Fefer et al., 2020).
Most parent involvement research has focused on the challenges of recruiting parents to participate in schools and subsequent communication issues. However, minimal research has been completed on developing school-based opportunities to build trust between both groups as an intervention (Hails et al., 2023; Hummel et al., 2023; Santiago et al., 2016). According to Bond (2019), building the skills of trust and collaboration is a crucial component to improve the relationship with parents since it may support teachers in learning how to share responsibilities and seeing one another as equals contributing to the students' education.

It is also shared that there is an increase in negative parent-teacher experiences between parents and schools when children are at risk of academic failure (Axford et al., 2019). Title I schools are noted as disadvantaged schools with many students needing strong academic support (ESSA, 2002), which may lead to routine critical conversations on students' deficiencies rather than strengths. These circumstances contribute to an emotionally charged school setting where parents and teachers often meet to discuss problems, which further negatively impacts the parent-teacher relationship. Therefore, frequent opportunities for parents and teachers to build trust and collaborate in the school community should be explored.

The researcher explored a collaborative approach to improve parent-teacher relationships in low-income communities by exploring human-centered design principles and tools that equipped teachers to examine biases as they problem-solved with parents. In addition, both parents and teachers engaged in activities using the ABCD model that allowed for new stories to emerge about the experience of parents and teachers post-pandemic. As schools seek to address unprecedented educational gaps due to COVID-19, there is a greater need to identify and collaborate with traditional and non-traditional
stakeholders who can meet the needs of families. This study seeks to solve this problem by examining strength-based problem-solving approaches that allow parents and teachers to view themselves as equal partners as they face shared challenges. This study is significant because it explored how the quality of parent and teacher relationships can be improved through human-centered design techniques. A few studies have explored human-centered design in creating parent programs, but none have used HCD principles and the ABCD model to help teachers solve school-related problems with parents. (Caspe & McWilliams, 2019; Harvard Family Project, 2016; Henriksen, 2020; Retna, 2016).

**Dissertation Overview**

Based on the challenges faced in low-income communities, parents and teachers should work together to develop innovative solutions to address the needs of students. Unfortunately, popular models on parent involvement do not consider race and cultural norms or provide enough details to determine how parents of various groups prefer to be engaged (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Broome, 2018; Brown, 2018; McKinney, 2017; Rogers & Byrd, 2023). Since parent involvement has been established as an effective strategy to ensure student success at all levels (Epstein, 1991, 1996; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jones & Palikara, 2023; Roberts, 2021; Yang & Chen, 2023), teachers should be provided with more innovative strategies and training. The literature review on the role of parent engagement and innovative professional development was limited, which indicated a need for additional research in this area. This dissertation explores how elementary teacher perceptions of parents can be changed through professional learning that incorporates human-centered design principles.

In this chapter, the purpose and overview of the study were provided to serve as a context for the following chapters. Chapter 2 will provide a literature review around
parent involvement, human-centered design in education, and the theoretical frameworks that support this study. The dissertation methodology will be outlined in Chapter 3 to provide details on the research design and the plan for data collection. In Chapter 4, an explanation of the results from the action research will be presented in connection with the posed research questions. In the final chapter, the researcher will interpret the findings through data analysis and connect how these results relate to the theoretical frameworks and existing literature.

**List of Definitions**

For clarification, the important terms used in this study have been defined.

**Asset-Based Community Development.** An approach to problem-solving that highlights the strengths, capabilities, and know-how of the people who live within various communities (Kretzmann & Mcknight, 1996).

**Communication.** This term refers to how parents and teachers discuss matters between school and home regarding students (Epstein, 2011).

**Culture of Poverty.** A myth that harms low-income students and allows teachers to justify low expectations for students experiencing poverty (Gorski, 2012).

**Human-Centered Design.** A creative approach to problem-solving that encourages all people to think as designers and to explore empathy to design innovative solutions to meet the needs of diverse users (IDEO.org, 2015).

**No Child Left Behind Act.** Federal legislation that increased accountability for public schools across the United States (NCLB; U.S. Department of Education, 2002). The goal of NCLB is to provide resources that focus on students in poverty, students of color, students receiving special education, and those who speak and understand limited to no English. NCLB was replaced in 2015 with Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015).
**Parent engagement.** A broad term to describe the shared responsibility between parents and teachers to actively support a child's learning and health (NAFSCE, 2010).

**Parent involvement.** This term refers to the different ways parents choose to engage with schools on their student's education (Epstein, 2011).

**Perceptions.** A person's thoughts, beliefs, and opinions of someone or something (Gorski, 2012).

**Socio-economic status.** The household income that a parent reports (NCLB, 2002).
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the most important predictors of a student's success is the extent to which parents are engaged and involved in their child's education (Byungmo et al., 2021; Powell et al., 2010; Wilder, 2014). Research indicates that when parents are responsive and interested in their child's academic activities, students are more motivated and engaged in school (Jones & Palikara, 2023; Pomperantz & Grotnich, 2017; Rowe et al., 2016). Similarly, when a student's teacher demonstrates warmth, interest, and support, studies have shown that students are more engaged in learning (Gregory & Korth, 2016; Quin, 2017; Wentzel, 2016). This research study examines relationships between teachers and families (i.e., parents' and teachers' perceptions of one another) to analyze strategies that improve parent-student relationships and student learning outcomes. Thus, the study explores the following research questions:

RQ1: How does the Designed for Success program, which incorporates human-centered design, impact the tools and strategies that teachers and parents use to foster increased parental engagement in Title I elementary schools?

RQ2: How does the Designed for Success program, which incorporates human-centered design, impact teachers' perceptions of parental engagement at Title I elementary schools?

This chapter will begin with a historical perspective on poor communities and how stereotypes and biases have shaped school-home relationships. Afterward,
theoretical frameworks are examined as the lens to guide this study. Reviews of needs-based and asset-based community development (ABCD) approaches are provided to gain insight into how institutions have addressed challenges in poor communities. The ABCD framework builds on the skills, experiences, and knowledge of local community members and the supportive functions of local institutions to create more sustainable solutions for the future (McKnight, 2017). Critical race theory (CRT) is explored to address how societal narratives are created and lead to negative perceptions of marginalized groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Since No Child Left Behind (2001) legislation mandates that schools must have parent policies to embrace family involvement, the study examined Epstein's (1995) parent involvement model to explore common activities used in school communities to increase engagement. As an intervention, human-centered design was discussed within the teacher professional development model to build relationships between various stakeholders in the school community.

**Literature Methodology**

In this literature review, the researcher used databases focusing on parent involvement and engagement, asset-based thinking, and professional learning. Articles were found primarily using ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) and EBSCO. The researcher examined books on equity and social justice in education to gain insight into the core beliefs teachers may have about low-income students and explored strategies that can be used to confront these beliefs. In literature, parent engagement is a complex and broadly defined term (Hayakawa et al., 2013; Jones & Palikara, 2023; Van Voohis et al., 2013). Therefore, parent engagement, parent involvement, and family engagement were used interchangeably. In addition, case studies on human-centered design were analyzed to identify the design tools that schools could use to address
assumptions and biases and promote empathy. The main search terms used in this study were parent involvement, parent-teacher relationships, asset-based thinking, and design thinking in schools.

**Historical Perspectives**

Extensive literature in the social sciences summarizes the causes of poverty and its effects on groups in society (Collier, 2007; Gorski, 2012; Lewis, 1966; Payne, 2005; Ryan, 1971; Shah, 2010; Valencia, 2010). In 1971, William Ryan wrote the book *Blaming the Victim* in response to the social policies that were being legislated that did not address the underlying systems and structures that were the root cause of societal problems. Ryan's book explained that school programs are often created to strengthen families rather than examining the structures that serve as barriers for students and their families (Ryan, 1971). The critique addressed the "blaming the victim" approach in education and discussed race-relation matters and healthcare.

Valencia (2010) used Ryan's work as the foundation for his deficit-thinking theory, suggesting that marginalized students are blamed for poor school outcomes because many educators lack the efficacy to help them. Valencia uses Ryan's term "blame the victim" to describe how this approach has been used in public policy and education, starting in the 1960s when cultural deprivation was discussed as a form of student oppression (Valencia, 2010). Valencia (2010) theorizes that educators have deficit beliefs and blame students for "internal deficits or deficiencies" (2010, pp. 6-7), which may be cognitive, behavioral, or motivational in nature.

The "blame the victim" approach in education allows teachers to engage in labeling rather than examining the role that school, systemic, and individual teacher behaviors play in student performance (Allen & Liou, 2018; Chen & Chen, 2019; Lasater...
et al., 2021; Nelson & Guerra, 2014; Valencia, 2010; Walker, 2011). Educators who engage in deficit-thinking may see students who are culturally different from the dominant culture as less capable (Chen & Chen, 2019; Nelson & Guerra, 2014; Shields, 2016; Walker, 2011). These views serve as barriers to reform because teachers may determine, "If the deficiency is in the child, we cannot be expected to 'fix' or teach them." (Shields, 2016, p. 42). Therefore, solutions for improving academic outcomes are often believed to be beyond the reach of the teacher or the school system, which makes addressing deficit-thinking an essential aspect of improving school relationships (Valencia, 2010).

Many people in the U.S. believe that poor people are poor because of their own deficiencies (Gorski, 2012). This notion can be attributed to Oscar Lewis's (1966) culture of poverty study, which stated that poor people remain poor due to cultural attributes, including a lack of understanding of the future and violent tendencies. He asserted that based on his research, there were seventy traits that typify the culture of poverty, and which can be framed into four dimensions:

1. The connection between the culture of poverty and the larger society.
2. The makeup of the slum community.
3. The makeup of families.
4. The values, attitudes, and characteristics of those living in poverty (Lewis, 1966).

He further shared that these traits were universal, based on his world travels, and the values and attitudes of the poor are passed down generationally. Scholars noted his work as they discussed the culturally deprived who were noted as poor Whites, Blacks, and Latinos (Valencia, 2010). According to Gorski (2012), class stereotypes existed
before the culture of poverty study, but these notions conditioned most Americans to accept these falsehoods about the poor. Unfortunately, since the poor are not able to counter these negative narratives, these stereotypes have persisted.

**Impact of Deficit-Thinking in High-Poverty Schools**

The No Child Left Behind Act (2002) initiated a trend toward using standardized test scores to define the effectiveness of schools and their teachers. As a result, when standardized test scores are below average, schools may be sanctioned at the state and local levels (No Child Left Behind, [NCLB], 2002). Although researchers have argued that test scores are not the best measure of academic achievement (Hübner et al., 2020; Jones & Mueller, 2017; Lattimore, 2005), schools must still engage in testing to meet state policies. Schools in low-income communities traditionally receive lower test scores and must develop school action plans (Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2015), but these action plans often move forward with minimal input from parents (Auerbach, 2007; Aouad & Bento, 2020; Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Murray et al., 2020). Valencia (2010) suggested that school actions that do not prioritize power sharing can be interpreted as schools not valuing the thoughts and opinions of the groups they serve due to deficit-thinking.

It has been shown that students who attend high-poverty schools are mostly taught by less experienced teachers who may have less favorable expectations regarding a student's ability (Barbarin & Aikens, 2015; Stephens et al., 2022), which leads to consistent failing test scores each year. In addition, there is evidence that when teachers link poverty and race, teachers may make automatic determinations on the student's intelligence, which makes the school barriers for already socioeconomically
disadvantaged students more challenging (Namrata, 2011). These assumptions and biases are detrimental to relationship-building within school communities.

In a study by Namrata (2011), eight public schools and 35 teachers were selected, interviewed, and observed to determine educators' views on students in high-poverty schools. The findings revealed that students who were already in a disadvantaged school were double marginalized by their teachers due to negative perceptions around race and class, leading to little to no expectations for them. It was recommended that public school teachers engage in sensitivity training to make them more aware of their thoughts and actions (Namrata, 2011).

Compton-Lilly (2004) provided additional insight into deficit-thinking with teachers and explained how teachers must challenge their belief systems about poor children and families. In her book *Confronting Racism, Poverty, and Power*, Compton-Lilly refuted a series of myths about poor families that have been orchestrated to blame the poor for societal problems (Compton-Lilly, 2004). An overview of strategies is provided that can be used to confront common myths about the poor and can help teachers build off the assets of economically advantaged students. However, most importantly, Compton-Lilly emphasizes the critical role teachers play in the lives of students, and she calls on educators to examine their biases around race and class. She shares that, like most members of our society, teachers are not aware of existing power systems.

According to Compton-Lilly (2004):

> We fail to recognize and challenge established ways of positioning people and labeling our world. Too often, children in urban communities are viewed as deficient, difficult to teach, uncooperative, and troubled. Their parents are
perceived as uninterested, complacent, subliterate, lazy, and negligent…in all societies, those people who control the society through money and might are the ones who are vested with the ability to label and explain the circumstances of others. (p. 16)

Overall, deficit-thinking and stereotypes persist because the poor are unable to combat these beliefs, and teachers who engage with families are not challenged to address their own biases through training and professional development. As a result, theoretical frameworks will be explored that will challenge key stakeholders in the school community to challenge their beliefs and biases in low-income communities.

**Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks**

**Figure 2.1**

*Theoretical Frameworks*

*Note.* Theoretical Framework. This Venn Diagram demonstrates the ways Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) and Critical Race Theory (CRT) overlap in Joyce Epstein’s Parent Involvement model.

The theoretical and conceptual frameworks outlined in this chapter provided knowledge on the concepts relevant to improving parent-teacher relationships in poor communities. An examination of the thoughts, attitudes, and perceptions of marginalized groups are discussed through the lens of the ABCD approach and critical race theory. The chapter also explores the positive and negative impact of the needs-based versus asset-
based approaches when used by organizations and non-profits to build relationships within poor communities. In addition, this section will discuss how perceptions have been formed on disenfranchised groups and how tenets of critical race theory can be used to address false narratives and stereotypes detrimental to building solid relationships.

Needs-Based Approach

The needs-based approach to community development is a common framework used in schools and organizations where leaders provide services to meet deficiencies (Krezmann, 2017; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003; McKnight, 2007; Nel, 2018). For example, schools and non-profits often conduct "needs assessments" as a common practice to determine the nature of their work and to form a baseline. By approaching challenges using negative language, this reinforces stereotypes within communities (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1996). Kretzmann and McKnight (1996) shared that a deficiency outlook solicits negative images of people experiencing poverty, which makes relationship-building more challenging and solutions more difficult to develop.

Table 2.1.

Needs-Based vs. Asset-Based

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Needs</th>
<th>Assets</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problems</td>
<td>Possibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scarcity</td>
<td>Abundance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs</td>
<td>Strengths, capacity, and assets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top-down</td>
<td>Inside-out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive receivers</td>
<td>Co-producers and active creators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provider-led</td>
<td>Citizen-led</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When communities begin to believe they are to blame for their challenges, external assistance is perceived as the only solution (Green et al., 2006; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Romero & Donaldson, 2023; Nel, 2018). However, without communities guiding and providing input on the work being done and sharing insights along the way, service providers often fail to achieve sustainable solutions (Chen, et al., 2020; McKnight, 2017). According to McKnight (2017), when communities rely too heavily on outside resources, there is always a level of disappointment because citizens have not learned how to sustain themselves, but only grown more reliant on external stakeholders. Therefore, the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) model is an approach that can be explored for long-term solutions.

**Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD)**

Asset-based community development (ABCD) is a framework developed by John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann to enhance the support and capacity of a community, such as a school community, to solve its own problems (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). The ABCD approach, which categorizes assets with individuals, citizen associations, and local institutions, emerged as a critique of deficit-based approaches that focused on the problems and deficiencies in a community rather than solutions (Chen et al., 2020; Nel, 2018; Walker, 2006). By strategically working against the needs-based approach, McKnight (2017) created a framework for nurturing existing assets to strengthen the capacities of a community and its individuals.

The ABCD model aims to counter deficit-thinking, which contributes to policies and practices that create greater dependency and disempower the people they are designed to support (Agdal et al., 2019; Harrison et al., 2019; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003; Nel, 2018). As a result, ABCD is noted as a positive
alternative to traditional needs-based approaches (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993), and much of the current literature about ABCD and asset-based approaches are case studies illustrating how their application has led to community empowerment and improvements in local healthcare.

The critical components of the ABCD process involve highlighting, mapping, and celebrating a diverse set of assets (Harrison et al., 2019). Harnessing these assets sets the stage for inclusivity and meaningful and long-lasting change originating from within the community. According to Kretzmann & McKnight (1993), there are five key stages of ABCD in practice: First, mapping or making an inventory of the capacity and assets of the community should take place. Second, relationship-building and connections between community members and agencies must be initiated to change values and attitudes. Third, community members must be mobilized to actively share knowledge and resources by identifying common interests. Fourth, a group must be convened to cast the vision for the group and reinforce strengths and skills. Lastly, the group must leverage outside resources to assist with items that they have identified, but they need help finding solutions.

ABCD research recognizes, emphasizes, and values the strengths within a community to mobilize, drive, and affect change from within. At its initial stage, the ABCD process involves identifying a given community's positive skills and capabilities by mapping assets to create an inventory of resources. This process, led by a person who may not be an expert in the field (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Missingham, 2017; Nel, 2018), guides the development of relationships through dialogue and partnership. The mapping process works in several ways to accentuate interconnections, interdependency, and relationships to develop a shared vision, initiative, or goal for the
future (Forrester et al., 2020). However, it is to be noted that the asset approach does not replace investments in communities but aims to achieve a better balance between service delivery and community building (McKnight, 2017).

Missingham (2017) pointed out that the framework needs to directly address how power may be unequally distributed between different groups and communities. MacLeod and Emejulu (2014) caution researchers that ABCD may overlook the impact of economic, political, and social forces and minimize the state's role in improving its citizens' lives. Therefore, understanding the nature of poverty and the negative perceptions of the poor is essential to the why and how behind ABCD (Harrison et al., 2019). By engaging in the ABCD process, participants are challenged to address deep-rooted belief systems and must start their outreach from a place of positivity rather than negativity. An examination of how educational policies were shaped and the narratives that followed around poor school communities will be examined through critical race theory.

**Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory is based on the works of Derrick Bell and Richard Delgado (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) and is grounded in the study of public policy and laws that shape society based on hidden race and class interests. Education researchers use the tenets of CRT to examine educational inequalities and reform movements using the basic tenets of critical race theory (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Mensah, 2019; Sleeter, 2017). The tenets of CRT include ordinariness, interest convergence, social construction, differential racialization, and storytelling (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). This study focused on the tenet of counter-storytelling to address how communities can work to address false narratives.
Critical Race Theory and Counter-Storytelling

Counter-storytelling is a fundamental tenet of CRT, in which those who are hidden or invisible within the narratives, such as people of color, are presented with the opportunity to amplify their voices, perspectives, and experiences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Ladson-Billings (1998) shared that counter-stories are emancipatory for people of color and other marginalized groups in that "naming one's reality" and using one's "voice" leads to transformative action.

With teachers now serving a population comprised mostly of impoverished children of color (Childstats.gov, 2020), CRT should be used as a lens to identify the barriers that prevent low-income families of color from obtaining equitable treatment in schools. Also, CRT can be used to expose deficit-informed research that distorts the experiences of people of color, and using a new lens can, instead, focus on how race, gender, and class are sources of strength (Bei & Knowler, 2022; Lindemann, 2020; Solórzano & Solórzano, 1995; Valencia & Solórzano, 1997).

Research shows that relationships between the school and home will facilitate or hinder a parent's ability to be involved in the school community (Epstein et al. 2011; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Wolf, 2020; Yang & Chen, 2023). Critical race theory explains how race plays a significant factor in how schools and families perceive one another. Counter-storytelling, which is included within CRT methodologies, allows researchers to shift power to people of color and other marginalized groups to identify problems further and begin conversations around solutions (Bei & Knowler, 2022; Lindemann, 2020; Solórzano & Solórzano, 1995; Valencia & Solórzano, 1997). CRT methods demonstrate that social justice for families in schools requires identifying and
naming institutional oppression and employing devices that will amplify marginalized voices (Marchand et al., 2019).

Related Research Studies

Griffin and Farris (2010) used the ABCD model of asset mapping as a tool to discover a school community's internal capacity from the inside out. School counselors developed a multidisciplinary team to examine and assess community resources, services, and programs. As a team, they identified 29 assets that allowed the school to strengthen relationships with families and provide information to students in need (Griffin & Farris, 2010). Also, Mosavel (2018) took a community-based participatory research approach to empower youth to identify assets in their community that could address local challenges with obesity among teenagers. The team categorized tangible and intangible community health assets and found possible solutions for improving health outcomes within their community. Asset mapping is an engagement practice that any institution can use to build community and encourage all stakeholders to learn about themselves and others (Borrero & Sanchez, 2017).

Kammer-Kerwick et al. (2022) used the ABCD to model a human-centered approach to examine how citizens may improve their quality of life by engaging in a participatory decision-making process around community development projects. Participants interacted with experts and community members to discuss the next steps in renovating an apartment building, opening a community health center, and deploying high-speed broadband internet in the downtown area (Kammer-Kerwick et al., 2022). The findings of this study illustrated how the asset-based approach helped decision-makers better understand the identities, personalities, personal values, and level of satisfaction prior to measures being taken with the community (Kammer-Kerwick et al., 2022).
A related study by Quartz et al. (2020) further reinforced the importance of understanding the personalities of a community prior to implementing a policy or reform. The study used the ABCD framework and asset mapping to analyze the 90-year history of a school community in Los Angeles by engaging in participatory research to establish a shared understanding of education as a public good and to set the stage for future collaborative problem-solving (Quartz et al., 2020). Lastly, a study by Pstross et al. (2014) built upon the foundations of asset-based community development (ABCD) to illuminate how catalytic storytelling can create and sustain community participation. Community development researchers served as provocateurs who challenged the perception of community members through questioning and used their ambiguous position as insider-outsider to stimulate further conversation, gather new ideas for community development, and encourage community members and researchers to continuously rewrite and retell their stories (Pstross et al., 2014).

**Epstein's Framework of Parental Involvement**

Most school communities use a standard model for parent involvement, such as Joyce Epstein's Framework of Six Types of Involvement, also known as the School-Family Community Partnership Model (Epstein, 1995). This model emphasizes a two-way partnership between educators and families working together, not a one-way opportunity determined by the school. The six types of involvement noted by Epstein are parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community. The Epstein Model is used as a guiding framework in many schools (Newman et al., 2019) since No Child Left Behind legislation requires that schools create a parent policy (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002). The framework outlines clear steps for parent involvement but does not consider how race, ethnicity, and
socioeconomic status may impact implementation of this model (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Marchand et al., 2019).

The Epstein model was studied under the lens of race and ethnicity in a study within a large high-poverty elementary school. Bower and Griffin (2011) shared that the elementary school attempted to meet all components of the Epstein model but did not consider the needs or desires of parents. Although the model promoted parent voice, educators assumed how parents wanted to be engaged and did not consider the racial makeup of the school or family culture as parent opportunities were created.

Bower and Griffin (2011) found that this model did not consider the different ways various groups preferred to communicate with schools based on culture. For example, it was found that Latino families tended to respect the role of the teacher and school and were less likely to make contact about problems with their children. Black parents also were found to be unlikely to contact the school, but it was due to their preference to discuss school matters with parent advocates or other parents. Unfortunately, educators interpreted these behaviors as a lack of engagement and became frustrated when parents did not participate in the activities outlined. Overall, the findings showed that the Epstein model does strive to promote parent voice. However, because it does not explicitly address the racial identities and cultural preferences of communication for families, it leads to misunderstandings between schools and parents. Bower and Griffin (2011) shared that the model should include "components of relationship building, advocacy, and parental efficacy, as these have been shown to be effective in working with African American, Latino, and low-income populations" (p. 82).

Parent-Teacher Relationships in Literature
A further review of parent and teacher relationships under the lens of identity, race, and class was found to cause power dynamics in classrooms that contribute to the continued oppression of marginalized groups (Darden, 2016) and many of the economic injustices and challenges that poor families face can be connected to laws and policies that are justified through stereotypes (Gorski, 2012; Marchand, 2019). It has also been found that stereotypes and biases are present even among pre-service teachers who view low-income working-class parents as different than themselves (Santamaria, et al., 2020; Stephens et al., 2022). In Santamaria's study, they found that many educators came into special education with deeply entrenched biases that serve as barriers to relationship-building. Also, the notion of power-sharing with families was an unfamiliar concept, and pre-service teachers only became open to the idea after extensive interviews and discussions with parents (Santamaria et al., 2020).

In addition, studies showed that informal conversational meetings with parents were more impactful in strengthening parent-teacher relationships (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Broome, 2018; Lasater et al., 2021; McKinney, 2017; Wolf, 2020). Trust is important, especially in elementary school, when new family school relationships are established (Hummel et al., 2023; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2005; Schuler Brunschweig et al., 2019). In family-school literature, trust is measured by school surveys, but there is limited research on how different demographics impact parent trust and involvement (Santiago et al., 2016; Wolf, 2020). One of the few studies conducted on parent-teacher trust was by Santiago et al. (2016), where they conducted a study on cultivating trusting relationships in schools. The researcher found that parents may enter the parent-teacher relationship with a lack of trust based on their own adverse childhood experiences, which may predict the level of relationship-building needed (Santiago et al., 2016).
Additional studies on school engagement with families of color identified everyday negative experiences with teachers (Brown, 2018; McKinney, 2017; Rogers & Byrd, 2023). McKinney (2017) examined the parent-teacher relationship of families with students of color enrolled in programs such as gifted and talented, special education, or general education. It was found that parents, whether in public or private schools, had similar experiences at school, with parents experiencing difficulty discussing their child's needs regardless of their child's academic ability (McKinney, 2017). Another study shared that families of color with children in special education felt that educators did not listen to their concerns or questions and, therefore, did not regularly attend parent-teacher conferences (Rogers & Byrd, 2023). Lastly, families of color with higher economic standing who had students in private schools also felt that educators provided more consistent and clear communication based on socioeconomic status and race (Broome, 2018). Parents of color faced similar experiences when communicating with teachers and school staff, indicating race and class impact school relationships (Brown, 2018; McKinney, 2017; Rogers & Byrd, 2023).

**Human-Centered Design Process**

Strategies to improve effective two-way communication and perceptions of parents and teachers should be explored through innovative approaches to community and relationship-building. A new approach to solving educational challenges that can be explored through professional development with teachers is human-centered design (HCD). HCD is a cyclical process that requires individuals seeking to solve a problem to assume the role of designers and empathize with their users by engaging in observation and interview, brainstorming new ideas with users, and prototyping and testing innovative solutions (IDEO.org, 2015). The HCD model is primarily used in business and
successful technical companies to redesign their work environments, products, and services.

**Human Centered Design Process**

**Figure 2.2**

*Human-Centered Design Process*

![Human-Centered Design Process Diagram](https://d.school.stanford.edu)

*Note.* Adapted from the Stanford D. School of Design Thinking. The five steps in the human-centered design process addresses perceptions by creating opportunities for teachers to engage in relationship-building and problem-solving. ([https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)). **Copyright 2022 by Stanford Institute of Design.**

Design thinking can be seen in three different ways: as a theory of practice, as an organizational resource, and as a mindset (Kimbell, 2011). Design thinking began in the 1950s. Design thinking can be seen in three different ways: as a theory of practice, as an organizational resource, and as a mindset (Kimbell, 2011). Design thinking began in the 1950s by engineers who called it design science. In the 1960s and 1970s, social scientists began researching and writing about design from the human standpoint, leading to human-centered design (Arnold, 2016). However, most design processes share the same components of design: (a) developing an understanding and empathy for users and their needs, (b) cycling through periods of divergent thinking, (c) short learning experiences through prototyping, and (d) gathering feedback and testing solutions with a small group
and only scaling up after methods are proved effective (Ertel & Solomon, 2014). This nonlinear process has often made design thinking practices in schools challenging for educators to embrace, but once accepted, it has led to increased creativity and empathy (Henriksen, 2020; Retna, 2016; Romero & Donaldson, 2023).

**Human-Centered Design in Education**

In Retna's (2016) study, the researcher examined teacher perceptions and experiences on adopting design thinking methods to enhance student learning. Through interviews, teachers shared that design thinking "can enhance skills such as creativity, problem-solving, communication, and teamwork" (Retna, 2016, p. 1). However, there were several challenges faced by teachers adopting design thinking, which involved inadequate resources, time constraints, and teacher apprehension about using a new method to solve problems (Retna, 2016).

In another study involving design thinking in schools, Henriksen et al. (2020) studied graduate students in an education program who were taught design principles and were challenged to address problems using the human-centered design framework. The researchers shared that educators found that design thinking principles helped them to become more creative in their relevant context and helped them to value empathy and become more open to uncertainty (Henriksen et al., 2020). As it relates to parent engagement, Rowland (2016) examined how human-centered design thinking could be used as a systematic framework for parent and school relationships. Components of the design thinking methodology were used by district staff and educators to help them listen to families and act in support of student learning as a team. Overall, the study showed that human-centered design principles can be used to empower parents to take more
meaningful roles in schools due to processes that allow them to provide authentic feedback (Rowland, 2016).

**Human-Centered Design Tools in Education**

**Table 2.2**

*Human-Centered Design Tools and Potential Results*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Human-Centered Design Tools</th>
<th>Potential Results</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviews, Observation, Immersion</td>
<td>Examining stereotypes with families; Listening to parents and building relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personas</td>
<td>Soliciting empathy for others; Identifying new solutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prototyping &amp; Testing</td>
<td>Creating creative solutions with parents and power sharing. Generating counter-narratives with marginalized communities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Human-Centered Design Tools. Listing of tools that are embedded within the design process that can be used by educators to address class stereotypes and biases.

Design thinking strategies can improve the teacher and parent experience by requiring the designer/teacher to empathize with their subjects through interview or observation, examining their assumptions and biases, defining problems, and prototyping and testing solutions (Brown, 2009). Some standard tools used in the design thinking process are personas and user journeys. A *persona* represents a particular group with shared needs or common behavior patterns (Chang, 2022). Although personas are fictional, a persona is not a stereotype but "an archetype based on real research." (Chang, 2022, p. 218). Personas are usually created in the empathy phase of the design thinking process to help a designer understand how people experience a problem from the user's perspective (Gaspar et al., 2022). Also, journey mapping is a tool that will help the designer visualize the experience of others by outlining a sequence of steps in a process (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The purpose of a journey map is to help find gaps and explore solutions that may not be noted due to a particular point of view (Følstad & Kvale, 2018).
Journey maps can be broad or detailed depending on the need to communicate various aspects of an experience (Chang, 2022).

Jones et al. (2022) used persona development and journey mapping to identify recruitment methods that would resonate with different types of college students to increase enrollment within their physical education program. The researchers noted that if institutions were to consider students as "customers" or "buyers" in the educational space, personas and journey mapping could be tools to help develop effective programs to meet customer needs. In public education, students and parents are not often referred to as customers, but post-pandemic customer needs are especially critical to the success and health of organizations (Jones et al., 2022). The researchers noted that organizations that achieved success after the pandemic's challenges invested substantial time and resources to understand the customers' perspective, which allowed them to stabilize their bottom line (Jones et al., 2022). Although design-thinking has been used in education (Retna, 2016; Romero & Donaldson, 2023), HCD-specific tool use of personas and journey mapping within the K-12 space may be helpful to explore as schools seek to uncover and identify emerging unmet needs for parents and students post-pandemic.

Lastly, human-centered design methods are being increasingly used in higher education with graduate students (Adam et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2020; McLaughlin et al., 2019). Romero and Donaldson (2023) outlined the merits of HCD at the graduate level, sharing how the framework could provide future health professionals with a toolkit to "solve both the complex known problems of today and the adaptability to solve the unknown problems of tomorrow "(p. 2). The researchers further explained how HCD empathy-building activities, such as role-playing and additional immersive experiences, led to new insights and generated greater solutions. The empathetic and iterative process
of HCD was viewed as a method that, if embedded within their curriculum, could transform education, strengthen healthcare systems, and prevent future pandemics (Frenk et al., 2010; Middleton et al., 2021; Romero & Donaldson, 2023).

Summary

Literature on the various types of families experiencing poverty and effective strategies used to improve parent-teacher relationships using innovative strategies, such as human-centered design, is minimal. This study was developed to expand the strategies used to engage families dealing with the daily struggles of navigating school systems post-pandemic. Effective communication and problem-solving strategies to address student needs were identified as skills that may improve the parent-teacher relationship. Human-centered design tools such as interviewing, observation, journey mapping, and personas can be used to identify student needs, improve communication, and develop better solutions to persistent problems.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This mixed methods action research study aimed to explore how parents and teachers may strengthen their relationship through engaging in human-centered design activities in a Title I elementary school. Parent involvement is defined as a parent's active role in learning activities at home and school and as an active participant in school-related activities (Epstein et al., 2011). As instructional leaders create policies and action plans to address school improvement, they should address staff perceptions, thoughts, and attitudes as they engage with families of diverse socioeconomic statuses (Mensah, 2019; Sleeter, 2017; Stephens et al., 2022). Many factors impact parent involvement, but perceptions between parents and teachers are the most crucial (Byungmo et al., 2021; Froiland et al., 2013; Yang & Chen, 2023). When there is a shared understanding between parents and educators, communication between both parties is improved, and each will have a positive attitude in the school environment (Byungmo et al., 2021; Epstein et al., 1997; Gartmeier et al., 2017; Leenders et al., 2019; Westat et al., 2001)

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this mixed methods research design:
RQ1: How does the Designed for Success program, which incorporates human-centered design, impact the tools and strategies that teachers use to foster increased parental engagement in Title I elementary schools?

RQ2: How does the Designed for Success program, which incorporates human-centered design, impact teachers' perceptions of parental engagement at Title I elementary schools?

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to explore how parents and teachers perceive each other in a low-income South Carolina elementary school community. The phenomenon explored in this study was parent engagement. The target study population included parents and teachers of elementary students from Title I schools, which is defined as a school with students from low-income families that make up at least 40 percent of enrollment (ESSA, 2015). Findings from this study may expand the literature on parent engagement and lead to the development of more innovative, inclusive, and equity-focused engagement plans in school communities.

**Research Design and Rationale**

Action research is a methodology generally used in the social sciences to better understand a problem and generate solutions (Merriam, 2001). Action research may occur in cycles and follow a predefined, repeated process. Still, the key characteristics of this type of research can be deemed as being technical, collaborative, and reflective (Herr & Anderson, 2015). The nature of action research empowers participants to improve their practice and advance their learning within their contexts (Efron & Ravid, 2013). As problems are identified, the researcher seeks to understand and make meaning of the problem by conducting research that may inform or improve their practice.
A mixed methods approach, using both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis, was used to balance each approach’s strengths and weaknesses and improve overall outcomes (Efron & Ravid, 2013). This form of data collection was appropriate since data would be collected throughout the study, and new techniques would be developed based on the results. This methodology was used to evaluate the problem around the lack of strong parent engagement in low-income communities and develop a professional learning program that would foster a strong school-to-family partnership.

Although the study was teacher-centered, data was collected from parents and teachers with students in a Title I school in the Midlands area of South Carolina. The relationship between families and the school communities are important during a child’s early learning and development (Lang et al. 2013). The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted families, teachers, and school institutions), which may have impacted how parents perceived their relationships with teachers (Hae Min et al., 2021). As a result, parent surveys were administered to provide additional context to the responses received from teachers.

**Intervention**

One approach to solving educational challenges that can be explored through professional development with teachers is human-centered design (HCD). HCD is a cyclical process that requires designers/teachers to empathize with their users by engaging in observation and interview, brainstorming new ideas with users, and prototyping and testing innovative solutions (IDEO.org, 2015). When used in education, this model provides school leaders with a formal process that supports teamwork and innovation and challenges teachers to address systemic problems in new ways (Retna, 2016; Romero & Donaldson, 2023).
The *Designed for Success* program consisted of a two-part virtual learning sessions that ran for two hours for teachers to learn how to use human-centered design principles in their work with parents to increase parental involvement and engagement. The virtual workshops taught teachers about parental involvement versus parental engagement, challenged them to examine their past experiences and core beliefs about family engagement, and taught educators about human-centered design principles that could be used in an action plan for the new school year. Each workshop consisted of a mini-lecture, small group discussions based on three questions, and a call to action. In addition, participants were encouraged to maintain a journal to capture their thoughts on the learning process. The online workshop was followed by a two-hour face-to-face workshop where teachers could practice what they learned alongside parents to discuss and brainstorm solutions to a school-based problem. Interviews and surveys were conducted with participants pre- and post-workshop to determine whether thoughts, attitudes, and perceptions were improved through the intervention.

As a teacher focused study, parents did not receive the same intervention as teachers. Due to time constraints, parents did not participate in the two-part virtual learning, but only participated in the face-to-face workshop. The face-to-face workshop alongside teachers was included to ensure that parents had the opportunity to share their lived experiences with teachers as they engaged in problem-solving. Narratives and storytelling are important factors when seeking to build empathy and disrupting commonly held beliefs (Bei & Knowler, 2022). Therefore, the *Designed for Success* program required both teachers and parents to engage in face-to-face problem solving to amplify empathy building and the effectiveness of the HCD and asset-based tools. Overall, the study’s focus on teachers and its limited timeframe, did not allow parents to
participate in the same two-part virtual learning and face-to-face workshop as teachers, which may have limited findings.

**Table 3.1**

*Summary of Designed for Success Program*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Data Instruments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1&amp;2</td>
<td>Preparation for Study</td>
<td>Pre-workshop surveys and interviews administered to parents and teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Workshop #1 Parent Involvement and Engagement and Core Beliefs</td>
<td>Observation Notes from virtual learning with teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Workshop #2 Human-Centered Design &amp; Asset-Based Community Development</td>
<td>Observation Notes from virtual learning with teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 &amp; 6</td>
<td>Workshop #3 – Strategies to Increase Parent-Teacher Relationships – Session with Parents and Teachers</td>
<td>Observation Notes from parent and teacher workshop Post-workshop surveys and interviews with parents and teachers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As part of the intervention, participants in the *Designed for Success* program also documented their feelings and attitudes using *empathy maps* that helped participants understand the lives of others as the starting point for their learning journey. These maps were also used to help solve problems from different perspectives. Empathy maps are graphic organizers that can help people organize and synthesize their observations and draw insights into a user's needs (Cairns et al., 2021). The researcher assessed these maps
as artifacts to determine if design teams comprised of parents and teachers were able to understand the needs of one another better and to address the stated research questions.

The researcher documented the social and cultural behaviors of educators and parents through careful observation. In this study, the researcher served as both the facilitator and observer, which required an insider and outsider role (Herr & Anderson, 2015). While facilitating the virtual and face-to-face workshops, the researcher served as an insider, providing support to teachers by sharing information and serving as an educational consultant. However, once parents entered the study, the researcher assumed the role of both an insider and outsider, observing the interactions between both groups. During the face-to-face workshops, the researcher completed an observation log of the physical setting, participants, interactions, conversations, and subtle factors, such as informal and unplanned activities, to capture the best information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

**Setting and Context of Research Study**

The research study took place in South Carolina with a total of 20 participants, 10 educators and 10 parents, who live or work in high-poverty school communities. The general population targeted in this research study were elementary parents and teachers with students in a Title I school in South Carolina. According to the South Carolina Department of Education (2022), there are 584 schools classified as Title I, or low-income schools, in South Carolina. Twenty-two percent of South Carolina families live in poverty, with 42% being single-parent families (SCDOE, 2022). The percentage of Black children (43%) and Hispanic/ Latino children (45%) living in poverty in South Carolina is about three times the percentage of White children (15%) (SCDOE, 2022).
The South Carolina Teacher Workforce report (2020) shares that South Carolina educators are 64% White female, 15% White male, 12% Black female, and 3% Black male (Starrett et al., 2022) Starrett et al. (2022) further explained that higher-poverty schools tend to have more Black and international teachers, with the average classroom teacher holding eleven years of experience. In addition, in higher-poverty schools, educator median salaries are $49,193, with teachers with master's degrees or higher scoring proficient on their performance evaluations (Starrett et al., 2022).

As an educational consultant, the researcher developed a virtual learning opportunity for South Carolina elementary teachers in high-poverty schools. The study was advertised within educator online professional learning communities and in local elementary schools, which allowed participants to be easily recruited. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) shared that recruiting potential participants who are easily accessible is a common research approach that is known as convenience sampling. Patton (2015) recommended specifying a minimum sample size "based on expected reasonable coverage of the phenomenon given the purpose of the study" (p. 314); therefore, the proposed teacher and parent sample size was 10-20.

Educators and parents were selected from schools classified as Title I in the Midlands area of South Carolina. The intervention included two parts: virtual and face-to-face learning, which required participants to reside in the same local geographical area to allow members to participate in each study phase. Parents and teachers from two Midlands-area schools were recruited for the study. Due to the nature of the study, which required teachers to provide in-depth personal experiences with teaching, the researcher anonymized qualitative data. The researcher also used pseudonyms for the names of
schools and assigned codes in the place of teacher and parent names to maintain participants' confidentiality.

The researcher was transparent in their approach to confidentiality to help participants be more trusting of the research and, therefore, more honest and open in their answers. Driscoll (2011) shared that ethical considerations impact all stages of the research process, and sensitive research topics may require anonymizing data or removing names. As a result, school demographic information from the two schools of teachers and parents has been changed. Ashwood Elementary School is comprised of approximately 390 students. The school has placed in the bottom 50% of all South Carolina schools for overall math and reading test scores. The school's minority enrollment is 99%, with 96% of students as Black, 2% Hispanic, and 1% identifying as one or more races. Wylie Elementary School serves approximately 500 students in grades Prekindergarten through grade five. The school has performed in the state's bottom 50% in reading and math. The school body is 97% Black, 2% Hispanic, and 1% representing two or more races.

All of the participants completed the study providing responses through interviews, surveys, and the workshop evaluation. As a breakdown, the researcher recruited five teachers and five parents from Ashwood Elementary and five teachers and five parents from Wylie Elementary School (Table 3.2 and Table 3.3). Educators, school staff, and family members who participated in the Parent Teacher Organization or were involved in a School Improvement Committee over the past year expressed interest in the study. Due to the larger-than-average population of Black students, 98% of participants in the study were Black.
Participants

The general population targeted in this study were elementary school parents and teachers in South Carolina. The target parent population included parents of elementary students who attended Ashwood Elementary and Wylie Elementary, Title I schools in the Midlands area of South Carolina. For this study, the researcher selected educators and their respective schools based on their size, location, and classification as Title I schools. The Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and School Improvement Council (SIC) were participant recruitment sources. By recruiting from the PTA and SIC, the researcher could purposively select caregivers interested in working with teachers. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants who served as a parent or caregiver for a high-poverty school in South Carolina. Purposeful sampling is often used to identify and select information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Parent advocates were identified as potential participants who could stand in for parents or be the voice for parents to provide additional context around problem-solving during workshops and interviews. This study's proposed teacher sample size consisted of 10 elementary school teachers. The proposed parent sample size for this study was 10 elementary school parents. Tables 3.2 and 3.3 provides a list of the teachers and parents who completed the surveys, interviews, and intervention.

The following table provides a breakdown of the teachers who participated in the study based on gender, race/ethnicity, role, and years of experience as an educator working in a Title I school. The group's composition was diverse in that educators worked in different high-needs schools in the Midlands area of South Carolina, with teaching experiences ranging from one to 35 years.
Table 3.2

Teacher Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ashwood Elementary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participant</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher J</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wylie Elementary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participant</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher H</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The group of parents who participated in the study from Ashwood Elementary and Wylie Elementary were comprised of Black female caregivers with different educational levels. Participants identified themselves as mothers, grandmothers, and an aunt with students in various grades at the elementary level. Most primary caregivers who participated in parent engagement programs in each school were female. Upon advertisement, the researcher found female caregivers expressing interest in the study.
Due to the data collection timeframe, the researcher could not recruit a more diverse population of parents.

Table 3.3

*Parent Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ashwood Elementary</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Role</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent H</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Grandmother</td>
<td>Female Grade 4</td>
<td>No High school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent B</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Grandmother</td>
<td>Male Grade 3</td>
<td>High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent C</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Female Grade 2</td>
<td>Some College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent D</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Female Grade 2</td>
<td>High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent I</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Male Grade 3</td>
<td>Some College</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wylie Elementary</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent A</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Male Grade 1</td>
<td>High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent E</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Female Grade 3</td>
<td>High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent F</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Male Grade 3</td>
<td>High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent G</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Grandmother</td>
<td>Male Grade 5</td>
<td>High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent J</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Aunt</td>
<td>Female Grade 3</td>
<td>High School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Role of the Researcher*

The researcher is an educational consultant whose primary role is to educate teachers and administrators on the most effective digital tools that can be used to enhance their lesson planning and school curriculum. In addition, the researcher works in the local
community, providing support through a non-profit by developing and facilitating workshops for parents on various topics. During the study, the researcher was both an insider and an outsider in the school community and was able to analyze the data from different points of view. As both the observer and facilitator during workshops, the researcher's behavior will be part of the setting and notes and was recorded and examined as well. Once data was collected, an exit strategy was employed based on Bogdan and Biklen's (2011) suggestion that "rather than abruptly ending this phase of . . . research . . . ease out of the field by coming less frequently and then eventually stopping altogether." (p. 116). Follow-up sessions, emails, and text communications were conducted to further participant collaboration and support the researcher as they eased out of the field.

Data Collection Instruments

The data for this mixed methods study comprised a variety of tools and approaches, such as surveys, semi-structured interviews, observations, and reflection prompts. Quantitative data was gathered through a survey, providing a baseline for parent and teacher perceptions of the parent-teacher relationship. The same survey was used at the end of the intervention to determine if any changes occurred in parent-teacher perceptions.

Qualitative instruments were used to collect data on the program's effectiveness and the human-centered design tools used to solve problems. Semi-structured interviews allowed parents and teachers to describe their experiences, with conversational space allowing for less structured questions. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the semi-structured format "allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to the new ideas of the topic" (p. 111). The
order of questions and the wording of questions were adjusted as needed to allow teachers and parents to express their thoughts and feelings about one another fully.

Teachers were asked to respond to daily reflection prompts after each session, focusing on the specific information learned during the workshop. Efron and Ravid (2013) shared that reflection may not happen automatically; therefore, tools to guide reflection are helpful for participants. The reflection prompts were provided to determine how the human-centered design tools were perceived and whether their perceptions of parent engagement had shifted after the professional learning.

Creswell and Clark (2018) suggested observation protocols to record events and to increase the understanding of events. The observation field notes form was adapted from the Efron and Ravid (2013) observation protocol, and their guidance was used to assess notes. In addition, research reflection responses were maintained and focused on the study's objectives to increase understanding of findings. Observation notes were maintained by the researcher and kept in a password-protected format.

**Pre and Post-Teacher Survey.** Joyce Epstein's Parent Survey on Family and Community Involvement in the Elementary and Middle Grades (Sheldon & Epstein, 2007) was used to collect information on the teachers' beliefs on parent involvement and their perceptions and expectations of parents. A survey was given to elementary teachers using an online survey tool that captured their thoughts and attitudes and demographic information such as age, race, gender, level of education, and years of teaching experience.

**Pre and Post-Parent Survey.** Joyce Epstein's Parent Survey on Family and Community Involvement in the Elementary and Middle Grades (Sheldon & Epstein, 2007) collected information on race, socioeconomic status, education, and parent
perceptions. The instrument used a Likert-type scale and consisted of 30 questions that could be completed online through an online survey tool. The survey aimed to measure parents' perceptions of the quality of the teachers and school and their perceptions of themselves as parents.

**Pre-Workshop Interviews.** After the initial survey, participants were invited to participate in a one-on-one interview. Interview questions were semi-structured and designed to determine parents' and teachers' perceptions and expectations. The questions were aligned to the research questions. Below are the pre-workshop interview questions and prompts used with parents and teachers:

- Describe your greatest concern about your student/child's education post-pandemic.
- Tell me about a time when you and a teacher/parent worked well together.
  Probing: Why did it work well? Why didn't it work well?
- Describe the process you use when you have a concern or problem with a student/parent.
  Probing: What do you do when things are not resolved?
- What is your greatest concern when working with teachers/parents?
- If you had a magic wand and could change one thing about the parent-teacher relationship, what would it be? Why?
- What comes to mind if you were to hear someone say, "Parents/Teachers just don't care"?
- Is there anything else you would like me to know about your experience with parents/teachers?
**Post-Workshop Interviews.** Post-workshop interviews were conducted at times most convenient for the subjects, such as at the end of the face-to-face workshop. Also, interviews were conducted via phone, online, or face-to-face based on the participant's preference. Following the post-workshop interview, the researcher transcribed all information recorded electronically as part of the qualitative study. Below are the post-workshop interview questions and prompts:

- What are your thoughts on the workshop(s)?
- What are your thoughts on human-centered design? Probing: Do you see yourself using these tools, i.e., personas and journey mapping?
- What are your thoughts on asset mapping? Probing: Do you see yourself using this tool?
- Describe what it was like working with parents/teachers to solve a problem in a workshop? Probing: Any challenges or surprises?
- Do you see yourself using these tools to problem-solve in the future?
- What would you say to someone if you heard them say, "Parents/Teachers just don't care" after completing the Designed for Success workshop?
- Is there anything else you would like me to know about your experience as a participant in the Designed for Success program?

**Observation Notes.** Workshops were held to teach educators about asset-based approaches to problem-solving and design-thinking strategies. Also, the training was held to challenge parents and teachers to work together to solve school-based problems using human-centered design thinking strategies. The researcher outlined the items to look for during workshop interactions and made notations, including participant quotes. The
observation write-up was descriptive and analytic, with the researcher reporting on what was observed and determining what was most significant to record.

The study benefited educators by providing a different way for them to engage in professional learning and collaborative research. The hybrid professional learning opportunity allowed teachers to learn virtually at their own pace and engage in meaningful work with parents during a face-to-face workshop. Also, the study gathered data using various sources, including cloud-based video recording tools that allowed the researcher and participants to closely examine the meaning behind words and check for personal biases as narratives were developed.

The study also included some limitations in its design. The purposive sample included a small number of parents and teachers from an elementary school in a particular geographic area. Therefore, the study results may not be representative of all elementary schools. It was also not possible to conduct all interviews through face-to-face meetings due to the schedules of parents and teachers. Virtual meetings and telephone calls were conducted to better support the schedule of participants, but this type of data collection may impact the results because the researcher was unable to observe body language and facial expressions.

**Research Procedures**

As the study was conducted, the researcher's role and activities were analyzed in three stages "entry, data collection and exit" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 142). Upon receiving approval from the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher recruited participants from local Title I schools by posting information on the purpose of the study, eligibility requirements, and the link to register for the free workshop on parent engagement. Participants who expressed their interest
were asked to confirm eligibility through the online registration form affirming their status as a South Carolina educator or parent in a high-poverty elementary school. Also, parents and teachers were asked to commit to a two-hour face-to-face training at a local library. The rights and privacy of all participants were carefully maintained and protected through the protocols outlined in the Belmont Report (Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1979). Protecting participant privacy and confidentiality was a priority for the researcher, and all actions were taken to ensure participants remained informed and their data was protected.

**Table 3.4**

*Research Phases*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phases</th>
<th>Data Collection</th>
<th>Timing</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase One</td>
<td>Preliminary research and recruitment</td>
<td>20-30 days prior to the start of the study</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase Two</td>
<td>Pre-workshop interviews and surveys</td>
<td>2 Weeks</td>
<td>Parents and Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase Three</td>
<td>Designed for Success - virtual training</td>
<td>2 Weeks</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase Four</td>
<td>Designed for Success – face to face training</td>
<td>1 Day</td>
<td>Parents and Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase Five</td>
<td>Post-workshop interviews and survey; Follow-up and exit messaging</td>
<td>2 Weeks</td>
<td>Parents and Teachers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research within this study took place in five phases. In Phase One, the researcher conducted preliminary research by advertising online and recruiting parents and teachers through professional networks before the intervention occurred. In Phase Two, parents and teachers completed surveys and interviews that would be used as a baseline for the study. In Phase Three, teachers participated in online training to learn the basics of parent engagement and how to use human-centered design tools and strategies to amplify parents' voices and problem-solve using new strategies. Also, educators were encouraged to respond to reflection questions at the end of each virtual session. During Phase Four, parents and teachers were brought together to solve school-based problems as a team using asset-based approaches. In Phase Five, the researcher recorded observations, reviewed work products, and administered end-of-workshop surveys. In the final phase, post-interviews were conducted with both parents and teachers. Follow-up meetings and messaging to participants were completed as needed to ensure narratives were correctly captured and that individuals understood the study's outcome.

**Data Analysis**

Each data source used in this study contributed towards understanding the research question: How does the *Designed for Success* program, which incorporates human-centered design, impact teacher and parent perceptions of parental engagement at Title I elementary schools? To better understand parent and teacher perceptions, the researcher used two surveys and semi-structured interview questions. In addition, the researcher reviewed survey and observation notes to learn more about the educator's experience with parent engagement and to design better online resources and workshop activities centered around the issues that emerged in the survey and interview feedback.
Once all data was collected, the researcher performed an analysis to ensure that information was adequately collected, organized, and interpreted.

**Surveys.** Surveys provide a numeric description of a population’s trends, attitudes, or opinions by studying a sample (Creswell & Clark, 2018). The study began with a broad survey to examine the results of a population of parents and teachers, and in the second phase, focused on quantitative data as collected through open-ended, semi-structured interviews. Pre and post surveys were administered to evaluate parent and teacher thoughts and perceptions on the parent-teacher relationship and asset-based approaches to problem-solving.

**Interviews.** According to Creswell and Miller (2000), researchers should use procedures to ensure the data collected is valid by checking for accuracy and quality. In particular, the researcher can serve as an unreliable source if they use various lenses to examine their collected data (Creswell and Miller, 2000). The researcher became familiar with the data and read through interview transcripts but provided opportunities for participants to check the transcription of interviews to ensure a clear interpretation was provided of their words and thoughts.

**Coding Interviews.** Once a clear transcription was completed, the researcher applied a coding system that protected participant identities and categorized words and phrases. Coding is described as a system that uses shorthand with various aspects of the data for easy data retrieval (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher conducted an inductive analysis, which is the traditional approach of reading through the data and allowing codes to emerge (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Creswell & Clark (2018) further shares that coding and analyzing data is iterative, meaning the researcher may need to revisit different stages throughout the process. The steps used were: (a) organizing and
preparing the data, (b) reading through the data, (c) coding the data, and (b) identifying
categories and themes. As surveys, interviews, and observations were analyzed, themes
emerged that required an additional analysis of documents and a triangulation of the data.
A summary of themes and their relevance to the research questions and theoretical
framework was developed as the researcher produced various reports on findings. The
final step involved weaving together a summary with visual data to help the reader better
understand the overall story, subsequent themes, and findings.

**Ethical Considerations**

Regarding ethical considerations, the researcher received certification from the
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI). The researcher received approval
for this study in accordance with the University of South Carolina Institutional Review
Board (IRB) and gathered written approval from the parents and teachers who
participated in the online module and face-to-face workshops. These practices support the
validity and reliability of the data gathered in this study.

**Summary**

This mixed-methods study explored how a program might improve parent and
teachers’ perceptions in a high-poverty South Carolina elementary school. A mixed-
methods approach was used to gather robust data collection to address the research
questions. Data collection included the use of two Likert-type questionnaires for parents
and teachers, one-on-one interviews, a reflection journal, observation notes, and artifacts.
The data analysis explored themes that appeared in the data collection as they related to
the original research questions.

The researcher followed the guidelines set forth and mandated by federal law in
researcher obtained written approval from participants through the appropriate consent forms. The researcher collected data once the proposal was approved.
CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

As outlined in Chapter 1, the purpose of this mixed-methods action research study was to explore how parents and teachers in Title I schools perceived their relationships and how human-centered design could be used to improve and strengthen parent engagement. This chapter explores the findings in response to the central research question, "How does the Designed for Success program, which incorporates human-centered design, impact the tools and strategies teachers and parents use to foster increased parental engagement in Title I elementary schools?" The second research question was, "How does the Designed for Success program, which incorporates human-centered design, impact teachers' perceptions of parental engagement at Title I elementary schools?"

General Findings and Data Analysis

Teacher Pre-Post Survey Results

The quantitative data collected in this study was from pre- and post-workshop surveys given to parents and teachers at the beginning and end of the six-week study. The pre-and post-workshop surveys consisted of 14 items, which required participants to select answers from a Likert scale. The items collected data on demographics, parent and teacher views and opinions on the parent-teacher relationship, parent-teacher roles and responsibilities, and academic concerns and needs post-pandemic. In the study, 10 teachers and 10 parents completed the pre- and post-workshop survey.
The pre-workshop survey was designed to identify teacher beliefs on parent engagement. An analysis of the pre-survey results reflected the most interesting findings under three statements. Under the statement "Most parents know how to help their children with schoolwork at home," 80% of teachers disagreed and strongly disagreed that most parents knew how to help students with their schoolwork. This is significant because, at the end of the six weeks, perceptions improved by 20% with teachers who could identify ways parents could help children at home with work. In interviews, teachers shared how weekly folders with practice work are routinely sent home, but teachers did not observe evidence of reinforcement at home. As teachers and parents problem-solved common issues, teachers were able to determine that parents could support learning at home but lacked confidence.
As outlined by the data in Figure 4.2, at the beginning of the study, 80% of teachers strongly disagreed that "Parent engagement is most important for student success at school." Although the importance of parent engagement has been well documented (Epstein, 1991, 1995; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jones & Palikara, 2023; Yang & Chen, 2023), most educators in the study indicated that they did not believe parent engagement was an important criterion for student academic success in school. However, at the end of the study, 40% of teachers shifted their perception of parent engagement and its impact on student academic achievement. In post-survey open-ended responses, teachers shared that the Designed for Success training that included evidence-based research on the impact of parents on academic student achievement, regardless of socioeconomic status, was an important factor in changing their thoughts.
Additionally, 90% of teachers agreed to strongly agreed that "Every family has some strengths that could be tapped into to increase students' success in school" (See figure 4.3). Teachers held a favorable view of families having strengths that could be used in the school community. However, upon reviewing the survey's open-ended responses, teachers could not identify the strengths of the families in their school communities. Teachers often would share examples from their experiences as a child or how their family supports the school. Although teachers could easily list the deficits of families, it appeared challenging for teachers to list the strengths of families in their school communities. As a result, the post-workshop survey results reflected minimal changes in teacher perception of family strengths.

Overall, the researcher found that 10% of teachers changed their views from strongly agree to agree that families had strengths that could be leveraged within schools. Although teachers worked with parents closely during the workshop, listing assets in the school community perceptions were only slightly changed. The Designed for Success program's asset mapping activity was designed to improve perceptions around family strengths, but views appeared primarily unchanged. Overall, at the end of the six
weeks, teachers acknowledged and appreciated the contributions of families in schools but could not explicitly list the unique strengths parents may possess to support their student's success.

**Teachers' Perception of Parent Responsibilities**

In the second section of the pre-and post-workshop survey, teachers were asked their thoughts on parent responsibilities. Questions asked for opinions about the activities that should be conducted by the parents of the children they teach. Teachers selected answer choices on a Likert scale that described the importance of these activities from *Not Important* to *Very Important*. In this section, teachers identified strong beliefs about parent responsibilities in the school community, which remained mostly unchanged at the end of the study.

**Figure 4.4**

*Teacher Pre-Workshop Survey on Parent Responsibilities*
As outlined in figures 4.4 and 4.5, pre- and post-workshop survey results showed at least 90% of teachers consistently held the position that it was *Pretty Important* to *Very Important* for parents to "Send children to school ready to learn;" "Know what children are expected to learn each year;" "Teach children to behave well;" and "Talk to children about the importance of school." In fact, responses to the statement: "Teach children to behave well," indicated that all teachers agreed this was an important parent responsibility. Moreover, pre and post-workshop responses indicated that teachers hold strong beliefs on parents being responsible for students' proper behavior and motivation, and these attributes are shaped at home.

These findings reflect that teacher beliefs on parent responsibilities were consistent with research on the importance of learning at home. According to Epstein (2013), children who have learning experiences outside of school may come to school better prepared to learn. When parents allow children to engage in learning in various
spaces, such as church, sports, and recreational activities, students are exposed to different settings that may require different conversations on education and behavior (Hails et al., 2023; Phillips, 2011). Also, when parents engage their children in sports, they are helping their children develop social skills, self-esteem, self-control, and academic commitment (Fefer et al., 2020; Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001; Quane & Rankin, 2006). This survey section demonstrated that educators found that good social skills, proper behavior in school settings, and an appreciation for school are significant parent responsibilities that all parents should embrace in the school community.

After the Designed for Success program, teachers maintained their core beliefs on parent responsibilities, with no change in perception on the following parent responsibilities, "Send children to school ready to learn", "Teach children to behave well," and "Talk to children about the importance of school." However, teachers appeared to minimize the importance of parents needing to ask for help, with 40% shifting down from Very Important to Pretty Important. Also, teacher post-workshop responses minimized by 10% the importance of parents to "Know what children are expected to learn each year." To gather additional context to this shift, open-ended responses were reviewed, and teachers shared that their initial beliefs held that newsletters and folders sent home routinely should make understanding what children need to know easily accessible. However, teacher beliefs changed based on direct conversations with parents on misconceptions around communications sent home.

These findings address the importance of refining teacher-home communications, which are the lifeblood of parent engagement in school communities (Garbacz et al., 2017). According to Olmstead (2013), school communications signal the value of education to the child, but both the sender and the recipient of the "signals" may have
different interpretations (Byungmo et al., 2021; Halsey, 2005; Hummel et al., 2023; Hurrelmann et al., 1987). For example, when parents did not respond to ideas shared in newsletters, teachers interpreted this signal as parents not desiring to participate in students’ academic success. However, once teachers had a dialogue with parents during the Designed for Success workshop and found that they lacked confidence or knowledge with schoolwork, their thoughts and attitudes shifted.

How Teachers Viewed the Effectiveness of the Training

Table 4.1

Teacher Workshop Evaluation Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The content was informative and engaging</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The daily reflection questions were appropriate</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The content shifted my thinking</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I have a basic understanding of design thinking</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I have a basic understanding of asset based or strengthens based thinking</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I can use design thinking tools to solve a problem. (Persona, empathy mapping &amp; journey mapping)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I can use asset-based approaches to solve a problem (Asset mapping)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I am confident I can explain what I learned with others.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I feel hopeful working with parents and teachers next school year.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I would recommend this workshop to friend or colleague.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Evaluations are important tools to measure the effectiveness of programs, provide feedback for improvement, and gain insight into participant satisfaction (Patton, 2011). In the school-based setting, evaluations are equally important to improve structures and processes and create a continuous improvement culture (Shaw, 2019). In the Designed for Success program, a 10-question workshop evaluation was administered to the 10 teachers in the study at the end of the program. Evaluation questions were designed to measure the perception of participants on the training program, human-centered design tools, and the effectiveness of these tools in changing their practices the next school year.

Workshop evaluations indicated that all teachers agreed to strongly agreed that "The content was informative and engaging" and "The daily reflection questions were appropriate." 80% of teachers agreed to strongly agreed that their thinking had been shifted because of the Designed for Success program. Survey open responses indicated that the problem-solving activities required them to reflect on their interactions with parents and the school communication strategies, which changed their perception of parents.

The tools and exercises used during the program were asset mapping, empathy mapping, and personas. Both human-centered design and asset-based community development aim to promote positive change (Adam et al., 2019; Brown, 2009; McLaughlin et al., 2019;). Although survey findings indicated that at least 90% of teachers gained a basic understanding of HCD and ABCD tools, all teachers felt confident using asset-based thinking tools. In survey open responses, educators explained that ABCD tools were like asset-based teaching strategies, which made having a dialogue on strengths versus deficits more comfortable. Educators shared that design thinking was
the most unfamiliar concept, but the videos shared during the training helped them to understand how it can be used in a school setting.

In program evaluations, teachers further shared their confidence in explaining ABCD and HCD with others, with workshop evaluations indicating that asset-based strategies provided increased benefits to teachers. For example, it was found that 40% of teachers strongly agreed they could use HCD-focused personas and empathy mapping, but 80% of teachers strongly agreed they could do asset mapping with others. According to survey open responses, this variation occurred due to the ease of use of tools and how easily teachers could understand the problem, which guided discussions more effectively. It was shared that the problems in the ABCD activities were more clearly defined, while the human-centered problems were intentionally left undefined, making dialogue more challenging. Teachers responded positively to both activities, but survey results were more favorable toward ABCD exercises.

Teachers perceived the parent engagement training favorably after a two-part training and interactive session with parents. All teachers agreed to strongly agreed that they felt hopeful after the Designed for Success program and would recommend the training to others. In open responses from the survey, educators used the words "interactive," "different," and "fun" several times. In Title I schools, professional learning is primarily focused on core subjects, with no focus on real-world school problems (Dynarski & Kainz, 2015). With the Designed for Success program, teachers could engage in a topic outside of ELA and Math and participate in problem-solving on timely and relevant issues in education.
Parent Pre and Pot Survey Results

The Designed for Success program provided parents with opportunities to receive training to improve communication with teachers and to learn new problem-solving techniques. In the study, 10 parents completed surveys to indicate their thoughts and perceptions on parent engagement pre- and post-workshop. The parent pre-workshop survey was designed to identify parent beliefs on parent engagement. In comparing the teacher and parent surveys, parent responses showed equally as interesting findings under the same three statements. The findings from the questionnaires are examined in the following section.

Figure 4.6

Parent Survey Results on Parent Engagement Related to Schoolwork

Under the statement "Most parents know how to help their children with schoolwork at home," 80% of parents disagreed to strongly disagreed that most parents knew how to help students with their schoolwork. In survey responses, parents shared that they lacked the time to help with schoolwork, noting that they were the primary caregivers managing commitments. Based on these circumstances, parents believed that finding dedicated time to sit down and help their child with school was challenging.
By the end of the six weeks, parent perceptions improved slightly, with 10% changing their views that they could help their child at home. After discussing schoolwork with teachers during the workshop, parents appeared to better understand the importance of weekly folders and the purpose of newsletters to encourage parents to help with academics at home. However, parents shared in post-workshop surveys that they lacked confidence in helping with schoolwork, providing examples of struggling in certain subjects when they were a student or not having a college degree as a barrier. Therefore, in addition to lack of time, parent's lack of knowledge and confidence was a barrier to helping their child outside of school.

It is to be noted, that one parent in the study shared in their pre and post-workshop survey responses that she was able to help her child at home using digital programs. The parent explained that their student completed assignments at home on a digital program designed to help improve his reading and math. As a result, she ensured he completed online modules at home to ensure he met the time requirements. Although it was unclear from survey responses if the parent monitored or tracked progress with the online program or was able to complete the assignments alongside their child, the parent appeared confident reinforcing a skill at home using technology.

**Figure 4.7**

*Parent Survey Results on Parent Engagement and Student Success*
In the pre-workshop survey, 100% of parents agreed to strongly agreed that "Parent engagement is important for a student's success in school." This was significantly different than the responses from teachers, who 90% disagreed to strongly disagreed that parent engagement was essential for student success in school. At the beginning and throughout the study, parents believed that parent engagement was important for student success and knew they played an important role.

Findings from the post-survey reflected that most parents' perceptions of parent engagement remained the same or improved after the training. All parents continued to perceive parent engagement positively and viewed their involvement as an essential factor in student success. The Designed for Success program and its training components, which shared research on parent engagement, were listed as factors that strengthened their beliefs on the importance of their role in and outside of school. Also, parents shared a deeper understanding of their importance by listing additional ways to support teachers besides offering school supplies. The workshop conversations and stories shared by teachers on their need for academic help were also noted as factors that strengthened beliefs on parent engagement.

**Figure 4.8**

*Parent Survey Results on Parent Engagement and Strengths of Families*
In pre-survey responses 90% parents agreed to strongly agreed "Every family has some strengths that could be tapped to increase student success in school." Therefore, all parent participants, except one, recognized that all families have strengths to contribute to the school's community. However, similar to teacher responses, parents were unable to list skills within their family that could be used in the school community. In the survey open-responses, teachers and parents were able to share barriers and challenges but provided minimal examples of the strengths parents could bring into schools to support student success.

At the end of the intervention, perceptions shifted from 90% to 100% of parents in agreement that families had strengths to support student success. After the workshop, all parents agreed to strongly agreed families had strengths and noted they could support their students despite barriers such as time. However, parents still could not list family strengths that could be used to support student success. As a result, the researcher has noted that teachers and parents need additional training on how different families with various structures can support student success.
How Parents Viewed the Effectiveness of the Training

Table 4.2

Parent Workshop Evaluation Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>5. I have a basic understanding of asset based or strengthens based thinking</td>
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<td>10. I would recommend this workshop to friend or colleague.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The 10 parents in the study completed the workshop evaluation and each had generally positive responses to the Designed for Success workshop, with 70% of caregivers sharing that their thinking had been shifted. The activities within the workshop were received favorably, and 90% of parents indicated that they would recommend the training to a friend or colleague. However, survey results reflected that not all parents
gained a complete understanding of the design and asset-based approaches. 50% of the parents shared that they did not feel confident in their learning, but 90% would recommend the workshop to a friend or colleague. It is to be noted that due to time constraints, teachers received 4 hours of dedicated training, and parents received 2 hours of training with teachers. Since parent participants received a different level of training, survey findings were impacted.

The researcher interpreted these results to mean that parents were still unfamiliar with the design thinking and asset-based terms and exercises, and additional training time may have been needed for both parents and teachers to receive the same hours of training to feel confident moving forward. However, parents did indicate they would recommend the training and felt hopeful about working with teachers in the upcoming school year. Therefore, the HCD hands-on activities and information-sharing exercises provided parents with positive experiences, but their ability to use the tools in the future needed to be improved.

**Semi-Structured Interview Themes**

Another phase of the data analysis included semi-structured interviews with teachers (10) and parents (10). Teachers and parents were invited to participate in a 30-minute face-to-face or virtual interview and were asked six questions framed to answer the research questions centered on parent-teacher perceptions and the effectiveness of asset-approached methods and human-centered design tools. The sessions were recorded and transcribed. Data was further reviewed to eliminate inconsistencies and errors.

Themes were then highlighted based on the frequency of words and topics related to the research question. Data was triangulated by reviewing observation notes using coding to identify additional factors that may illuminate biases and assumptions or bring
to the forefront unique perspectives. The four themes that emerged from teacher and parent semi-structured interviews were:

1. **Teacher frustration and fear for students and families post-pandemic.**

2. **Parental fear and uncertainty when engaging with teachers.**

3. **Misconceptions on effective parent engagement and involvement.** A desire for more effective training to improve communication, problem-solving and better understand parent-teacher personal stories.

**Figure 4.9**

*Four Themes of Study*

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**Theme One: Teacher frustration and fear**

The words "fear" and "frustrated" were used the most by teachers to describe their concerns for students and families post-pandemic. During interviews, educators were eager to share their experience with minimal probing and appreciated having the time to discuss post-pandemic issues and the challenges of working with parents.
Below are teacher comments made regarding the fear for students post-pandemic:

Teacher B: “My students are being pushed to the next grade without mastering their current grade. I am so afraid because I know they are not proficient in reading, and we all know what happens to kids who can’t read.”

Teacher I: “Students are suffering emotionally and have not adjusted back to school. I’m seeing wild behaviors in students I thought I’d never see in elementary school. I have no idea how they are going to make it and I don’t know how they will make it past middle school, much less high school. Something’s wrong when I care more than the parent.”

Teacher G: “No attention span at all. Children are very disengaged. I try and try, but nothing gets through to them. I am scared I’m not a good teacher anymore. I have a feeling the parents are frustrated, too; that’s why they don’t call back.”

Teacher D: “These kids don’t know the basics and act like they don’t have to earn
their grades. Parents take up for kids too quick. I’m afraid we won’t have any successful graduates coming out this district.”

Post-pandemic teachers may have to deal with academic gaps and behavioral issues because of remote learning and school closures (Grosse, 2021), which make communication between parents and teachers increasingly important. However, effective communication between teachers and parents is crucial for a child's academic success (Epstein, 2013; Fefer et al., 2020; Hummel et al., 2023; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Teacher participants in the study expressed fear and frustration because they felt parents were not providing the necessary support at home to address the wide range of challenges. Without parents’ support, teachers believed that learning gaps would widen, making their role of helping students catch up academically more difficult. When sharing their negative experiences working with parents, teachers expressed that they often felt ignored or dismissed, which added to their frustration as classroom instructors. Examples of experiences with parents who did not respond to emails, phone calls, or other forms of communication were provided. As the researcher probed for a list of strategies teachers used in situations where parents were non-responsive, teachers shared becoming frustrated and giving up or passing the parent to an administrator.

Additionally, teachers were concerned that the extended period of remote learning may have affected students' attention spans, which has caused increasing classroom disruptions, social-emotional challenges, and widening academic gaps—which caused educators the most concern and anxiety. During probing on how parents could help, teachers shifted their core beliefs that parents should reinforce the importance of school, but no examples were provided on strategies parents could use at home to address learning or social-emotional and learning engagement needs.
Subtheme: Asset-Based Tools to Address Teacher Post-Pandemic Fears

With the Designed for Success program, educators were able to learn about ABCD and HCD in training sessions with other educators. In these training sessions, educators identified timely and relevant issues such as bullying, disruptive behavior, and student academic challenges. By engaging in a dialogue with colleagues on post-pandemic problems, educators were able to address the conditions that caused them fear and uncertainty around parent engagement. In addition, participating in a workshop with parents interested in improving school communication, provided the group an opportunity to share their concerns in a safe space with parents.

Prior to learning ABCD or HCD tools, the researcher shared the following prompts with teachers in the study:

- What strengths and positive qualities do parents bring to their child's education?
- List the unique perspectives or insights parents could provide a teacher about a student.
- How can a classroom teacher leverage the parents' knowledge, skills, and experiences to enhance their learning?

These reflection questions provided educators with the opportunity to have conversations from a new perspective and set the stage for educators to problem-solve common parent issues using a new, asset-based lens. Asset mapping activities allowed teachers to work together to identify their local communities' strengths, skills, and resources and the potential assets parents bring to the table.

In the parent-teacher workshop, educators were able to engage in asset-based problem-solving to complete an asset-mapping activity together with parents. When problem-solving, teachers indicated they needed to be made aware of the wide variety of
cultural assets in the local community. For example, in an activity designed around school suspensions and mentoring, parents and teachers brainstormed non-traditional support for students such as church deacons, small business owners, fraternal organization members, and local barbers and hair stylists. Although teachers had completed this activity previously among colleagues, they explained that the activity was more impactful with parents, allowing them to gain a deeper appreciation for the diverse backgrounds and social networks of parents. Engaging in problem-solving with non-educators enhanced the effectiveness of the problem-solving strategies used in the workshop. In addition, these hands-on activities promoted active engagement by fostering collaboration and partnership with teachers and parents; both agreed that they felt hopeful about improving parent engagement in their evaluations.

**Theme Two: Parent Fear and Uncertainty**

Although parents discussed learning gaps and additional post-pandemic challenges, they were optimistic that students could catch up or that the school administration would solve the problem through support programs. Parent optimism post-pandemic contrasted teacher fears and frustration around student academic performance. Interviewed parents did not express the same level of fear around academics as educators. However, parents did share fear and uncertainty concerning communicating with teachers. Parents appeared hesitant to approach teachers, sharing that they feared teachers were either overwhelmed or would not appreciate questioning from a parent.

Half of the parents in the study shared that after having a negative experience with a teacher, they would only approach the teacher again once they observed the teacher being friendly consistently or were spoken well of by another parent. Parents with negative experiences used the words "uppity" and "stuck-up" multiple times to explain
why they needed to observe teachers behave in a friendly manner on a consistent basis before they would approach them about a problem. It is to be noted that parents with favorable experiences with teachers often assumed teachers did not need their support or desire their support outside of school supplies. When probed further about providing support outside of school supplies, parents explained that they were uncertain about how to help at the school because they either worked full-time, did not know what to ask, or did not go to college.

Parent A: “I’m not sure how I can help the school. I’ll do whatever the teacher asks or needs if they can just let me know.”

Parent D: “I don’t have much time, but I could always bring supplies. I really don’t know what teachers need from me since I never went to college. I can’t volunteer or chaperone trips, but I guess I could do a better job asking.”

Parent F: “I would do almost anything if they were more communicative about my child’s learning progress and the areas he’s struggling in. My son has an IEP, and I still get little to no communication. Until they start communicating with me, they will get no more participation from me.”

Parent I: “I have four boys who all graduated from the school. I used to know the people at the school, but a lot of the folks I know left or retired. The new teachers and principal look uppity to me and I didn’t even know how to talk to them. I sat back and watched and saw a teacher that was really nice and spoke every day. I was nervous to talk to her, but I took a chance and asked her how I could help my son to not get left back. She helped me too, but I waited to see if I could talk to her because those teachers act uppity.”
Subtheme: Empathy Mapping Tools to Address Fear and Uncertainty

In Human-Centered Design, empathy mapping allows individuals to better understand perspectives, experiences, and emotions (Gasper, Goncalves & Filho, 2022). According to Cairns et al. (2021), an empathy map synthesizes information on an individual by visualizing what that person says, does, sees, and hears. During empathy mapping, individuals focus attention on an individual’s worries, fears, frustrations, wants and needs, and what makes them happy (Adam et al., 2019; Mercer & Reynolds, 2002; Romero & Donaldson, 2023).

The personas "Maria" and "Manny" were provided for teachers and parents to complete an empathy map and design their own questions. Maria is an immigrant and has an 8-year-old son named Manny. Manny is failing math and has not turned in homework for over a month. The teacher has called Maria and sent notes home in his folder. She has listened to the messages and explained to Manny to do better in school, but he has continued to not turn in homework assignments. In pairs, teachers and parents were asked to complete an empathy map and design follow-up questions to learn more about Maria and Manny's thoughts, feelings, and routines.

The researcher modeled completing the first three questions using the empathy mapping template. Parents and teachers worked together to complete the map and develop questions to learn more about the personas and increase empathy. At this stage, it took pairs longer than expected to get started, but they were able to discuss and record the ways the parent may feel isolated, lonely, and overwhelmed. As parents and teachers discussed the persona, they shared their own collective stories of feeling like the parent or the teacher.
Figure 4.11

Designed for Success Program Persona

Persona – Maria & Manny

Family:
Rodriguez
Maria – Age 27

Student:
Manny, 8 Years Old, 1st Grade

Story:
Maria recently moved to the US and is living with her Aunt. She is working a 2nd shift at a local plant, which allows her to take Manny to school each morning. When she drops him off at school, she tells Manny to be good and to respect his teachers. On Monday, Mrs. Elliott, Manny’s 1st grade teacher pulls Maria to the side and shares that Manny has failed his last two math tests and has not turned in homework for the past month. Maria goes to work but is worried. When she gets home Manny is asleep, but the next morning Maria tells Manny she is disappointed in him and that he needs to be good and “do better”. She spends each morning reminding him that he must do better in school.

Two weeks later…
Manny has continued to not turn in homework and is falling further behind in Math. Mrs. Elliott is frustrated and is not sure what to do.

In Brief:
Maria is bilingual. She has a 6-year-old son who is not performing well in Math.

Strengths:
Maria is thoughtful and caring. Manny is a skilled artist.

Problem:
Manny is not completing his homework and is not passing his math tests.

Let’s Take A Walk in Someone Else’s Shoes!
Empathy Mapping!
Say, Do, Think Feel
What questions might we ask Maria?
What questions might we ask Manny?

Note. Adapted from Stanford d.school Empathy Planner. License: Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-Sharealike 4.0 International. Stanford d.School Empathy Planner

Figure 4.12

Empathy Map

Note. Adapted from Stanford d.school Empathy Planner. License: Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-Sharealike 4.0 International. Stanford d.School Empathy Planner
Once empathy mapping were complete, pairs were challenged to create their own questions to further empathize with their persona, such as "What routines do they have for checking Manny's homework after Maria gets off work?" "How do you (Maria) feel being an immigrant? When was the last time you felt overwhelmed?" and "How comfortable do you (Maria) feel about disciplining Manny if he doesn't do his homework?". Empathy maps were remarkably better during the parent-teacher workshop than the teacher-only training; however, the researcher provided more support, parent and teacher participants asked more questions prior to the launch of the activity, and this was the second time teachers engaged with the empathy mapping tool.

Lastly, parents and teachers were asked to create a journey map based on a detailed schedule of Maria and Manny's day. Participants were provided a template to map each scene and develop a solution that may help solve the problem of Manny not completing his homework and not performing well in math. During the journey mapping activity, parents and teachers created maps or comic strips with pictures of Maria checking his homework log before going to bed, Maria asking Manny to count and multiply when she is cooking, Maria using Google translate to help with homework, and Manny learning to ask for help if he did not understand his math work in school. It was clear that the journey mapping activity was the most enjoyable activity for teachers and parents. At the end of this exercise, teachers shared that parents asked better empathy questions about the daily routine of Maria. Parents shared that teachers had better ideas to include on the journey map about how Maria could help at home, like using math while cooking or creating math flashcard games.
Theme Three:

Misunderstandings on Effective Parent Engagement

During teacher pre-workshop interviews, it became clear that teachers believed parents did not have the capacity to do more academically with students. Parents also agreed that they did not know how to support students academically; therefore, they sought additional support, such as being classroom volunteers or chaperones, providing school supplies, or reinforcing discipline. During interviews, parents believed these were the primary areas where teachers needed support, and teachers and parents were unaware of non-traditional parent engagement strategies.

According to Osefo (2017), "non-traditional forms of parent engagement are available and have helped families to come together to build relationships between schools and parents" (p. 64). However, non-traditional forms of engagement often need to be accounted for or recognized by schools and administrators in urban school environments (Osefo, 2017). For example, most teachers stated that parents were too easygoing and not as concerned about student's grades. However, most parents shared examples of having daily conversations with students on proper classroom behavior to reinforce learning. When parents did not return calls, teachers felt that parents did not care about academics. However, parents perceived practical support to be centered on the child's physical well-being, ensuring proper breakfast and nutrition, which would allow them to be physically ready to learn or follow up with more discipline. Overall, misunderstandings appeared when the parent perceived discipline as their primary responsibility and educators did not embrace non-traditional parent engagement activities as support.
Based on parent-teacher interviews, additional misunderstandings may occur when teachers expect parents to follow up on schoolwork and to practice concepts and skills at home based on standard communication methods, such as newsletters and homework logs. However, parents expressed feeling intimidated helping their children with schoolwork based on their education level or did not pursue conversations with teachers based on the perception that they were too busy or overwhelmed. When probed further, parents shared empathy for teachers post-pandemic but perceived teachers were too overwhelmed to talk to them, did not believe they could help with academics, and assumed that school supplies were the most desired.

Parent J: “I check my baby’s bookbag every afternoon to make sure there isn’t any notes from the teacher. She knows not to act up in school because I ask her about school daily. I stay on top of things like that and don’t have any problem going up to the school if she is not behaving, but I can’t help with the type of homework she has now.”

Parent G: “My grandson hasn’t had a good year at all. I don’t know how to help his teachers since I don’t know how to help him with his work. I can’t afford a tutor, but the teacher sends extra stuff home for him to do. I stay on him to complete it and will put him on punishment if she tells me he acts out, but I can’t really check his schoolwork to make sure it’s right.”

Parent E: “All the teachers look so stressed out. I leave them alone with so many kids in the class and not enough teachers. My daughter has one of the better teachers in the school, so I try not to bother her about anything.”

Teacher C: “My teacher program told us to provide a wide range of information for parents so they can access it any time of day. I have the folder that
goes home, the online website, and the platform they tell us to log student behavior. Once I post feedback online, it’s on them to make sure they follow up. When I don’t see a change in behavior or grades, that lets me know they haven’t done anything. I probably should do more, but I’m really nervous talking to parents, but at the end of the day, it’s on them.

Teacher D: “I have a parent that always brings me hand sanitizer, which I appreciate. But sometimes I’m like, ‘Ma’am your child acts up each day in class. Keep that hand sanitizer. I need help getting him in line.’ She tells me she’s trying, but I’m so frustrated. Who knows? She probably doesn’t know what else to do but bring supplies. I don’t know what to do either. I’ve tried everything.”

Teacher G: “Students lack motivation, and the desire to learn, and parents could model the importance of school by attending conferences and just picking up the phone. They certainly don’t need to join the PTO or SIC—just talk to me. I doubt they even read the newsletters, which is the easiest thing they could do to support us.

Through the Designed for Success program, teachers and parents engaged in discussions and activities that allowed participants to share stories. Storytelling is a powerful tool that appeals to an individual's senses and emotions, but the culture of school communities may not be conducive to allowing marginalized groups to use their voices (Ladson-Billings, 1998). According to Elbaz-Luwish (2001), storytelling and narratives can bring people from diverse backgrounds together, and educators can play a
significant role in building commonality in schools (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2001; Lindemann, 2020; Mensah, 2019).

The teacher and parent workshop allowed stories to be fostered through hands-on problem-solving activities that allowed participants to organically share their experiences in a school community. For example, the researcher briefly lectured teachers on Asset-based Community Development and Asset mapping. Teachers were challenged to create their asset map based on everyday scenarios, such as individuals, organizations, and experts they could contact if their car broke down and they had to move out of state. Once lists were created, the researcher asked parents and teachers how easy or hard it was to generate the lists. Teachers could discuss their cultural backgrounds, privileges, and connections and having more potential assets than their parents. By teachers engaging in storytelling through the lens of their personal privilege, they were able to gain a new perspective on parents and better understand the importance of asset-based thinking.

Additional stories were naturally generated through additional asset mapping activities in which educators were further challenged to brainstorm and find local individuals, civic organizations, associations, and businesses that would be able to help in a 30-mile radius and pin these organizations to a map. In parent and teacher workshops, participants were able to reminisce and share community stories of key people, organizations, and volunteer groups that supported their schools. Many stories shared were of past school practices, such as participating in home visits and community gatherings such as block parties, which allowed opportunities for individuals to get to know the local community better.
Theme Four:

Teachers and parents desire the time to connect and to share personal stories.

In post-workshop interviews, all teachers explained that the stories of the Designed for Success program were equally as important as the activities. Participants were able to share the stories they heard as they reflected on the change of perception. However, they felt they needed more time to further use these strategies to better understand one another. Many of the experienced teachers in the study explained that they saw value in the ABCD and HCD tools but felt "too old" to use new strategies or that their "minds were not wired" to solve problems a certain way. However, teachers with one to five years of experience shared that they wanted to learn more about design thinking. They could visualize how they might use the asset or journey mapping tools when working with the PTO or their grade level team with a problem student, but only after they had exhausted all other solutions. Teachers with less than five years of experience shared the same concern about time, impacting how often and consistently they would use new problem-solving strategies.

Additionally, during the final analysis of teacher open responses in pre- and post-workshop surveys, 70% of educators agreed to strongly agreed that teachers did not have the time required to engage parents in useful ways. In post-workshop interviews, teachers could share additional context to their responses, explaining that they were excited about the new strategies but were unsure how to implement them based on time constraints. In addition, teachers believed that HCD and ABCD tools were the best fit for parent advocates and administrators who would have more time to implement these strategies in the school environment effectively. These findings are consistent with research that shared that the implementation of design thinking tools in the school environment
requires an abundance of time resources that many school communities may not have available (Retna, 2016; Romero & Donaldson, 2023).

To further highlight this theme, teachers and parents shared the following in post-workshop interviews:

Teacher C: “It was challenging to not jump to a solution to a problem but following the Asset mapping exercise and listing out community assets helped me to see the parents in a new light. We can’t keep thinking that because families may be disadvantaged, they don’t have anything they can do to help.”

Teacher D: “This is the type of training we need. We get the same stuff over and over, but we need to sit down and talk to one another. We do the parent teacher conferences, but we need to invite parents to come and talk about our real problems with us. I promise you we would get a lot done if we were given the time.”

Parent G: “I was struggling in the beginning, to be honest, but it felt so good to list all the people I knew to help the school. I had no idea I knew so many people, or that is the type of stuff teachers need. I thought all they needed was school supplies. My family and church can help solve problems if they just ask us.”

Summary

This chapter's overview of the data collected included an analysis of pre- and post-workshop surveys, pre- and post-interviews, workshop evaluations, and observation notes from the intervention. Findings from these data points indicate that the Designed for Success program identified human-centered design tools that may shift parent-teacher
perceptions in Title I school communities. In addition, the data gathered uncovered common themes and subthemes found in parent-teacher relationships after the COVID-19 pandemic. The following chapter will provide a summary of the overall findings, a conclusion, and recommendations for future research and practice.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This mixed-methods study explored how teachers and parents may improve perceptions of parent engagement using human-centered design. A mixed methods approach, using both quantitative and qualitative data, helped to balance the strengths and weaknesses of the study and improve overall outcomes (Efron & Ravid, 2013). The researcher was able to measure thoughts, attitudes, perceptions, and the effectiveness of tools. The study collected data from 10 parents and 10 teachers using pre- and post-surveys using Epstein's Parent Survey on Family and Community Involvement in the Elementary and Middle Grades (Sheldon & Epstein, 2007). Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with the 10 teachers 10 parents to explore parent and teacher perceptions of parent engagement and parent responsibilities post-pandemic. The results from these data points helped the researcher identify four themes: (a) teacher frustration and fear, (b) parent fear and uncertainty, (c) misconceptions about effective parent engagement, and (d) a desire for parent engagement training to better understand parent-teacher personal stories and lived experiences.

Summary of the Study

This study was conducted to address post-pandemic concerns in education related to student academic achievement and the role of the parent and teacher. Traditionally, Title I schools serve students facing economic and academic challenges (South Carolina Department of Education, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic may have caused additional
gaps in learning and provided challenges for educators as they address disruptive behaviors in schools, especially among the most vulnerable of students (Grosse, 2021). Post-pandemic innovative strategies should be explored to help increase achievement and, since extensive research supports parent engagement as one of the most important indicators of the success of a student (Epstein, 1991, 1996; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jones & Palikara, 2023), additional studies may be needed in this area.

Studies have proven that two-way communication between home and school has led to improved grades and standardized test scores (Byungmo et al., 2021; Epstein et al., 1997; Gartmeier et al., 2017; Leenders et al., 2019; Westat et al., 2001). Unfortunately, research indicates minimal opportunities for teachers to practice and strengthen effective parent-teacher communication (Byungmo et al., 2021; De Bruïne et al., 2014; De Coninck et al., 2023; Epstein, 2013). It is further shared that teachers who are practically new to the profession regard conversations with parents as one of the most challenging aspects of their job (Stephens et al., 2022; Vanderlinde & Kelchtermans, 2013). As a result, new methods and approaches to prepare educators to strengthen school-home relationships are emphasized in the literature (Epstein, 2013; De Coninck et al., 2023; Walker & Legg, 2018).

According to Levickis et al. (2022), the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic created significant challenges for parents and educators, but despite the stressors and barriers, school communities were able to provide differing levels and varied types of support and personalized two-way communication. In addition, studies have shown that post-pandemic, parents have a deeper appreciation for the work of educators (Byungmo et al., 2021; Jones & Palikara, 2023; Yang & Chen 2023) which may provide a window of opportunity to establish authentic collaborative relationships. As Caspe et al. (2011)
stated the time is always ripe for “new models and approaches to preparing teachers for meaningful and effective family engagement” (p. 1). As a result, this study examined an innovative approach to strengthen parent-teacher relationships with 10 elementary teachers and 10 parents in two different Title I schools. Teachers and parents participated in the Designed for Success program, which used Human-Centered Design to address school-based problems. The following research questions were developed:

1. How does the Designed for Success program, which incorporates human-centered design, impact the tools and strategies that teachers and parents use to foster increased parental engagement in Title I elementary schools?
2. How does the Designed for Success program, which incorporates human-centered design, impact teachers' perceptions of parental engagement at Title I elementary schools?

Over the course of six weeks, the researcher implemented the Designed for Success program with 10 teachers and 10 parents who support students in two Title I elementary schools to uncover the answers to these questions. In the first phase, the researcher set the stage for data collection by promoting the study and gathering permissions. In the second phase, semi-structured interviews and surveys were conducted, which allowed parents and teachers to share their experiences and stories working with one another post-pandemic. In the third phase teachers participated in a two-part virtual workshop to learn the foundations of parent engagement, asset-based approaches to problem-solving, and human-centered design thinking strategies that could be used to solve problems in the school environment. Teachers engaged in exercises using asset-based approaches to problem-solving, such as asset mapping, empathy, and journey mapping tools to find solutions. In the fourth phase, educators worked alongside
parents to discuss and identify solutions to common school-related problems using these human-centered design-thinking and asset-based techniques. In the final stage, the researcher administered a post-workshop survey to collect data on whether teacher and parent perceptions had changed after completing the *Designed for Success* program. In addition, post-workshop interviews were conducted with participants to identify further how specific human-centered design thinking exercises and asset-based approaches may have impacted their perceptions of parents and teachers.

The study revealed that parent and teacher perceptions were improved through the *Designed for Success* program, which allowed teachers and parents to explore innovative strategies to problem solve. Four themes emerged on parent engagement in Title I elementary schools during data collection centered on:

1. Post-pandemic related fear and frustration about student achievement.
2. Parental fear and uncertainty on how best to approach and support teachers.
3. Teacher and parent misconceptions on parent-teacher roles and responsibilities.
4. Teachers and parents desire the time to connect and share personal stories.

The subthemes that emerged about parent engagement and human-centered design identified that (a) asset-based strategies can be used to improve perceptions, (b) human-centered design tools can be used to problem-solve and address fear and insecurities. Each theme and subthemes supported the research questions and answers related to parent engagement and human-centered design tools.

**Implications of Findings**

The literature review for this study explored research on deficit-thinking (Valencia, 2010) through the lens of Epstein’s framework for Parent Involvement.
Research was also expanded to identify potential tools that could be used to improve parent engagement perceptions and engage both groups in solving common school-based problems. Asset-Based Community Development (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993) and Human-Centered Design-thinking (Brown, 2009; Raz, 2018) research provided insights on how to invite diverse stakeholders into collaborative problem-solving. The tools identified through research, such as asset and empathy mapping, were used as part of the intervention with parents and teachers.

Researchers have theorized that there are multiple factors that impact student achievement, but an abundance of studies support parent engagement as the most consistent and effective strategy to improve student outcomes (Byungmo et al., 2021; Epstein et al., 1997; Gartmeier et al., 2017; Leenders et al., 2019; Westat, et al., 2001). The goal of the study was to develop a school-based program that would teach specific skills that would not only support relationship-building but solve timely relevant problems faced within family engagement. Data analysis suggested that asset-based tools, such as human-centered design thinking, positively impacted parent-teacher relationships. The study's implications reflected that school communities can improve parent engagement through training incorporating shared problem-solving exercises to address post-pandemic issues.

Furthermore, parent and teacher perceptions improved by participating in the Designed for Success program, evidenced through pre- and post-surveys and interviews. All 10 parents and 10 teachers agreed they would recommend the training to others. In addition, participants indicated a desire for schools to prioritize learning events that addressed timely issues alongside the groups most impacted. Based on data collected from surveys, interviews, and observation notes, parents and teachers were not aware of
the level of misinterpreted cues which led to increased fear, frustration, and uncertainty in the parent-teacher relationship. Parents and teachers agreed that caregivers did not know how to help their children at home. The majority of teachers (80%) and parents (70%) disagreed to strongly disagreed that "Most parents knew how to help students with their schoolwork at home." However, during interviews, both groups could not provide any specific problem-solving that had been done to address this area of concern. Also, parents and teachers agreed that all families had strengths to add to the school community, but neither group could clearly identify those strengths. For example, 90% of teachers and parents agreed to strongly agreed that "Every family had some strengths that could be tapped into to increase students' success in school," but upon prompting, minimal examples were provided. Lastly, each group made assumptions related to the qualifiers for effective parent engagement at home, but parents and teachers were only able to identify a limited number of strategies related to supporting students at home.

Two-way communication between parents and teachers may only improve once more targeted conversations on traditional and non-traditional parent engagement can serve as a baseline for parent engagement conversations. Parent and teacher core beliefs about roles and responsibilities of one another appear to lead to misconceptions. Concrete messaging on roles, responsibilities, needs, and wants related to school and home may be needed to limit the assumptions and misconceptions that hinder the parent-teacher relationship.

Blömeke et al. (2015), share that school situation-specific skills related to parent-teacher communication are needed. The findings from the Designed for Success program support this research in that expert-novice teachers conceptualize school-based problems differently, with expert teachers identifying problems more accurately and being more
flexible in decision-making (Berliner, 2001; Stephens et al., 2022). In the study, expert teachers with five or more years of experience were able to address HCD persona-based problems faster than novice teachers and provided a wider variety of solutions once they gathered information. Although most teachers' situation-specific skill development is centered on classroom management (Sherin & Van Es, 2002; Stephens et al., 2022), additional teacher practice, especially for new teachers, may be needed in parent-teacher communication situations (De Coninck et al., 2023).

In addition, school communities may want to share their overall academic concerns with parents each school year in a psychologically safe setting. Slusareva et al., (2020) share that psychological safety in schools can be defined as an environment that ensures the safety of the psyche of the subjects involved in the educational process. Within the framework of parent engagement, the threat of psychological safety may cause parents and teachers to avoid communication and situations in which deeper conversations are needed.

To foster collaboration between parents and teachers and address learning gaps caused by the pandemic, crucial conversations are needed on academics and assessment data. Two-way communication is necessary for successful school partnerships, which require ongoing interactions between parents and teachers to understand better and reinforce responsibilities and viewpoints (Atojonen, 2014; Byungmo et al., 2021; Leender et al., 2019). Post-pandemic school-initiated collaboration will be critical to improving the educational outcomes of students. However, as this study and others have indicated, parents may be hesitant to address academics and assessment data due to a variety of reasons, including the belief that this is a responsibility solely of the teacher (Braunschweig et al., 2019; Broome, 2018; Peace-Hughes et al., 2021; McKinney, 2017;
Nieminen, 2021). Jones & Palikara (2023) reinforce this notion even during the post-pandemic school setting, in which parents may not address academics holding the belief that they are intruding or are being disrespectful if they ask for clarification, while teachers may interpret these actions as parents not caring or being uninterested in their child's success at school. In addition, the overemphasis of training on core subjects in Title I schools (Dynarski & Kainz, 2015) and the lack of training on building effective school and home relationships with teachers (Poskitt, 2018), may have resulted in an ongoing cycle of misconceptions and academic underperformance.

The study also showed that a lack of parent engagement could be attributed to the fear and intimidation of parents approaching teachers due to the varied education levels between both groups. In high-poverty school communities, communications may need to use warm, confidence-boosting language to encourage parents that they have the capacity to support learning at home. Inclusive communication with intentional, psychologically safe language may help minimize conflict and increase outcomes (Slusreva & Dontsov, 2020). In addition, schools may need to explore the development of tiered listings of activities that can be completed at home that fit the parent's comfort and time commitment level.

By further examining the implications of this study, the researcher was able to understand better how human-centered design tools and asset-based strategies can enhance parent engagement through the Designed for Success program. The design tool of empathy mapping provided participants with a comprehensive understanding of the unmet needs of parents and teachers in a psychologically safe environment. Participants could remove themselves from the situation by using a persona or scenario and examine the problem through a fresh lens. The conversations participants engaged in during the
empathy mapping experience improved perceptions by helping groups practice problem-solving through the stance of a teacher or parent. Also, by having participants assume opposite roles during the exercises, participants were able to co-create solutions as they listened to stories told from different lived experiences. The collaboration between parents and teachers helped to foster a sense of ownership, which increased workshop satisfaction and the desire for future parent-teacher training.

In particular, the empathy mapping process created a trusting and collaborative relationship between parents and teachers because the exercise encouraged open communication through problem-solving and decision-making. Educators were able to solve a common school issue with a parent, which helped them identify gaps in communication and understanding from another point of view. By gaining insights into parent perspectives and priorities, teachers were able to determine that school newsletters may not be enough and that more personalized messaging may be needed to make information more accessible for parents.

This study supports the use of Human-Centered Design tools to improve the perceptions of teachers and parents in Title I elementary schools. The two research questions that were answered are as follows:

1. Human-Centered Design tools are viewed favorably and can be used with parents and teachers to improve parent engagement within Title I school communities.

2. The Designed for Success program, which incorporated Human-Centered Design, improved parent-teacher perceptions through use of human-centered design activities.

**Methodological Limitations**

Methodological limitations can impact the data collection process. In this study, several limitations impacted the findings. The limitation of this study includes sample
size, participant selection, and length of study. The researcher carefully considered these limitations when interpreting and applying the findings of the study.

A limitation of this research was the small sample size of 10 parents and 10 teachers. With a small sample size of Title I parents and teachers, the researcher was unable to generalize the study's findings to the larger population. Results in this study may not accurately represent parent and teacher relationships in high-poverty school communities or be applicable in additional contexts. In addition, the sample size may increase sampling error and may not capture the target population's full range of perspectives and experiences.

The second methodological limitation was participation selection. Participants were selected from two urban school districts within the same region of South Carolina. This was done to ensure participants could attend a face-to-face parent-teacher training. However, by limiting participant selection, the study may not have adequately represented the different variables that exist in different types of school districts and communities, such as rural school communities. This may also impact the reliability and validity of the study's conclusions. Also, parents and teachers were recruited based on their current interest in family engagement, which provided participants who had some previous experience working with members in the school and at home.

A third limitation of the study is related to the intervention used with parents and teachers. The Designed for Success program provided teachers and parents with different learning opportunities on HCD due to time constraints. Teachers were able to participate in a two-parent virtual training and workshop, however, parents received only the face-to-face workshop. Findings show that parents did not find HCD tools as effective, which
may be due to parents and teachers not receiving the same interventions and limits the study.

Last, the study was limited due to the length of time the study was conducted. The study took place within six weeks, which limits the overall data needed to determine the effectiveness of the Designed for Success program and the sustainability of human-centered design tools learned. The study was unable to determine the sustainability of HCD tools or whether parent-teacher relationships improved in the participants' local school community.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

This study contributes to existing research on parent engagement and the effectiveness of human-centered design tools. The purpose of this study was to improve the perceptions of parents and teachers and to examine human-centered design tools that may increase parent engagement within Title I elementary schools. The researcher identified three areas for future research in parent engagement in high-poverty school communities.

As the study examined the lack of strong parent-teacher relationships in Title I elementary schools, the researcher determined that post-pandemic school communities should develop parent-teacher meetings to engage in academic conversations. Research to determine how schools can set the conditions needed to engage parents at all socioeconomic and educational levels in academic conversations while maintaining self-esteem and psychological safety may be helpful to this area of study. Teacher and parent emotional comfort can be described as situations where both groups are able to preserve their dignity and respect while expressing their opinions and seeking support (Slusareva & Dontsov, 2019). Moreover, as schools continue to address the learning gaps created by
the global pandemic, parents and teachers must feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and asking for the support needed to help students.

Also, during the pandemic, families had to shift from face-to-face teaching to distance learning, which further blur the responsibilities between school and family and raised new challenges for parents who had to be more responsible for their children's learning (Garbe et al., 2020). Recent studies exploring the impact of COVID-19 on the role of the parent in the United States indicate that the pandemic substantially widened socioeconomic gaps, with low-income families engaging in more unstructured learning time and higher-income families engaging in higher levels of online learning (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2020). Based on these findings, schools may need to explore various strategies to engage poor parents to maintain learning outside of school (Addi-Raccah & Seeberger Tamir, 2023). Further, teacher burnout, based on the changing ways of working due to COVID-19, may require school administrators to provide additional support to teachers that do not have the capacity to perform additional outreach (Pressley, 2021).

Another opportunity for future research would be to explore how human-centered design can be embedded into standard school processes when addressing complex, challenging, and consistent problems. Traditional family engagement events such as open houses, parent-teacher conferences, math and literacy nights, and volunteer opportunities have been explored (Epstein, 2013). However, these events may not cultivate the level of trust needed to allow parents and teachers to share their authentic stories. Future studies could examine strategies to amplify parent-teacher voice and cultivate trust by redesigning traditional school events through the use of HCD tools, which may lead to a greater impact and increase engagement.
A final suggestion for future research would be to explore training for new teachers on human-centered design and parent engagement. New teachers in the study appeared to deeply understand the framework and were excited to continue using the methodology to solve problems if provided the time. A study exploring training with new teachers on the power of storytelling, amplifying parent voices, trust building, and innovative problem-solving may be an interesting addition to studies on parent engagement.

**Action Plan**

Action research requires the researcher to formulate a plan once the study is completed (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The researcher plans to share her findings with parents, educators, and community organizations that would like to work on solving complex problems involving students. The findings from the *Designed for Success* program will be used to help teachers, parents, and civic organizations better understand the perspectives of others. By engaging key community stakeholders in empathy asset-based thinking activities, the researcher can continue to uncover the complexities of parent engagement and problem-solving solutions in high-poverty communities.

As a consultant, the researcher will continue to develop and refine templates and step-by-step guides to help teachers repeat the use of HCD tools during daily school-based planning meetings. The study emphasized the importance of intentionality when communicating with parents, therefore providing concrete examples for teachers, and the step-by-step guides may continue to strengthen relationships. The researcher will also continue to offer inclusive training that will allow parents and teachers a safe space to share their stories and build parents' confidence in engaging in academic conversations.
with teachers. Parent sessions will be offered at a local library in a Title I community to provide parents with strategies to enhance parent-teacher communication and collaboration before relationships are strained. Bridging communication gaps, building trust, and establishing strong partnerships within low-income communities will be an ongoing action for the researcher.

The school lockdowns stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic offer opportunities for reimagining parent-teacher relationships in schools for both high and low-socioeconomic families. The impact that strong family/parent involvement can have on student success is well documented (Epstein, 2013), but race and class may create diverse barriers in the schooling experience for families (Bei & Knowler, 2022; Sleeter, 2017). Based on the study, school staff and educators should be sensitive to the social differences between parents and refine their messaging to ensure all parents feel empowered to support their students at home. In addition, schools may need to consider parent gender and the strain of the responsibility of schooling on mothers, grandmothers, and aunts. Although this was not a primary focus, most caregivers in this study and during the pandemic were females who served as the primary source of safety, financial security, comfort, and protection for students (Forbes et al., 2022). The additional task of leading schooling at home may exacerbate women's lives, further requiring more intentionality related to school-home partnerships (Addi-Raccah & Seeberger Tamir, 2023).

**Conclusion**

This action research study explored how the Designed for Success program, using Human-Centered Design tools, could improve parent-teacher relationships in Title I elementary schools. All participants in the study agreed that the program was impactful.
and that they would recommend the program to others. This study used Human-Centered Design and asset-based thinking strategies to help teachers and parents examine their core beliefs and engage in active learning as they solved common school-based problems. The researcher's goals were to provide an opportunity for parents and teachers to work together to find solutions to shared problems while using tools that would increase empathy and collective storytelling. Although all participants viewed the training favorably, school-based time constraints and the variation in intervention used with parents and teachers was a concern. As school leaders strive to address student challenges post-pandemic, additional stakeholder groups, such as administrators, school board members, and civic groups, may need training to better understand the value of collaborative problem-solving and its potential impact on the lives of families most in need.
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APPENDIX A

PARENT SURVEY

Introduction

We are working to improve ways that schools and families can help each other and help all children succeed in school. We want feedback from parents with a child or children in Title I Elementary schools. This information will be used in the study to develop new strategies for school and family engagement post-pandemic. To do the best job, we need ideas from EVERY FAMILY. The questions in this survey were developed by teachers and administrators working with researchers at Johns Hopkins University. They also designed questions for families to learn about their ideas and needs. You may skip any question, but we hope you will answer them all.

1. Who is filling out this survey?

2. HOW MANY CHILDREN in your family go to school THIS YEAR?

3. If you have more than one child in school, please answer the questions in this survey about your OLDEST CHILD at school. What is the gender of your OLDEST child?

4. What is your highest education?

This section of questions will ask for your professional judgment about parent involvement. Please select the one choice for each item that best represents your opinion and experience.

Strongly Agree   Agree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

1. Most parents know how to help their children on schoolwork at home.
2. Every family has some strengths that could be tapped to increase student success in school.

3. Parent involvement is important for student success in school.

The next questions ask for your opinions about the activities that you think should be conducted by the parents. Select the choice that best describes the importance of these activities. IT IS THE PARENT'S RESPONSIBILITY TO.....

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not Important</th>
<th>A Little Important</th>
<th>Pretty Important</th>
<th>Very Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. Send children to school ready to learn.

2. Teach children to behave well.

3. Know what children are expected to learn each year.

4. Ask teachers for specific ideas on how to help their children at home with classwork.

5. Talk to children about the importance of school.

Open-ended survey responses

1. What is your greatest concern as a parent after the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. What is ONE thing you and your family could do to help the school or child's teacher?

Please use the space below for additional comments or feedback
APPENDIX B

TEACHER SURVEY

Introduction
In this study, we aim to learn more about how schools and families can assist each other to better understand and improve family and school connections. The questions in this survey were developed by teachers and administrators working with researchers at Johns Hopkins University. They also designed questions for families to learn about their ideas and needs. Many teachers and families have completed the surveys as a first step toward improving their schools' practices of partnerships. Please know all information you provide is confidential and your participation is voluntary, and you may leave any question unanswered. Please note: In this survey, "Parent" means the adult in the family who has the most contact with the school about the child.

1. How many years have you served as an educator?
2. How many years have you served as an educator in a Title I school?
3. What grade(s) did you teach THIS YEAR?
4. How many students do you teach each day, on average?

This section of questions will ask for your professional judgment about parent involvement. Please select the one choice for each item that best represents your opinion and experience.

Strongly Agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly Disagree
4. Most parents know how to help their children on schoolwork at home.
5. Every family has some strengths that could be tapped to increase student success in school.
6. Parent involvement is important for student success in school.
The next questions ask for your opinions about the activities that you think should be conducted by the parents of the children you teach. Select the choice that best describes the importance of these activities. IT IS THE PARENT'S RESPONSIBILITY TO.....

Not Important      A Little Important      Pretty Important      Very Important

6. Send children to school ready to learn.
7. Teach children to behave well.
8. Know what children are expected to learn each year.
9. Ask teachers for specific ideas on how to help their children at home with classwork.
10. Talk to children about the importance of school.

Open Ended Survey Questions

1. What is your greatest concern as an educator after the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What is ONE thing your student's family could do to help you as an educator?

Please use the space below for additional comments or feedback
APPENDIX C

PARENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Describe your greatest concern about your student/child's education post-pandemic.

2. Tell me your greatest dream or wish for your students when they finish school.

3. Tell me about a time when you and a teacher/parent worked well together.
   Probing: Why did it work well? Why didn't it work well?

4. Describe the process you use when you have a concern or problem with a student/parent. Probing: What do you do when things are not resolved?

5. What is your greatest concern when working with teachers/parents?

6. If you had a magic wand and could change one thing about the parent-teacher relationship, what would it be? Why?

7. What comes to mind if you were to hear someone say, "Parents/Teachers just don't care"?

8. Is there anything else you would like me to know about your experience with parents/teachers?
APPENDIX D

TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Describe your proudest teacher moment.

2. Tell me your greatest dream or wish for your students when they finish school.

3. How has the pandemic impacted student learning? Parent engagement and involvement in school?

4. Describe the process you use when you have a concern or problem with a student.

5. Tell me about a time when you and your student’s parent worked well together as partners. Why did it work well OR why didn’t it work well.

6. How do you establish trust and relationship with parents?

7. If you had a magic wish and could change one thing about the parent-teacher relationship, what would it be?

8. What comes to mind if you were to hear someone say, "Parents/Teachers just don't care"?

9. Is there anything else you would like us to know about what is important to you about your child’s education?
APPENDIX E

DESIGNED FOR SUCCESS WORKSHOP EVALUATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The content was informative and engaging</td>
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<td>2. The daily reflection questions were appropriate</td>
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<td>3. The content shifted my thinking</td>
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<td>4. I have a basic understanding of design thinking</td>
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<td>5. I have a basic understanding of asset-based or strengthens based thinking.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. I can use design thinking tools to solve a problem</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Personas, empathy mapping &amp; journey mapping)</td>
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<td>7. I can use asset-based approaches to solve a problem</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Asset mapping)</td>
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<td>8. I am confident I can explain what I learned with others.</td>
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<td>9. I feel hopeful working with parents and teachers next school year.</td>
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<td>10. I would recommend this workshop to friend or colleague.</td>
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</tbody>
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Please use the space below for additional comments or feedback
APPENDIX F

PERMISSION LETTER

Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships
Johns Hopkins University • 2800 North Charles Street, Suite 420 • Baltimore MD 21218
TEL: 410-516-8800 • FAX: 410-516-5572 • nmpsf@jhu.edu

01/06/2023

To: Andrea Lance
From: Joyce L. Epstein & Steven B. Sheldon

Re: Permission to use:


This letter grants you permission to use, adapt, and/or translate the surveys noted above in your study.

We ask only that you include appropriate references to the survey and authors in the text and bibliography of your reports and publications.

Best of luck with your project.