

Belonging in Parent-School Partnerships: Perspectives of Parents of Middle School  
Students with Autism

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
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College of Education  
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Date of Approval:  
October 30, 2014

Keywords: Belonging, partnership, collaboration, school-family subsystem

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## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to all those whose lives are touched by autism. May it serve to help build mutual understandings and develop collaborative relationships between us all.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Our lives are influenced by many others as we sail the seas of time. As I have navigated the often muddy waters of parent-school relationships, across seas both rough and calm, catching soft breezes and raging gales in my sails, to finally come to the port of dissertation, I find that I have sailed in company with a uniquely fine crew. Please accept here my humble and tremendous thanks, shipmates.

First, to my wife and First Mate, Lisa. Your love, patience and encouragement in this journey have kept the ship afloat, even during the direst of days. You, above all others, put your faith in me when I had little faith in myself. You mended the torn sails of my pride and patched the leaking seams along the hull of my self-confidence. When you instinctively knew it was time, you took charge, changing course to briefly set anchor in some small corner of paradise and came with me ashore, returning my feet to the ground with much needed rest and relaxation. I am, in all things and in all ways grateful to you and to the karma that has put us together.

Next, to my dissertation committee, the Admiralty. You taught me to navigate by sun and stars using the logs and charts of other mariners who have gone before. You sent me forth upon rough seas, but you were always with me. I knew your presence and felt your guidance at each turn of course and came safely home because of you.

Thanks to my good friend and colleague, Tyler Hicks - a fellow Captain piloting his own vessel, although toward a different port. As our ships passed close abeam upon our

separate journeys, we shared our stores and charts, and reflected together upon our developing our skills.

To the parents who participated in this study, the shipbuilders. Truly yours is the ship upon which I sailed. Every plank and nail, each fixture, and every thread of every line and sail were put in place by your hands, from the tip of mainmast to keel and bow to stern.

To my dear friend and shipmate, Fred Wilson, who was taken much too soon from this world. You taught me what dedication should look like, as a parent, as a teacher, and as a friend.

Finally, yet not least, thanks to my mentor, colleague and dear friend, Dr. Phyllis Jones. A sailor can only truly learn well by the hand of master, one who takes you and molds you with kindness, wisdom, knowledge and mightily high expectations. You are the embodiment of these things, the personification of them, and I cannot begin to express the sincerity or depth of my gratitude.

To you all, I wish...

Fair winds and following seas.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The goal of this study is to contribute to understandings of parent-school relationships involving parents of students with autism by exploring notions of belonging with a small group of parents. The purpose of the study is to describe the experiences of middle school parents of children with autism. From these descriptions, I examined how parents of students with autism might contribute to understandings of belonging in school-family partnerships and enable schools and families to collaborate more effectively. This study addresses an apparent gap in understandings of belonging of parents of children with autism in their relationships with their child's school. As parents are asked to make connections with their children's school in parent-school partnerships, understandings of those connections are vital to generating and sustaining meaningful and effective relationships between parents and schools. This study uses thick descriptive methods (Geertz, 1973) to examine the phenomenon of belonging in parent-school partnerships among a small group of parents of middle school children with autism. The experiences of the parents in this study suggest that parents of middle school students with autism seek a sense of belonging in their relationships with those they work with regarding their children's schooling. This study also suggests that a sense of belonging may be an essential element of effective parent-school partnerships.

## **CHAPTER ONE:**

### **INTRODUCTION**

It is the duty of every town to educate its children, up to such a point, that they may know their duties and be disposed to perform them.

Mann, 1839, p. 53

This chapter outlines the historic evolution and current state of parent-school relations that apply to parents of students with autism and sets the research problem and purpose of the study. Further, this chapter describes the conceptual framework and rationale for the study and presents a list of research questions that guided the study, concluding with a definition of terms.

This study examined the perspectives of a small group of parents of middle school students with autism regarding their experiences of belonging as partners with their children's schools. Recently, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said,

I want all parents to be real partners in education with their children's teachers, from cradle to career. In this partnership, students and parents should feel connected--and teachers should feel supported

(Duncan, 2010, May 3).

This quote is taken from the Secretary's speech before the Mom Congress in which he explained his vision for improving American schools through parent-school partnership. In that speech, Secretary Duncan framed parent perspectives of their children's schooling as positive but requiring improvement, and proposing a vision for American schools that redefines the role of parents as partners with schools in educating their children.

Secretary Duncan's vision is not new. Since the beginning of the current millennium, federal initiatives for establishing and improving parent-school partnerships with parents of students, including parents of students with autism, have been included in education legislation and grant initiatives (e.g., Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004; No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, U.S. Department of Education, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2013). These initiatives are supported by a growing body of research demonstrating that parent involvement makes a difference in student learning outcomes (e.g., Cross, Traub, Hutter-Pishgahi, & Shelton, 2004; Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2003, 2005, 2007). This body of research includes evidence that supports improved academic and behavioral outcomes for students with autism through parent involvement practices (e.g., DeRosier, Swick, Davis, McMillen, & Matthews, 2011; Schopler, 2001; Wallace & Rogers, 2010).

To appreciate the current state of parent-school partnerships, I believe it is essential to first explore the history of parent-school relations. For most of human history in North America, parents were the primary providers and principal decision makers regarding their children's education. Both before and after the first European settlers established themselves along what is now the eastern United States, children were being taught the cultural, spiritual, and economic roles and responsibilities of life within their cultures and communities (Kamp, 2001; Marten, 2007; Reagan, 2000). Many families certainly experienced having children with disabilities in these cultures - some through naturally occurring physical and neurological diversity, and others as a product of disease, illness, war, or accident (Nielsen, 2012). Throughout the colonial era and well into the dawn of the new Republic (approximately from 1607 to 1830), opportunities for formal schooling were

sparse, and community services for children with disabilities virtually non-existent (Rury, 2002; Winzer, 1993). Parents determined what, where and when their children would learn, yet were restricted by the few options available outside the home, and even fewer options for their children with disabilities. In general, children with disabilities either blended into the community or were confined to the home (Wickham, 2006).

As the new Republic expanded its borders and population, concern for increasing crime and disorder among the nation's youth inspired the establishment and rapid growth of publically funded, unified school systems (Kaestle, 1983). These common schools systems were envisioned as a means to protect and promote the moral and cultural integrity of the nation (Kaestle, 1983; Spring, 2001). Yet the term common school is somewhat deceiving in that they were less common in who attended than the term might imply. Additionally, common schools remained primarily a voluntary institution within a predominately agrarian society that valued the skills of the agrarian life over academic pursuits (Tyack, 1974), and families of children with disabilities still had few opportunities for an education outside the home (Winzer, 1993).

Following the Civil War and throughout the era of industrialization (roughly 1865 to 1940), interest in publically funded schooling continued to increase and school populations to steadily grow, despite State compulsory education laws that largely went unenforced until the 1930s (Katz, 1976). Educational opportunities for children with disabilities also increased as institutions were launched to treat specific populations, such as children who were deaf, blind, or intellectually impaired (Winzer, 1993). Although States were enacting compulsory education laws, the majority of States and districts established exclusionary policies and practices to prevent children with disabilities from attending schools (Yell,

Rogers, & Rogers, 1998) as evidenced by the courts' support of those policies in cases such as *Beattie v. Board of Education* (1919), *Williams v. Board of Education* (1908), *Department of Public Welfare v. Hass* (1958), and in the initial bill proposing the Education for All Handicapped Children Act's (1975) affirmation that of approximately seven million children identified with disabilities in the United States at the time, "One million of these children are excluded entirely from the public school system and will not go through the educational process with their peers" (Committee on Public Welfare, 1973, p. 4). Again, many families were left without the benefit of a public education for their children with disabilities, and retained exclusive responsibility for their children's education related development.

In the three decades following the end of World War II, the United States was challenged to address its policies and practices of racial apartheid (Kushner, 1980). This era of civil rights reform brought national attention to the marginalization of its citizens of color, including the state-sponsored school segregation of students by race (Ezra, 2009). Through organized advocacy that included the leadership of parents, the U.S. Supreme Court determined that segregation of students by their unalterable characteristics was a violation of the U.S. Constitution (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954). This decision paved the way for parents to address the segregation and exclusion of their children with disabilities from public educational services through the federal courts system (Giuliani, 2012).

By the early 1970s, two parent-led court cases - *PARC v. Pennsylvania* and *Mills v. School Board of the District of Columbia* - resulted in the federal courts confirming the right of access to public school for children with disabilities (Yell, Rogers, & Rogers, 2012).



Further parent-led advocacy prompted the U.S. Congress to pass the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) (1975), establishing the educational rights of children with disabilities and recognizing parents as the defenders of those rights (Ong-Dean, 2009) as “equal partners in the special education process” (Yell, 2012, p. 72). Increasing parent and professional advocacy continued to emerge, such as in the establishment of the American Association on Mental Deficiency (later The Association for Severely Handicapped, and now TASH) in 1975 to create an activist policy agenda to address their concerns through national and state legislative bodies (Sailor, 2011).

Subsequent policy amendments strengthened the rights of parents in the education process. The 1986 amendments to EAHCA included a provision to award court fees to parents who prevail in cases involving the child’s right to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) (Handicapped Children’s Protection Act of 1986), alleviating some of the financial burden parents experienced in challenging school policies and practices. These amendments also introduced the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) Along with changing the name to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the 1990 reauthorization of EAHCA recognized autism as one of the thirteen disability categories under which students may be eligible for special education services. The 1997 amendments to IDEA strengthened the recognition of parents as collaborative partners with schools, clarified the roles of legal guardians and surrogate parents, required schools to inform parents of students’ progress toward educational goals as often as non-disabled students were notified of their progress, and required parent participation in decisions regarding eligibility and placement in special education. These measure were taken “to ensure the rights of children with disabilities and parents of such children are protected”

(Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990, Section 601(d)(1)(B)). The current iteration of IDEA as the Individuals with Disabilities Education improvement Act (2004) (IDEIA) expanded the definition of parents to include natural, adoptive, and foster parents, guardians, or persons acting in the role of parent with whom the child resides. It also required schools to provide an interpreter in the parent's native language during individualized education plan (IEP) meetings and to obtain written agreement for the excusal of IEP team members from attending meetings.

While IDEIA recognized parents as vital participants in designing their child's individualized educational program, it also placed a tremendous burden on individual parents to inform themselves and function within the complexities of the special education structure (Ong-Dean, 2009). Some of these challenges many parents encounter include: Interpreting and using the professional language of special education (Harry & Kalyanpur, 2012); identifying and coordinating services across multiple providers and agencies (Stroul, Blau, & Sondheimer, 2008); and parent action as the leading vehicle for enforcing IDEA (Wakelin, 2008).

From the early implementation of federal legislation to provide educational services to children with disabilities, many parents were concerned for their own lack of knowledge and skill in providing meaningful participation in developing individualized educational plans, relying on the knowledge and skill of the professionals over their own (Lewis, 1977; Norton, 1977; Penney, 1977; Sagstetter, 1977). According to Ong-Dean (2009), it was believed that legislation would create an egalitarian and democratic system in which the public would participate in promoting the social, vocational and academic welfare of citizens with disabilities. He additionally pointed out that the legislation appeared to have

evolved from a reform initiative into a system of technical management in which schools and parents treat special education law as a functional checklist for compliance rather than a system of reform through democratic participation. As a matter of compliance, the law and its resulting practices have created a system of conflict between parents and schools (Gryphon & Salisbury, 2002; Ong-Dean, 2009). This litigious context is evident in Zirkel's (2011) study of special education litigation involving free and appropriate education/least restrictive environment in which he found children with autism accounted for approximately one third of published court decisions, and a disproportionate increase in litigation compared with increases in eligibility for services for autism spectrum disorders under IDEA.

Current parent-school relationships with families of students with autism appear to be disproportionately strained in comparison with other family groups (Lake & Stewart, 2012). In their study of parent involvement and satisfaction among families of children with autism, Zablotsky, Boswell, and Smith (2012) found that while this group of parents was more inclined to attend school conferences, meet with service providers and help with homework, they were more dissatisfied with home-school communication than other parent groups. In their study of parents of children with autism's perspectives on parent-school relations, Stoner and her associates (2005) found their group of eight parents of four children with autism struggled with issues of obtaining a diagnosis, confusion in learning new professional based vocabulary, working with new staff, and adapting to school cultures. These parents also reported difficulties in obtaining appropriate services after confirmation of a diagnosis of autism.

If national policy has not resolved conflict between school and parent, some teacher preparation and professional practice policies have developed to enhance parent-teacher relationships (Marschall, Shah, & Donato, 2012). The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (2008) (NCATE) has included a provision within its conceptual framework that requires teacher preparation programs to develop teacher skills in fostering relationships with parents and families to support student's learning and well-being. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (1999) (NBPTS) included the requirement for teachers to demonstrate collaboration with families to support their children's education and act as links in family resource networks. The Council for Exceptional Children's Professional Standards demand that teachers seek and use parent knowledge, maintain communications with families, and inform parents of their rights and procedural safeguards (Council for Exceptional Children, 2009).

As noted above, recent federal initiatives have promoted increased family involvement in education that affect families of children with disabilities in schools. The federally funded Race-to-the-Top competition has awarded points for districts developing education improvement plans that use support from stakeholders, including parent organizations (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Similarly, the Investing in Innovation (i3) grant competition added an absolute priority focused on improving parent and family engagement in schooling (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Parent-school partnerships are promoted in legislation, research, and professional educator practice as a means of improving student outcomes. In addition to the policy and research implications noted above that support the importance of parent-school

partnerships in education, recent literature in the fields of mental healthcare and social work have also demonstrated the effectiveness of improving emotional and behavioral, academic, and social outcomes of students through holistic approaches that involve parents as partners in service system design, implementation, coordination and oversight (e.g., Mayberry & Heflinger, 2012; Pires, 2008; Roose, Roets, Van Houte, Vandenhole, & Reynaert, 2012; Stroul, Blau, & Friedman, 2010).

The term *partnership*, as used in education with regard to the parent-school relationship, implies several characteristics, including: Empowerment (Addi-Racah & Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008, Blausey, 2013; Cooper & Christie, 2005; Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012); equity (Auerbach, 2009; Epstein, 1993; Epstein et al, 2009); trust (Blue-Banning, Summers, & Frankland, 2004; Wellner, 2012); shared decision-making (Golnik, Maccabee-Ryaboy, & Scal, 2012; Zaretsky, 2004); mutual respect (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Noddings, 2002), and; commitment (Hoover-Dempsey, Whitaker, & Ice, 2010; Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012). While each of these characteristics has been addressed in the literature on school-parent partnership, this study examines partnership through the lens of belonging.

Belonging is a complex concept of the human experience that involves the social locations in which belonging is constructed, individuals' identifications and emotional attachments to others, and the ethical and political value systems people use to judge their own and others' belongings (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Belonging is a basic human need (Maslow, 1970) and is one of the factors that contribute to productive formal and informal relationships across contexts (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992; Ma, 2003; Stum, 2001). Belonging shapes how people think (their cognitive processes) and feel (their positive and negative affects) (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). However, the politics

of belonging appear to determine who is excluded or included in collectives and groups (Carolissen, 2012). The dynamics of belonging, then, are multi-faceted constructions of the lived experiences of individuals, fluid in their interpretations and reifications, and consequential to interpersonal and organizational process effectiveness.

Individual sense of belonging is the experience of personal involvement in a social system or environment so that the person feels himself or herself to be an integral part of that system or environment (Anant, 1966; Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992). In the field of education, the literature on belonging appears to predominantly focus on students within the social contexts of school (e.g., Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Libbey, 2004; McMahon, Parnes, Keys, & Viola, 2008) and parent sense of cultural isolation from their children's schools (Harry, 2008; Harry & Kalyanpur, 1994). There appears, however, to be a void in the research around parent sense of belonging in their relationship with their children's schools. It is as if most parents are expected to either have a natural sense of belonging in the school relationship inherent in their role as parent, or that a sense of belonging among parents is unnecessary in developing partnerships between school and families, so long as cultural and linguistic differences are recognized and accommodated.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The goal of this study is to contribute to understandings of parent-school relationships involving parents of students with autism by exploring notions of belonging with a small group of parents. The purpose of the study is to describe the experience of belonging of middle school parents of children with autism. From these descriptions, I examined how parents of students with autism might contribute to understandings of

belonging in school-family partnerships and enable schools and families to collaborate more effectively.

Currently, role theory (e.g., Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins, & Closson, 2005), ecological theory (e.g., Downer & Myers, 2010), and Epstein's model of parent involvement (Epstein et al, 2009), strongly influence theory and practice in school-family partnerships in the U.S.. What these theories and models appear to do is employ a *Field of Dreams* (Gordon, Gordon, & Robinson, 1989) model of parent involvement (i.e., if you build it, they will come), by creating school-devised and -initiated opportunities for parent participation and by developing systems for school-based management of parent involvement that often lack parent perspectives on what these endeavors should look like, what they should accomplish, and how they might be most effective. Understandings of parent perspectives of belonging in parent-school partnerships are valuable in co-developing and co-implementing effective and meaningful partnerships between parents and educators.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The idea for this study has its roots in my own experiences as a person with impairments, as a teacher of students with disabilities, a teacher educator, and as a parent. These personal, professional, and life experiences have caused me to examine my own sense of belonging in my relationship with other educators, parents and students.

One of my most vivid school memories is of my father and I sitting in an empty classroom with my fourth grade teacher and the school principal. I was terrified; my father, indignant. This meeting had been arranged by my teacher to address her concerns over my handwriting.

I remember struggling with my pencils and papers, and with chalk at the blackboard. I wanted so much to make my letters and words as flowing, symmetrical, and plainly beautiful as my classmates. While their writings were artistically aesthetic, mine were as painful to see as they were to make. Constantly embarrassed, I spent endless hours after school and on weekends practicing my handwriting skills. Of my own initiative, I copied from books and magazines and composed my own short prose, always finding these eventually hidden in the bottom of the kitchen trash can before the end of the day, buried deep below the other filth to be ejected from our home. But, I loved the feel of the pencil in my hand and the sound of the scratching lead on blank paper. Yet no matter how hard I tried, I could not improve the graphic quality of my handwriting.

There we were, the four of us in that meeting. And I remember my teacher's words, like a knife, piercing my chest and driving coldly into my heart. "His handwriting is very poor. In fact, the worst I've seen in fifteen years of teaching. Mr. Riley, I just don't think he's trying; not at all." I sank in my chair, shamed by the teacher I admired in front of the man that was my hero. I began to withdraw inwardly, trying to make the people, furniture, and especially the words seem farther away as I became smaller and smaller with each labored breath. Until my father, himself an elementary school principal in the same school district, stopped my teacher in mid sentence and said, "Miss Soandso, you really don't know what you're talking about." Dad held the floor for several minutes as he related in great detail his direct observations of my efforts, not only to improve my handwriting skills, but also in working to better myself in math, science and history. He told them of things I had tried to keep hidden, even from him, things of which I didn't know he was even aware. When he



was finished, he sat calmly with legs crossed and folded hands in his lap and a rather smug look on his face.

My teacher sat with her mouth wide open, looking somewhat like a large fish suspended in a tank of calm water. I don't think I've seen a more astonished look on a person in the over 40 years since this happened. She looked at my father, then to her principal, lost for words in realizing her own failures as my teacher, failures of not recognizing my struggle and responding to my needs. And I, no longer cold or seeking to retreat, looked on my father, my hero, with renewed respect for having known and taken pride in my secret study habits and defending me with such eloquence. The school principal, demonstrating a wealth of tact and wisdom, concluded the meeting by commending me for such diligence, thanking my father for his insight, and assuring us on behalf of my teacher and the school that my efforts would be valued from then on and accommodations made to support my learning.

I share this experience from my past as an example of how my interest in parent-school relations first formed. As a student, throughout childhood and adolescence, there were two social institutions that dominated my life - home and school. Each seemed to have separate responsibility and authority over my development and discipline. In watching these two entities come together during the infamous handwriting meeting, I began to observe the similarities and differences, conflicts and collaborations between my parents and my school. And I began to question why, with such similar purposes in promoting my development and welfare, they should act with such disconnectedness.

Later in life, as a parent, I made similar observations and asked comparable questions of myself regarding my own relationship to my child's schools. My place as a

parent in my child's schools seemed defined by traditions of role identity. It seemed as though my place in the home-school association as a parent was to serve the needs of the school in working with my child in a top-down professional led relationship. I found my suggestions and questions sometimes ignored and often met with suspicion, annoyance, or condescension. I was constantly reminded that my place as a parent was to do what my child's teachers and school told me to do.

As a teacher of children with disabilities, I increasingly learned to value my students' parents as collaborators in their children's school related development. At first, parents responded with surprise and an element of awe at being asked to share their knowledge, opinions, hopes, concerns and suggestions. They were often astonished at having the opportunity to work as part of a team to make plans for instruction, accommodation, modification of school and teacher practices. As I became increasingly aware of the term parent-school partnership, I began to question what partnership is and what it means to parents to belong in partnership with schools.

This study has been for me both a personal and a professional effort to understand parent-school partnerships. In particular, it is a study of the perspectives of parents of children with autism around their experiences of belonging in their relationship with their children's schools. For the purposes of this study, I defined partnerships as two or more parties working together while exercising shared power, authority and responsibility in order to achieve common goals. It was my hypothesis that a sense of belonging is an essential element of effective parent-school partnerships. Additionally, I suspected that while other relationships - such as parent involvement or engagement in schools - may be

beneficial to students, they do not achieve the status of partnership as defined in this study, and may not be perceived by parents as being as effective as partnership.

Along with being inspired by my personal interests and experiences, this study is situated within the philosophical framework of social constructionism (Gergen, 2009). According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), reality is constructed through social processes, and through our interactions with each other we attempt to make sense of the world by developing mental representations that provide order to our subjective experiences. In our social worlds, people together create realities to answer challenging conditions (Harris, 2013). The use of a constructionist framework in this study was also supported by Antonsich's (2010) analytical framework of searching for belonging, in which he argues that:

Belonging should be analyzed both as a personal, intimate, feeling of being 'at home' in a place (place-belongingness) and as a discursive resource that constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/ exclusion (politics of belonging). The risk of focusing only on one of these two dimensions is to fall in the trap of either a socially de-contextualized individualism or an all-encompassing social discourse (p. 644).

Thus, the constructionist framework was an ideal lens through which to conduct this study in that it serves as a means to better understand the experienced realities of parents' own sense of belonging while allowing me to engage my own reality as a parent, teacher, teacher educator and researcher through reflection and reflexivity. Parent constructions of what it means for them to belong and experience belonging or lack of belonging in partnership with their children's schools are a construction of a social reality that needs to

be better understood by those who work within and across the power structures of public education.

## **Rationale**

This study addresses an apparent gap in understandings of belonging of parents of children with autism in their relationships with their child's school. Research indicates that parent involvement in their child's education is important (e.g., Cross, Traub, Hutter-Pishgahi, & Shelton, 2004; Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jaynes, 2003, 2005, 2007). Current federal initiatives for improved parent involvement is also quite strong and support the belief that parent involvement makes a difference in children's education (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2002; No Child Left Behind Act, 2004, U.S. Department of Education, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

In parent-school partnerships, parents are asked to make connections with their children's school. Understandings of parent sense of belonging as a connector in school-family relationships are lacking. If parents' involvement in their children's schooling is important to meeting the educational needs of their children, and if belonging is an integral element of social connectedness (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992), then understandings of belonging are vital to generating and sustaining meaningful and effective relationships between parents and schools.

## **Research Questions**

The following research questions will guide this study.

1. How do parents of students with autism describe the school-family partnership?
2. How do parents of students with autism define belonging, particularly with regard

to their own belonging in the school-family partnership?

3. What are parents of students with autism's experiences of belonging with their child's school?
4. How can understandings of notions of belonging help schools improve partnering relationships with parents of students with autism?

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following terms are defined.

*Belonging:* For the purposes of this study, I define belonging as a feeling one has about his or her personal involvement with and acceptance by others that leads to a reciprocal membership status.

*Children with Autism:* For the purposes of this study, Children with autism are defined as those children found eligible by their school districts for special education services for autism under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004.

*Parent:* The federal definition of a parent contained in Section 602(23) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004) shall be used to include a natural, adoptive, or foster parent of a child; a guardian (but not the State if the child is a ward of the State); or an individual acting in the place of a natural or adoptive parent (including a grandparent, stepparent, or other relative) with whom the child lives, or an individual who is legally responsible for the child's welfare.

*Partnership:* The term partnership implies collaboration between two or more parties. However, all collaboration is not partnership. Thus, for the purposes of this study, I define partnership as two or more parties working together while exercising shared power,

authority, and responsibility, to achieve common goals.

## **CHAPTER TWO:**

### **REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE**

The connections we make in the course of a life – maybe that’s what heaven is.

Mr. Rogers  
(Quoted in Junod, 1998, p. 1438)

In this chapter I present a review of literature relevant to the present study. I will first discuss evidence of the importance of parents and schools working together for the benefit of the children they share. I will then review various forms of parent-school partnerships that have been proposed and employed in the context of public schooling. Next, I will discuss literature identifying the characteristics of, and barriers to, effective parent-school partnerships. Finally, I will discuss the belonging in the context of school as a possible characteristic of effective parent-school partnerships.

#### **Understandings about Parents of Children with Autism**

The concept of family in modern times is quite complex. For example, Edwards (2009) highlights thirteen family structures in which children, including children with autism, may belong (see Appendix A). Within these structures, the role of parent may be assumed by any of a number of individuals. In this study, I use the federal definition of *parent* stipulated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 as a natural, adoptive, or foster parent of a child; a guardian (but not the State if the child is a ward of the State); or an individual acting in the place of a natural or adoptive parent

(including a grandparent, stepparent, or other relative) with whom the child lives, or an individual who is legally responsible for the child's welfare (Sec. 602(23)).

From pre-historic times, parents have been teaching their children skills, mores and values to survive and thrive in the contexts in which they lived (Berger, 1991). Spikins (2013) proposes that autism is a part of the origins of humanity, suggesting that families of children with autism may have existed from prehistory and been teaching their children with autism alongside typical siblings. As communities developed, families continued to be the principal means for supporting and effecting children's development for the benefit of the child, the family, and society. With escalating complexities of social structures over time, specialists in preparing youth to meet increasing demands of their civilizations emerged to pass on their values, traditions, methods and skills to the next generation (Kendall, Murray, & Linden, 2004). Yet, with few exceptions, parents and families retained their primacy in exercising responsibility and authority of their children's development through adulthood. Only recently in the timeline of civilization has a shift from familial to public responsibility and authority for the formal education of children occurred (Hiatt, 1994).

In the modern era that has recognized autism as a unique category of human exceptionality, parents, particularly mothers, were once framed as the cause of their child with autism's apparent emotional disturbance (Feinstein, 2010). In that context, mothers were accused of emotionally damaging their children as a result of their own emotional distance from the child. As scientific inquiry into autism developed, and continues to thrive, other theories emerged in attempting to explain the causes of autism that were not directly related to family care and caring (Feinstein, 2010). While there remains today no



consensus on causality, it appears widely accepted that parental care and caring are not a cause of autism.

While parenting in general may be stressful, evidence suggests that parents of children with autism experience higher levels of parenting stress than those of typically developing children and those of children with other disabilities. For example, in their study of 25 parental couples of children with autism compared with 20 parental couples of children with not diagnosed with autism, Brobst, Clopton and Hendrick (2009) found that parents of children with autism experienced more intense child behavior problems, greater parenting stress, and lower levels of satisfaction with their relationship. Similarly, Rao and Beidel (2009) found in comparing parents of 15 children with high-functioning autism (HFA) with parents of 15 matched control children that parents of children with HFA experienced significantly more parenting stress than other parents. In their meta-analysis of studies using comparison groups to examine parenting stress, Hayes and Watson (2013) found a large effect size in different experiences of stress in families of children with autism compared with those of typically developing children.

Turnbull, Summers & Brotherson's (1984) family systems framework identifies family interaction as taking place through the processes of cohesion and adaptability. While Olsen, Portner and Lavee (1985) defined cohesion as "the emotional bonding that family members have toward one another" (p. 4), Minuchin (1974) described the extremes of family cohesion as enmeshed and disengaged. Altieri and von Kluge's (2009) findings suggest that an enmeshed form of cohesion may be more adaptive for families that encounter significant challenges associated with autism. However, enmeshed cohesion does not appear to be a universal characteristic of families of children with autism. As

Higgins, Bailey, and Pearce (2009) found, parents of children with autism reported lower family cohesion than parents of typically developing children. Olsen, Russell, and Sprenkle (1980) indicate that adaptability is the family's ability to change in response to stress. The range of adaptability among families extends from rigid to chaotic (Altiere & von Kluge, 2009). Altieri and Kluge (2009) found fewer families of children with autism had a rigid style of adaptability, and significantly more had a chaotic style of adaptability than families of typically developing children.

Stoner, Bock, Thompson, Angell, Heyl and Crowley (2005) found that parents of young children with autism are often frustrated in their encounters with professionals. Among their findings, they first indicated that the challenges parents faced in the processes of obtaining a diagnosis for their child and a resultant distrust with medical professionals influenced parent's interactions with education professionals. Second, they found that parents, upon receiving a diagnosis of autism for their children, were "propelled into a process of intense self-education" (p. 43) in order to cope. Third, their findings demonstrated that early intervention services for their child with autism appeared to help parents meet their needs for self-education and coping. Lastly, their study found parents felt that entering the special education system was traumatic, IEP meetings confusing, and obtaining services for their children complicated.

### **Importance of Parent-School Partnerships**

In the United States, expanding population fueled by mass immigration and a shift from agriculturalism to industrialization experienced the development and growth of public schools as the principal mechanism for enculturation and investment in developing social capital (Coleman, 1987; Harris & Witte, 2011; Smokowski & Bacallao, 2011). Schools

increasingly assumed surrogate parental rights through law, policy and practice for certain aspects of child rearing, exerting authority over youths for significant portions of their lives (Cutler, 2000). For more than a century and a half, control of children's education has progressively shifted from parent toward the State as schools organized to administer not only academics, but also foster social development, provide cultural indoctrination, and administer discipline among its students (Spring, 2001).

In recent times, concern for improving student outcomes has grown to challenge the efficacy of institutionalized school autonomy by demanding accountability for producing results in improved student learning achievement and enhancing the prospective quality of life of students transitioning to adulthood (Saha, 2009). While shifting dynamics of control and the pursuit of investment in social capital through public schooling may have awarded educators a dominant role in the family-school relationship, there is a current appeal for improving student outcomes by increased parental involvement in their children's schooling (Duncan, 2010; Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2002; No Child Left Behind Act, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Since publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), Americans have become increasingly aware of and concerned for the condition and productivity of its public schools. The problems the National Commission found involved inadequate curricula, low expectations for student achievement, little time spent by students and teachers in developing academic skills, and many teachers being inadequately prepared for their professional roles and responsibilities. The Commission concluded that, "Declines in educational performance are in large part the result of disturbing inadequacies in the way the educational process itself

is often conducted” (p. 18). These concerns persist today, as evident in the voluminous quantity of discourses that have focused on improving schools and student outcomes over the past thirty years in policy, research, and advocacy efforts, and also appear in literature that specifically focuses on students with autism (e.g., Lund, 2009; Olley, 2005).

One method proposed to help improve schooling for all children has been in forming and maintaining effective parent-school partnerships (e.g., Epstein, 1992; Epstein, et al, 2009; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007; Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin & Soodak, 2006). Research suggests that parental involvement in education has positive effects on student academic achievement (e. g., Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2003, 2005, 2007). Additional research suggests that parental involvement makes a difference in developing student cognitive, social, and behavioral factors that support school outcomes (e.g., Beets, Cardinal, & Alderman, 2010; Domina, 2005; Fan & Williams, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey, Whitaker, & Ice, 2010; Powell, Son, File, & San Juan, 2010). Other studies, specific to families of children with autism, indicate that direct involvement of parents in the education of their children results in significant improvement in student achievement and enhance generalization and maintenance of skills (e.g., Johnson, et al., 2007; Ozonoff & Cathcart, 1998).

The importance the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (NCLB) places on parent involvement in the education of their children is reflected in its use of the word *parent* over 600 times. At the individual school level, Title I of NCLB requires each school to jointly develop with parents a school-parent compact that “outlines how parents, the entire school staff, and students will share the responsibility for improved student academic achievement and the means by which the school and parents will build and develop a

partnership to help children achieve the State’s high standards” (Sec. 1118(b)).

Additionally, Title I requires individual schools and local education agencies to build capacity for parent involvement that facilitates school, parent, and community partnerships.

Specific to special education, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004) (IDEA) also places a strong emphasis on forming and maintaining strong relations between parents and schools, including those of children with autism. Under Section 650(3) of IDEA, Congress recognized that State Education Agencies (SEA), in collaboration with parents, are in the best position to improve educational outcomes for students with exceptionalities. Additionally, IDEA authorized SEAs demonstrating efforts to form partnerships with others, including parents, to seek funding under Section 652(b)(2). While IDEA does not specifically address partnerships at the individual school level, it provided a framework for ensuring close collaboration between individual parents of children with exceptionalities and schools through an Individualized Education Planning process and protects the rights of parents and students through a system of procedural safeguards in working with schools.

Recent federal education improvement grant initiatives have also emphasized the importance of building meaningful parent-school partnerships to improve student outcomes. The Race-to-the-Top grant initiative (U.S. Department of Education, 2010) encouraged local education agencies to partner with parents and parent organizations to meet students’ social, emotional and health needs. The Investing in Innovation (I3) Fund grant initiative (U.S. Department of Education, 2013) identified parent engagement as one of the priorities State applicants must meet in order to receive funding under this program.

Specifically, the I3 fund encourages applicants to develop increased school level ability to “build and sustain effective home-school partnerships that support student learning and whole school improvement” (p. 22).

Although the U.S. Constitution does not identify education as a right of its citizens, the federal government has consistently recognized education as a common civil right of its citizens (Anyon, 2008). The right to public education is almost unanimously guaranteed by the individual constitutions of each separate state (Rebell, 2011/2012). Beyond their constitutional guarantees to provide children with a public education, most States have also adopted policies for increasing parent-school collaboration (see Appendix B). The language used in these policies support models for parent-teacher collaboration that is often included in school effectiveness and individual teacher performance evaluation systems. However, while many schools and teachers are being held accountable for establishing and maintaining partnerships with parents, the mechanisms for accomplishing partnerships within States are not clearly defined. Schools and teachers are expected to select, implement and lead partnership initiatives based on their interpretations of what parent-school partnerships should look like.

Legislation and research have prompted several professional teacher organizations to establish policies for standards of professional practice in forming and maintaining parent-school partnerships. These standard are, in turn, often used by institutions of higher education and teacher professional development systems to design their curricula and instruction. For example, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) has included a provision within its conceptual framework that requires teacher preparation programs to develop teacher skills in fostering relationships with parents and

families to support student's learning and well-being (NCATE, 2008, Standard 1); the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) includes a requirement for teachers to demonstrate collaboration with families to support their children's education and act as links in family resource networks (NBPTS, 1999, Standard XII), and; the Council for Exceptional Children's (CEC) Professional Standards require that teachers seek and use parent knowledge, maintain communications with families and inform parents of their rights and procedural safeguards (CEC, 2009, Section 1).

In short, evidence suggests that parents are important to improving student outcomes among children with exceptionalities, including those students with autism. The demands for increased parent involvement in the schooling of their children are flourishing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in hopes of improving the future quality of life of all students. Parent-school partnerships are seen as one very important method of assuring those hopes are realized.

### **Forms of Parent-School Partnership**

Partnership means different things to different people in different contexts (Brinkerhoff, 2003; French & Swain, 2008; Herbert, 1998; Walker, 1982). In her study of buyer-supplier relationships, Duffy (2008) laments that although academics and practitioners have written extensively in the area of their nature and attributes, partnerships are "still only poorly understood" (p. 228). This appears no less the case in the area of parent-school partnerships. Although education legislation and policy mandate that schools receiving Title I funding and all public schools serving students with exceptionalities work with parents regarding their children's education, law and policy have not provided a framework for enacting parent-school partnerships. In this absence,

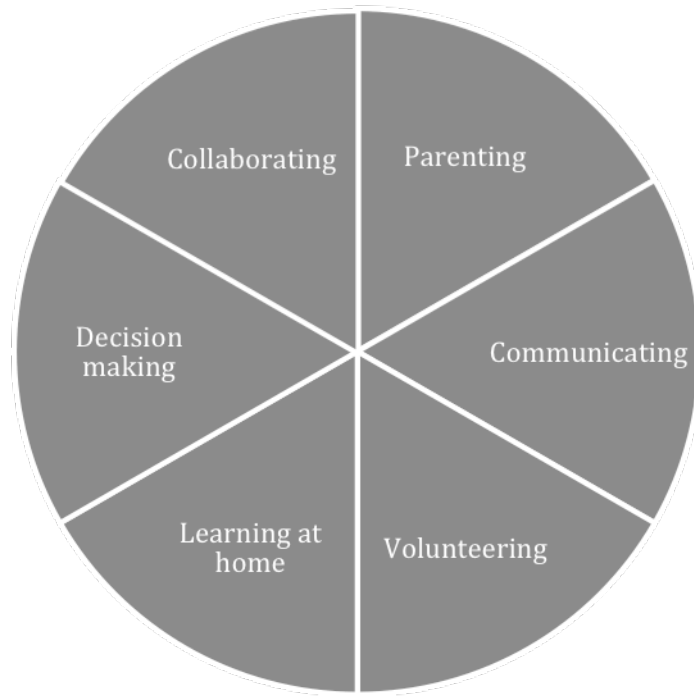
researchers have proposed several models to establish and maintain meaningful relationships with parents as partners in the schooling of their children. Often, however, the language of parent-school connectedness is confusing in the seemingly interchangeable application of the terms involvement, engagement, and partnership (Ferlazzo, 2011; Stoloff, 1989). Some models of parent school relationships, such as those in the works of Epstein and her associates (2009), Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995), de Fur (2012), Stroul and Friedman (1986), have attempt to clarify parent-school partnership working.

### **Epstein's Framework of Parent Involvement**

Epstein and her colleagues (2009) developed a framework explaining six types of parent involvement. Their work has been used to illustrate and organize ways in which educators and parents can begin to conceptualize and implement parent-school partnerships (Figure 1), and include the practices of parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating.

**Parenting.** Parenting involves providing for a child's health and safety, developing and utilizing child-rearing skills and approaches, and building positive home conditions that support learning and behavior (Epstein, 1992). Through this model of parent-school involvement, families receive support for developing home environments that support children as students. Epstein and her associates envision this form of involvement as enacted through school sponsored parent development activities that include parenting workshops, coursework that develops and supports parenting skills, home visits and neighborhood meetings to help families and schools develop mutual understandings, and information dissemination systems to provide parents with current and useful parenting and child rearing suggestions.





**Figure 1.** Six forms of parent involvement (Epstein et al, 2009)

**Communicating.** Communicating as a form of parent involvement in this model entails the design of two-way systems of informing parents about school programs and children’s progress. Examples of such systems include parent conferences, periodically sharing examples of student work with families, implementing a regular schedule for communication, and making information clear and understandable in the parent’s primary language.

**Volunteering.** Parents are recruited and organized to support school activities. Volunteers may be anyone who supports school programs and student activities, and activities may be in any form and in any time and place, not just during the school day or within the school building. In addition to focusing on the direct contributions of volunteers in classrooms and other settings, the school-family partnership may create a specific room

in the school for parents as a workroom or family center for volunteer work, meetings and resources, coordinate systems of parent safety patrols to monitor student transitions, or develop plans for parent volunteer opportunities based on specific needs of individual students, groups of students, or classrooms.

**Learning at home.** In involvement through learning at home, schools provide parents with information and ideas, and enhance student learning through homework and other curriculum related activities, decisions, and planning. Schools may provide information on required student skills in all subjects at the appropriate grade or developmental level, homework policies and monitoring techniques, calendars of activities for home learning, summer learning packets or activities, or family subject area activities at school.

**Decision-making.** Through involvement in decision-making, schools include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy through parent/teacher organizations, school councils, committees, and other school or parent led organizations. Additionally, schools may support parent decision making by providing information on school or local elections and information to connect all families with parent representatives.

**Collaborating with community.** Through involvement by collaborating with community, schools identify, integrate and coordinate resources and services within the community to strengthen school programs, family practices and student learning and development. Schools may provide information on community health, cultural, recreational and social support programs in the community, community activities that link

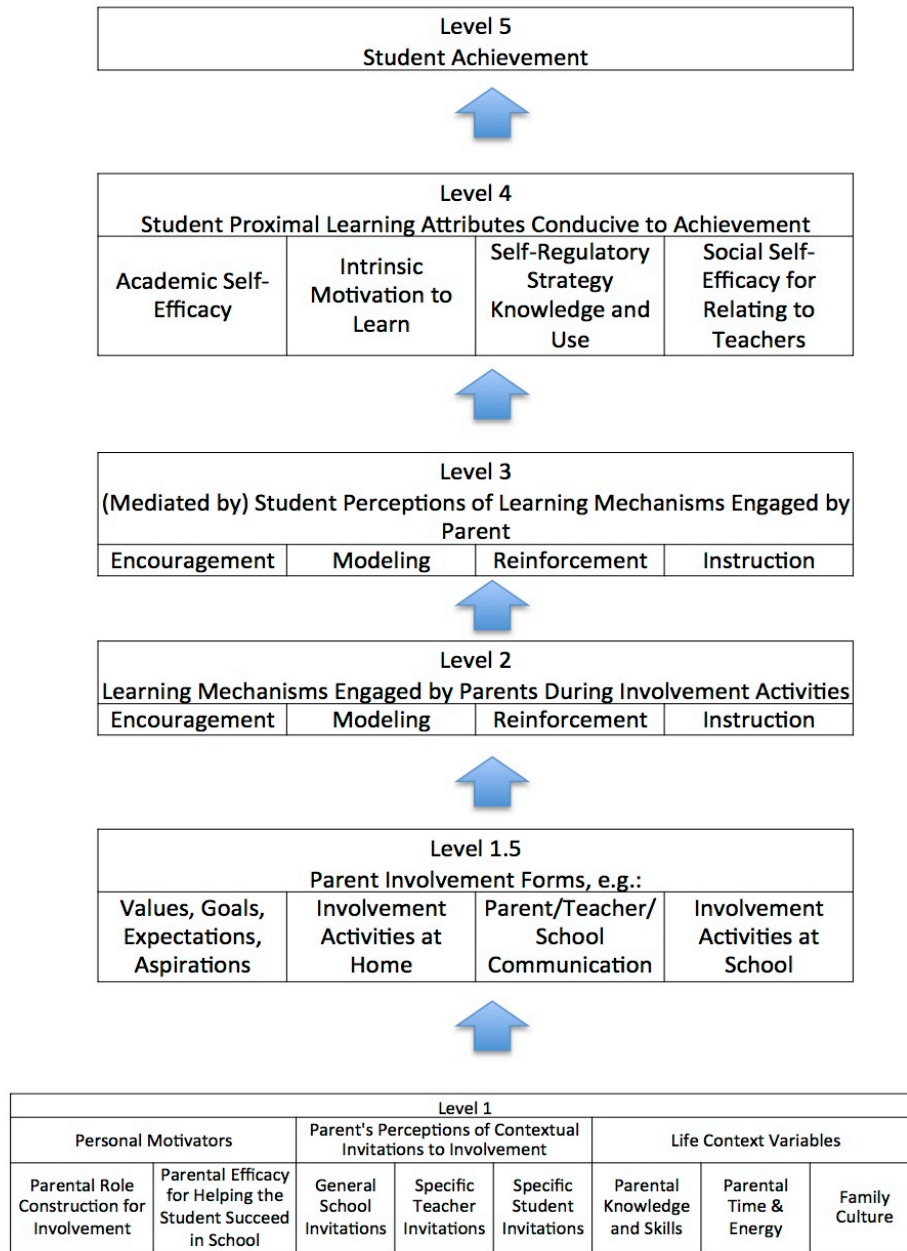
learning skills and talents, and provide opportunities for community service by students, families and schools.

Each type of family involvement in the Epstein and associates' model is not exclusive of the others. Rather, they may overlap and contribute to each other. For example, volunteering may involve having families contribute to constructing complex and wide ranging systems of communication, community collaboration may be sought by soliciting community health organizations to provide workshops on parenting skills to family members, and learning at home may require collaboration with the parent and community volunteers to establish learning opportunities in real-world settings (Epstein, et al., 2009). However, according to Epstein and her associates, parent involvement in decision-making may, and should, take place at all levels across all forms of school involvement.

This typology and model of parent involvement has been used by the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) to develop parent-school-community partnerships (Hutchins & Sheldon, 2013). Studies have shown that applying this model in schools increases the amount and quality of parent involvement with their children's education (Griffin & Steen, 2010; Sheldon, 2005; Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004) and improved student outcomes (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002, Sheldon, 2003; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002; Sheldon, Epstein, & Galindo, 2010). Additionally, Epstein's typology informs this study by presenting a framework for explaining how some parents may experience involvement with their children's schools and affect their perceptions of belonging in participating in each form of involvement.

## **Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model of Parent Involvement**

The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of parent involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Hoover-Dempsey, Whitaker, & Ice, 2010) describes the parental involvement process within five levels of activity (Figure 2). This model attempts to explain why parents become involved in their children's education and how that involvement may influence student outcomes. The first level (Levels 1 and 1.5 combined), explains that parents are motivated to become involved in their child's schooling by personal factors, perceptions of invitations, and life contexts (Hoover-Dempsey & Sander, 1995, 2005; Walker, Shenker, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2010). Parent personal motivations include the parent's own understanding of their role in promoting their child's education, as well as the parent's beliefs about the efficacy of working with their child's school. This model also proposes that parents may be motivated to become involved in their child's education by their perception of invitations to participate by their child and their child's teachers. Additionally, the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model acknowledge that life context variables, such as the parent's knowledge and skills, availability of time and energy, and cultural influences, may be related to parent motivation to become involved in their child's schooling. This model suggests that once a parent is motivated to make a decision to participate in their child's education, that participation may take one of several forms, including teaching values and setting goals and expectations to support their children's education, helping to construct a sense of self-determination for educational success in their children, participating in learning activities at home and at the school, and communicating with teachers and other school personnel.



**Figure 2.** The Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler Model of the Parent Involvement Process

The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model frames parent involvement as being carried out through parents providing encouragement, modeling, reinforcement, and instruction to the child (Level 2) (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Hoover-Dempsey,

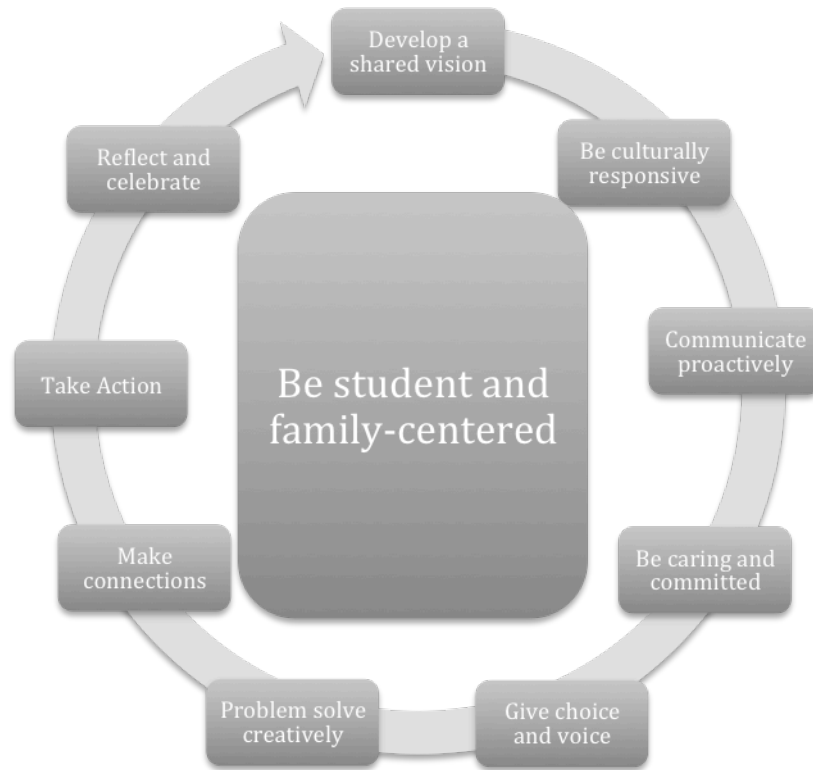
Whitaker, & Ice, 2010). At Level 3, these parent activities may be mediated by the student's responses to their parent's use of encouragement, modeling, reinforcement and instruction (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2005). Level 4 of the model are student attributes that contribute to learning achievement, such as the student's sense of academic self-efficacy, his or her motivation to learn, the strategies used to self-regulate learning, and the student's self-efficacy for socially relating to teachers. Finally, Level 5 represents the student achievement as the culmination of parent's active involvement in their child's schooling.

As reported by Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins, and Closson (2005), research supports the effect of parent role construction, sense of efficacy, perception of invitations to involvement, and school sensitivity to life-context variables on parents' involvement practices across school and cultural contexts. Conducting a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) on parent responses to items indicating their involvement on the basis of the Hoover-Dempsey model, Anderson and Minke (2007) found parents sense of efficacy and level of resources less influential than expected, yet also found that parent role construction was strongly influenced by teacher invitations to participate. In their survey of 770 parents of students in grades 7 through 9, Deslandes and Bertrand (2005) found that parents became involved in their child's schooling when they perceived teachers and students expected or desired their involvement. Both these studies indicate that the perception of the welcoming nature of the invitation to participate in their child's schooling is an essential motivating factor in their choosing to participate in their child's schooling.

This model of parent involvement contributes to framing this study by providing understandings of motivating influences on school involvement among parents of students with autism. Parents of students with autism may be motivated by their perceptions of themselves and the roles of parenting, as well as the contexts that shape these perceptions. This model further helps inform this study by providing a frame of reference for examining the manifestation or absence of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators related to experiences of belonging in working with schools among parents of children with autism.

### **de Fur's Family Partnership Model**

de Fur (2012) combined research on family and service provider collaboration to develop a model of family partnership in transition activities for students with exceptionalities (Figure 3). This model addresses 10 strategies that contribute to collaborative partnership working in a continuous cyclic process centered upon the strengths and needs of child and family rather than those of institutions and service providers. In this model, partners develop a clear expression of their future vision for the student that includes high, yet realistic expectations for long- and short-term goals. Professionals within the family partnership model are required to demonstrate cultural responsiveness, honoring the cultural, linguistic and social heritage of children and families. Partners are proactive in promoting and taking part in frequent, two-way communication, giving information and receiving feedback, in language that is sufficient quantity and quality, and understandable to all partners. Partners in this model demonstrate caring and commitment that goes beyond bureaucratic procedures and documentation, allows parents and children to speak openly and make choices in shaping their own path, and attempt to solve problems creatively, and make connections with each



**Figure 3.** de Fur's family partnership model (de Fur, 2012)

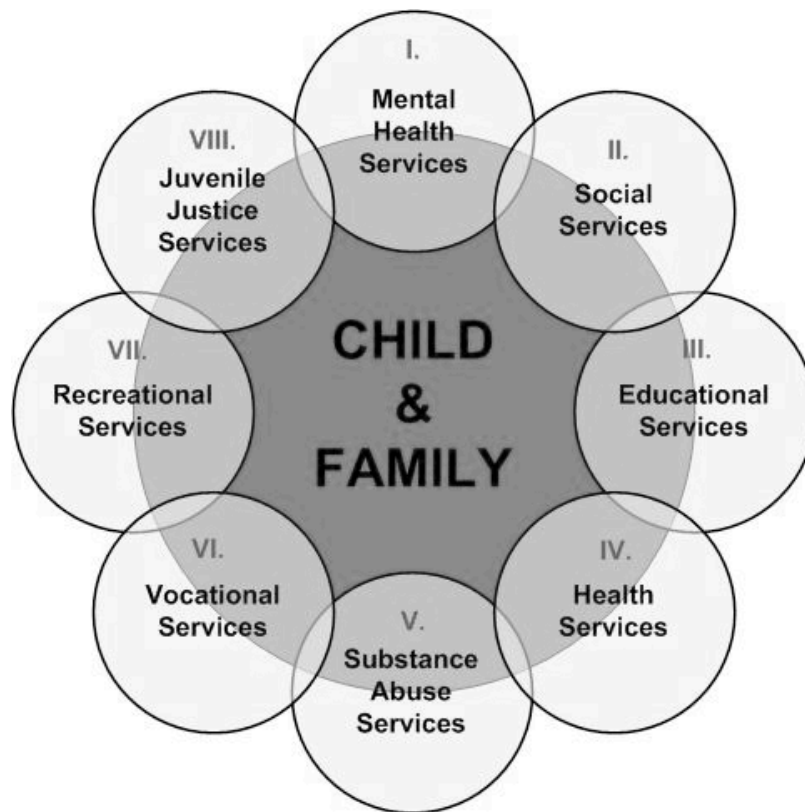
other by sharing responsibilities, reinforcing and supporting each other, and taking action together rather than unilaterally. Finally, the de Fur model stipulates that partners reflect on their activities, finding new strengths on which to build and identifying potential challenges in the future while also celebrating accomplishments.

deFur's model of family partnership provides this study with a frame of reference for the activities that take place in forming and maintaining school based partnerships with parents of children with autism. While de Fur's model focuses on activities performed by school based professional, it contributes to this study by allowing for the examination of parent perspectives of the manifestation, quality and efficacy of these professional activities in their experiences of partnering with their child's school.

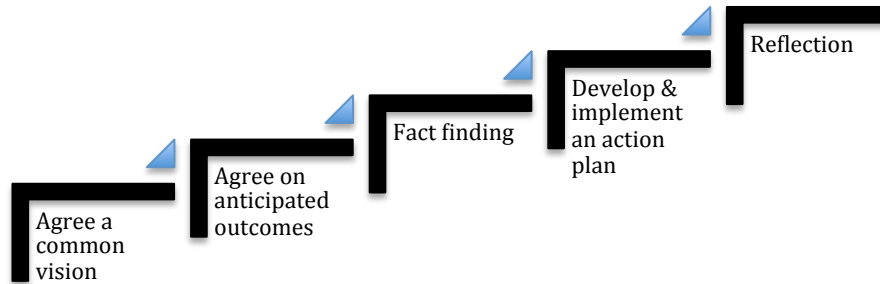


## Systems of Care Approach

The systems of care approach was first defined by Stroul and Friedman (1986) as a structural framework (Figure 4) for delivering comprehensive services to children and families that are child and youth centered, family focused, community based, and culturally and linguistically competent (Stroul & Blau, & Sondheimer, 2008). Through the systems of care approach, collaborative partnerships are formed between family, child, and community agencies and service providers to deliver individualized, integrated,



**Figure 4.** Systems of care framework (Stroul & Friedman, 1986)



**Figures 5.** Stages in developing systems of care (Pires, 2008)

developmentally appropriate services linked across agencies within the least restrictive and most normative environment (Center for Mental Health Services, 2001; Stroul, Blau, & Friedman, 2010). These partnerships follow discreet stages of development (Figure 5) that empower the family and the child as vital members in planning, implementing, sustaining, evaluating, and adjusting services (Pires, 2008). The resulting cohesive network of community-based services and supports ensures that families and youth work in partnership with public and private organizations to promote efficacy, build on the strengths of individuals, and honor the cultural and linguistic contexts that help children and families function better at home, in school, in the community, throughout life (Pires, 2002; Stroul, Blau & Sondheimer, 2008).

Implementing a Systems of Care approach involves developing core leadership that represents constituency, has credibility within the community, capacity to engage other stakeholders, and demonstrates commitment to system building (Pires, 2008).

Membership includes not only representatives of various public and private agencies involved in providing mental health services, but necessitates families and youth as full partners in all aspects of system leadership, shifting from a provider-driven to family-

driven perspective (Osher, Penn & Spencer, 2008). Partnership across constituencies reduces the potential for parallel delivery systems that traditionally exist with limited interagency collaboration and risk ineffective development across the child's complex life experience (Pires, 2008). Through collaborative design, partners share in governing the system, and in identifying and accessing resources across agencies, communities, and individuals. In designing and implementing a system of care, partners work to develop cultural and linguistic competence to meet the needs of the child and family (Isaacs, Jackson, Hicks, & Wang, 2008). In developing cultural/linguistic competence, service providers learn to respond to the context of the child and family, develop an understanding of the problem from the view of the child and family, identify strengths of the family and child, and build a relationship between service providers and those receiving services. Rather than addressing the child's needs from a unilateral lens that positions the service provider at the center, the system of care works as a cohesive unit to move within cultural and linguistic contexts and across boundaries to acknowledge the family and child as leaders in their own development.

The Systems of Care approach is founded upon the principal that services for children with exceptionalities must be child centered, family focused, and community based. As such, it provides this study with a framework for understanding the complex orchestration of interpersonal and inter- and intra-agency relationships parents of children with autism may experience in promoting the learning achievement of their children. While the Systems of Care approach has been employed in working with public schools as partners in meeting the needs of children with mental health issues, the model this framework has the potential for meeting the needs of other students, including students

with autism who experience a combination of services from multiple agencies, organizations and individual service providers.

### **Characteristics of Effective Partnerships**

Partnerships are social systems in which people engage in social exchange (Bandura, 2001; Eilbert, 2003; Weihe, 2006). Partnerships take form along a wide spectrum of human relationship in which people may experience different interpersonal working relationships, partnership cultures, or expectations for individual partners and for the partnership as a whole (Balloch & Taylor, 2001). For example, Epstein and her colleagues' (2009) model of six forms of parent involvement present a framework through which partnerships may take place across a range of activities. While partnerships may take various forms and involve diverse characteristics, several authors have attempted to delineate the common characteristics of effective partnerships from a holistic approach, as seen in Appendix C. To construct the appendix, I conducted an online search of three academic databases (H.W. Wilson's Education Full Text, PsychInfo, and Business Source Premier) through the University of South Florida's Library web portal. Search terms used in all three databases were the word *partnership* within the title or abstract of all full text, peer-reviewed publications. A total of 5,131 articles were identified (1,413 from Education Full Text; 1,283 from PsychInfo; 2,679 from Business Source Premier). Two hundred sixty six (266) were deleted as duplicate articles for a subtotal of 4,865. I reviewed each remaining article's title and abstracts, removing those articles that:

1. Did not attempt to discuss the combined characteristics of partnerships from a holistic approach (i.e., only a few characteristics were discussed in isolation from a larger body of characteristics);

2. Focused on sexual partnerships;
3. Focused on marital partnerships;
4. Were published for sole purpose of announcing the formation of specific partnerships;
5. Reviewed books.

After applying this exclusion criteria, a total of eight articles remained (Blue-Banning, Summes & Frankland, Nelson & Beegle, 2004; Clarke, Sheridan & Woods, 2010; de Fur, 2012; Iyer, 2003; Keen, 2007; Mohr & Spekman, 1994; Pires, 2008; Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006). The characteristics listed in Appendix C are presented in order of the frequency with which each was discussed among the collection of works. For example, all authors directly discussed effective communication as a characteristic of effective partnership, while only three works discussed skill sets. Those characteristics are:

- Effective communication
- Shared objectives
- Mutual trust
- Shared responsibilities
- Shared problem-solving
- Shared power
- Commitment
- Other Characteristics: Participation; Time; Sensitivity; Skill sets.

## **Effective Communication**

The word *communication* is derived from the Latin verb *communicare*, meaning to share or make common (Rosengren, 2000). As such, communication is a means for sharing and understandings common between those who communicate.

Mohr and Spekman (1995) state that timely, accurate and relevant information is essential to achieving the goals of a partnership. They clarify that by sharing information partners are able to act independently while maintaining focus on collective goals over time. Their findings suggest that effective communication is critical in signaling future partner intentions and contribute to partner trust and commitment, also suggesting that without high levels of communication quality and participation in communicating, partnership success is placed in doubt. Iyer (2003) says that, while formal exchanges of information between partners may take place at least once a month, “there must be free and open access to members from all levels to participate in the informal exchanges” (p. 50).

According to Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, and Soodak (2006), effective parent-school partnerships require effective communication of sufficient quality and quantity. In parent-school partnership, Keen (2007) cites a study by Dunst, Trivette, Davis, and Cornwell that found open communication and honesty among the highest ranked characteristics of effective help giving practice among parents and education professionals. Similarly, Blue-Banning and her associates (2004) found a strong emphasis on the importance of communication among their participants’ descriptions of the need for both information quantity and quality. de Fur (2012) states partners communicate honestly, openly and proactively, both sharing and seeking information. She also states that, “families want a

sufficient quantity of information that enables efficient and effective coordination and understanding among the partners” (p. 63) and acknowledges that partners have a shared language that is clear and jargon free, enabling parents and educators to establish clear goals and identify roles and responsibilities for achieving them. Clarke, Sheridan and Woods (2010) stress that providing bi-directional communication on a consistent basis demonstrates respect for the parents’ essential role in promoting their child’s educational success and may create good will between partners. Pires (2008) states that, “lack of communication is guaranteed to leave certain groups of stakeholders...feeling powerless and disenfranchised, not to mention angry and hostile toward the system-building effort” (p. 101). She stresses that effective communication vehicles must be established and maintained in parent-school partnerships to enable and empower partners to function collaboratively.

### **Shared Objectives**

According to Narus and Anderson (cited in Mohr & Spekman, 1995), partnerships are formed to achieve goals that could not easily be attained when acting alone. They state the motivation for forming partnerships in business is primarily to enhance competitive advantage, allowing partners to expanded their access to new technologies or markets, broaden access to information and skill sets, offer a wider range of products or services, and reduce risks. In discussing coordination of activities, they again cite Narus and Anderson who suggested that the coordinated actions of partnerships are directed at mutual objectives.

Iyer (2003) believed as Mohr and Spekman that partnerships are formed primarily to achieve objectives that might otherwise not be possible. His position is that partnership

goals may be stated either broadly, in generalized terms, narrowly, or with great detail. He emphasized that, while there is no particular reason to state objectives broadly or narrowly, the statement of objectives functions as a demonstration of how closely the partners agree on their objectives. In either case, goals are created and used to strengthen the alliance by giving a sense of form and direction. Keen (2007) however observes that when parent-school partnerships are broadly defined, parents and professionals often interpret the goals differently from each other, which may create confusion and lead to distrust.

Within the field of education, the explication of partnership goals appears to take on greater significance. Pires (2008) states that parent-school partnerships in a systems of care framework require clearly stated objectives that define what is to be done, who will do it, and when it will be done. Clarke, Sheridan and Woods' (2010) first principle for healthy family-school relationships states that "Families and educators share the same goals concerning children's positive development and achievement" (p. 64). They view shared goals as intrinsic to all family-school relationships, including parent-school partnerships. de Fur (2012) agrees that parent-school partnerships in transition planning for students with exceptionalities "hold a common vision and set of clear goals," and that "partnerships engage in activities to achieve a common goal" (p. 59). She goes on to say that, while policy does not mandate the use of a student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) as a long-term strategic plan, a focus on the student's vision and objectives in transition planning is necessary to implementing and sustaining effective team actions. Keen (2007) supports the view that the IEP has been widely used as a means for encouraging parent participation in educational goal settings in collaboration with their child's school, and discusses two



approaches to achieving effective partnerships around goal identification: One through the use of the Canadian Occupational Performance Measure (Law, Baptiste, Carswell, McColl, Polatajko, & Pollack, 1998), and the other in a process of identifying goals as part of the family's ecology. Both these approaches are aimed at helping parents identify and prioritize school related goals, supporting their ability to contribute to shared planning and decision-making activities with their children's school.

While they do not list it as a separate characteristic of partnership, Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin and Soodak (2006) implying the importance of developing shared goals for the student to building trust among partners. They view partnership as a process in which partners advocate for the student, negotiating between values, beliefs, and expectations to achieve a common ground. Blue-Banning and her associates (2004) also chose not to identify shared goals as a separate characteristic of partnership, but did state the importance of recognizing shared goals in partnership. In their study of parent and educator perspectives of partnership, they determined that partners "share a common sense of assurance about...each other's beliefs in the importance of the goals being pursued on behalf of the child and family" (p. 174).

### **Mutual Trust**

Trust is a relation between parties in the expectation by one that another's interests encapsulate their own, and that the other party will act as expected (Hardin, 2002). Mohr and Spekman (1995), investigating the characteristics of effective partnerships in business, found a significant relationship between trust and partnership satisfaction, suggesting that trust is a key indicator of partnership effectiveness, enabling partners to manage stress, display adaptability, and demonstrate flexibility (Williamson in Mohr & Spekman, 1994).

Iyer (2003) identifies trust as an expression of commitment to the partnership that includes an assessment of whether that commitment will be upheld. He positions trust as having dual functions, at times acting as an input to the creation of partnerships and at others as an output in which trust is constructed through experience.

In the field of education, Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin and Soodak (2012) call trust the *keystone* of partnership, viewing it as the essential element that locks the entire spectrum of partnership characteristics together as a whole. They envision trust as constructed through: open and honest communication; demonstration of mutual respect, commitment, and professional competence; sharing of power among partners; and partner advocacy in seeking mutually beneficial solutions to problems. Through trust, partners develop greater capacity to grow stronger (de Fur, 2012), manage stress and display adaptability and flexibility (Williamson in Mohr & Spekman, 1994), exchange crucial information (Turnbull et al 2012), reduce the sense of vulnerability (Clarke, Sheridan & Woods, 2010), and influence the effectiveness of the partner relationship (Keen, 2007). Conversely, lack of trust deteriorates the quality and quantity of information exchange and decision-making (Mohr & Spekman, 1994), participation (Iyer, 2003), and inhibits the pursuit and achievement of common goals (de Fur, 2012; Keen, 2007). Blue-Banning and her associates' (2004) study of the characteristics of effective parent-school partnership found that parents used the term trust in the context of three distinct meanings: Trust as reliability in others following through with their actions; trust as safety in preserving the health and welfare of their children; and trust as discretion in the assurance of confidentiality.

Finally, while Pires (2008) does not list trust as a separate characteristic of partnerships, she recognized the importance of trust building to activities for constructing effective collaboration between parents and schools. She stated that trust is used in partnerships to enable partners to share information and perceptions, provide feedback, and work cohesively.

### **Shared Responsibilities**

Iyer (2003) defines responsibility in partnerships as the allocation of tasks to partners involved in the alliance. He states that partnerships must be clear and explicit in defining and assigning tasks to achieve their objectives, and that assigned tasks must match to partners with full understanding of their individual and collective accountability for those tasks. According to Iyer, assigning responsibilities may be easier when objectives are narrowly defined. Mohr and Spekman (1995) imply in their discussion of coordination that partners share responsibilities and found that high levels of coordination of partner activities were associated with achieving mutual objectives.

In defining partnerships, de Fur (2012) states that, "Partners define roles and responsibilities and they hold themselves and one another accountable for carrying out responsibilities" (p. 58-59), including both implementing and evaluating their actions. Within this definition, she states that partners not only share responsibilities, but reinforce one another's efforts, share risks, celebrate each other's successes, and use each other's strengths to compensate for each other's limitations. She observes that bi-directional communication among partners enables them to clearly identify each other's roles and responsibilities. In discussing building partnerships through a systems of care framework, Pires (2008) notes that such partnerships require structure that acts to define the roles,

rights and responsibilities of each partner. She states one of the principles to guide collaboration as sharing accountability for taking risks and achieving goals as an entire team. According to her conception, structure is created with consideration to how power and responsibilities are allocated.

In their definition of family-school relationships, Clarke, Sheridan, and Woods (2010) state that there is a connection between individuals who share responsibility for supporting the growth and development of children. They characterize shared responsibility (along with demonstration of mutual respect) among partners as indicative of a core belief that partners share the same goals of promoting student development and achievement. Additionally, they classify efforts to uphold personal responsibilities within the partnership and connect with others who share responsibilities for the child's development as a manifestation of individual partner commitment to supporting children's learning. Similarly, Blue-Banning and her associates (2004) support the idea of sharing responsibilities between parents and schools as a matter of equality in making members of the partnership feel equally powerful in their ability to influence outcomes. Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin and Soodak (2006), however, caution against sharing more responsibility with families "than they have the time, energy or desire to handle" (p. 152). They recognize that a balance is required among the several family functions (Turnbull, Summers & Brotherson, 1984), rather than overemphasizing education to the detriment of the others.

### **Shared Problem-Solving**

Mohr and Spekman (1994) frame joint-problem solving as a conflict resolution technique. They found joint problem solving to be a significant predictor in partnership success, and state that when partners solve problems together, mutually satisfactory

solutions may be reached that enhance partnership success. They further note that using smoothing over or avoidance techniques to resolve problems fail to address the root cause of conflict and undermines achieving partnership goals. Clarke, Sheridan and Woods (2010) agree that avoidance may undermine parent teacher relationships and obstruct student development.

de Fur (2012) states that “partners engage in active problem solving together” (p. 58). Clarke, Sharidan and Woods (2010) indicate that resolving conflict may involve employing consensus-based or negotiation strategies to collectively solve problems. Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin and Soodak (2006) address shared problem solving in partnership through their discussion of advocacy and creating win-win solutions. They cite Jones (2003) to support their view of advocacy as emphasizing the creation of problem solving to achieve mutually agreed-upon solutions and peacefully resolve conflict. Pires (2008) also discuss shared problem solving as a matter for conflict resolution by ensuring that all partners strengths and skills are utilized in solving problems. Lastly, Blue-Banning and associates (2004) imply the importance of shared problem solving without specifically naming it as a unique characteristic of partnership in their treatment of indicators of equality that include: avoiding the use of professional cloud, allowing reciprocity among members, willingness to explore all options, fostering harmony among all partners, and avoiding “turfism” (p. 174).

### **Shared Power**

Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin and Soodak (2006) define power as the “ability and intention to use authority, influence, or control over others” (p. 151). In deFur’s (2012) definition of partnership, she explicitly identifies sharing power and decision making

authority as a requisite to partnerships that focus on transitions of students with exceptional needs. Keen (2007) states that power in relationships concerns the ability to influence others, and that when one party takes on more decision-making, others may be discouraged from participation and establish an imbalance of power that acts as a barrier to participation.

Several authors discuss the characteristic of shared power in terms of equality. Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin and Soodak (2006) clarify that power may be expressed as either power-over others or power-shared relationships. They state that, in power-over relationships within schools, the family and student will experience the consequences of decision making efforts, while power-shared relationships foster the mutual contributions of talents, time, and resources to achieve goals. Blue-Banning and her associates (2004) state that equality in parent-school partnerships may be achieved when partners actively work to ensure that all partners feel equally powerful in their ability to influence outcomes. Clarke, Sheridan and Woods (2010) contend that families often enter into relationships with schools at a disadvantage with teachers often possessing the power to uphold their values and methodologies as valid while families tend to lack the social standing, resources or capital to exert their opinions. However, they point out that such power struggles may be reduced when partners focus on the relationship they share and are made to feel valued and respected. However, the sharing of power between school and parent can be problematic as two systems, traditionally viewed as bounded by their characteristic parameters of time, space, political and social structures, resources, etc. (Creswell, 1998), form an emergent sub-system. Within the parent-school subsystem, members of each

contributing system may work to sustain or exert power over the other in order to maintain or gain influence (Czarniawska, 2008).

### **Commitment**

Mohr's & Spekman's (1994) study suggests that the ability of partners to convey a sense of commitment to the relationship is key to partnership success in business. Blue-Banning and her associates (2004) state that parent-school partners share a sense of assurance about each other's devotion and loyalty to the child and family and each other's belief in the importance of the goals being pursued. Clarke, Sheridan and Woods (2010) state that commitment in family-school partnerships may be demonstrated in many ways, including efforts to fulfill personal responsibilities and connect with others. Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin and Soodak (2006) state that commitment is demonstrated by professionals when they practice sensitivity to the emotional needs of families, are available and accessible so that families can reach and communicate with them, and when they go above and beyond to meet the needs of their students.

### **Other Characteristics**

Several other characteristics of effective partnerships were discussed with less frequency by authors of the literature in Appendix B. These include participation, time, sensitivity, and skill sets. This is not to indicate that these characteristics are less important than others discussed more fully in the literature, but that these characteristics were important to the construction of understandings of partnerships to those who discussed them.

Clarke, Sheridan and Woods (2010) state that effective parent-school partnerships demonstrate cultural and linguistic sensitivity. Pires (2008) also characterizes effective

partnerships as demonstrating culturally and linguistic competence in their process while Keen (2007) supports the idea of sensitivity in partnerships by stating that such partnerships are characterized by awareness of individual and family needs. Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin and Soodak (2006) agree, yet do not identify sensitivity as a separate characteristic of partnership, instead including it in their discussion of respect.

As a characteristic of partnership, Mohr and Spekman (1994) define participation as “the extent to which partners engage jointly in planning and goal setting” (p. 139). As was the case in their discussion of communication quality, they state that without participation, the success of partnership is again placed in doubt. Iyer (2003) classifies participation as a characteristic of effective partnerships that includes trust, level and distance in the contexts which partnerships take place. While trust is a function of commitment, level indicates where in the organizational hierarchy partnerships take place (i.e., (in cases of partnerships in education) at the State, District or school level), and distance refers to both the physical (distance) and social gaps between partners (i.e., close and proximate or aloof and distal). In the field of special education, de Fur (2012) states that, “parents and students are equal participants in the IEP decision-making process” (p. 59) and that parent school partnerships “presume active participation by all team members” (p. 64). However, she goes on to point out that achieving participation by families and students has been difficult to achieve in spite legislative mandates to include parents in the IEP process.

Iyer (2003) discusses the timeframe in which a partnership exists one of the characteristics of partnership. According to him, some partnerships are established for a fixed duration while others are left open and vague. In cases where objectives are narrowly defined and specific, alliances may be formed for a very short term. Conversely,



those partnerships with objectives that are broadly defined may leave the duration of their partnership open and unspecified. Pires (2008) approaches time as a matter for ensuring there is adequate opportunity to achieve the goals of the partnership and allow partners to reflect on their actions, achievements, and future goals. Clarke, Sheridan and Woods (2010) discuss time as a factor related to continuity within the partnership. In other words, they see time as an important factor in ensuring consistency in working toward achieving goals over time and across the contexts of home and school from year to year.

Blue-Banning and her associates (2004) state that,

Members of the partnership perceive that others on the team demonstrate competence, including service providers' ability to fulfill their roles and to demonstrate 'recommended practice' approaches to working with children and families (p. 174).

They found that parents and professionals admired those partners who could make things happen, could adapt instructional approaches to meet a child's individual needs, were willing to learn and apply advanced technology in their teaching, and had high expectations for their students. Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin and Soodak (2006) affirm that within parent-school partnerships, teachers must demonstrate professional competence by providing a quality education, continuing to learn about the profession of teaching, and set high expectations for their students. They frame professional competence of educators as having an obligation to demonstrate and improve their professional skills over time to enhance their practice and increase their ability to meet student needs. Clarke, Sheridan and Woods (2010) define competence as "the fulfillment of one's role obligations" (p. 67) and the relationship perceptions of the competence of others have on building trust by

demonstrating accountability and commitment. Competence, then, is the belief in another's skill and ability to full their obligations to and within the partnership.

The collection of characteristics of effective partnerships in Appendix B demonstrates that the various conceptions of partnership are quite diverse. First, several characteristics were identified by all the authors of the works in Appendix B as important to forming and maintaining effective partnerships. These include effective communication, shared objectives, and mutual trust. However, not all authors identified the same characteristics across their separate conceptions of what effective partnerships should look like. For example, few authors discussed participation, time, or skill sets as elements of effective partnership. This should not be construed to mean that one characteristic is more important or valuable than another to effective partnership, but as a sign that understandings of partnership may either be incomplete or not yet completely articulated. It is from this assumption that I hypothesize that belongingness may be, as yet, an unexplored characteristic of effective parent-school partnerships.

### **Barriers to Parent Involvement**

The characteristics of effective partnership describe features that enhance the potential for successful partnership working. It appears that partnerships may, however, take place even in the absence of some of these characteristics. For example, Mohr & Spekman (1994) indicate that partnerships may take place in the absence of shared objectives, quality communication and participation, only that their success then becomes questionable. Iyer (2003) implies that in the absence of or poor quality of shared objectives, allocation of responsibilities, and communication may impede but not preclude partnership working.

Some authors have claimed that trust is a requirement for partnerships to exist. For example, mutual trust has been stated as a necessity for partnerships to form and continue (Blue-Banning, et al, 2004; de Fur, 2012; Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin & Soodak, 2006). However, this may be an idealization rather than a reality. As Keen (2007) points out, in parent-school partnerships the partners generally don't get to choose partnership, have little say over when and how long partnerships will take place, and may interpret goals differently. In such situations, it seems apparent that partnership working may take place before trust is established or common goals realized.

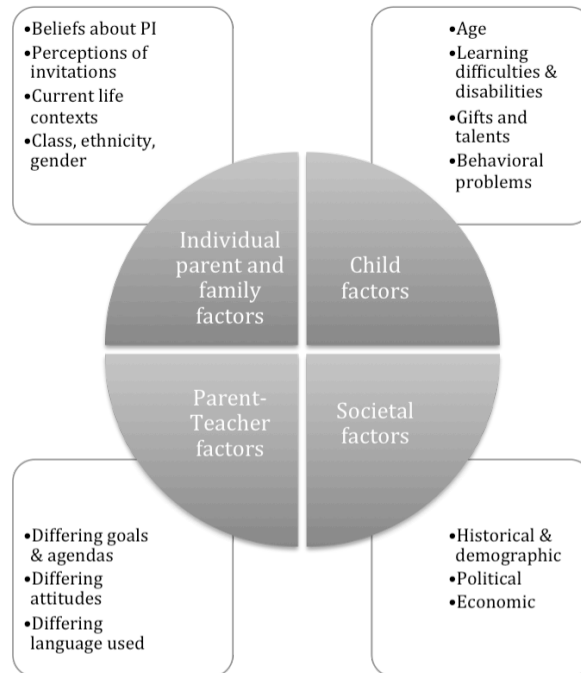
Although partnerships may take place in the absence or poor quality of one or more characteristics, these may also act as barriers to participating in partnerships. When parents and schools have divergent goals, potential partners may devalue the partnership model. For example, Greenfield, Quiroz, and Raeff (2000) found that teachers and Latino parents in their study had different goals regarding models of teaching. While teachers goals were to educate parents how to teach their children at home as "auxiliary teachers" (p. 106), parent goals were for the teacher to be the child's academic instructor and themselves as the authority on social development at home. Thus, some parents may view partnering for the purpose of developing academic skills across home and school contexts as inappropriate. According to Finders and Lewis (1994), some parents' distrust of schools may prevent them from participating in their children's education. For example, where communication is of poor quality or inconsistent, parents may feel disempowered or devalued (Clarke, Sheridan & Woods, 2010). Poor communication quality and quantity may prevent parents from partnering with schools when they do not perceive invitations to

partner or understand how they can contribute within a parent-school partnership (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

### **The Hornby-Lafaele Model**

In addition to the presence and quality of the characteristic of effective partnership promoting or inhibiting parent involvement, Hornby and Lafaele (2011) adapted Epstein's (2001) framework of overlapping spheres of influence to develop an explanatory models of the barriers to parent involvement in their children's education. Their model attempts to clarify barriers to parent involvement with schools within four areas: Individual parent and societal factors; individual parent and family factors; parent-teacher factors, and child factors (Figure 6).

**Societal factors.** Within this category, Hornby and Lafaele (2011) discuss historic and demographic, political, and economic factors that work as barriers to parent involvement. According to them, the history of organizing schools created a system of



**Figure 6.** Facting as barriers to parent involvement (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011, p. 39)

inflexibility that may alienate parents, traditional beliefs about family contexts may create conflict between expectations and realities of parent involvement, governmental policy and action may be inconsistent and lead to competition between parents and schools, and political control of schooling (such as through school zoning) may create difficulties for some parents to get to school. This is supported in the work of Ong-Dean (2009) who details the conflict between parents and schools in a system that characterizes parents as defenders of their children’s educational rights, pitting them against institutional inflexibility and insensitivity. Additionally, school culture and climate may limit the roles parents may take, isolating them and alienating them from partnership workings (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). The diversity and complexity of modern family contexts may not

match traditional views of family and the demands of parenting (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin & Soodak, (2006).

While hopeful that the quantity and quality of legislation and policy affecting parent-school partnerships are improving, Epstein, Galindo and Sheldon's (2011) findings suggest that enacting these policies require school and district leadership that supports and facilitates parent involvement in schooling. This may be challenging for administrators as legislation and policies may promote parent-school partnerships yet represent parents as *others*, framing parent knowledge as inadequate, supplementary, or unimportant to that of professional educators (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000).

Also among the societal barriers to parent-school partnerships are issues of access to resources. According to Hornby and Lafaele (2011), school funding has been organized around free market policies in which schools must justify their funding while demonstrating achievement of short-term goals for student achievement in reading and math. This, they say, presents schools with a challenge for justifying funding parent partnerships because of their long-term orientation to achieving goals for student success.

**Individual parent and family factors.** The second category of barriers in the Hornby and Lafaele (2011) model discusses the importance of parent beliefs about the nature of their involvement with schools, perceptions of their invitations to participate in their children's education, the current life contexts experienced by parents, and issues of class, ethnicity and gender that act as barriers to parent-school partnership. Parent beliefs that affect their involvement in their child's education, and in participating in partnerships with their child's school, include their perceptions of what partnership is, their role within the partnership, their own ability to contribute to their child's education, and beliefs about

their child's intelligence and how children learn and develop (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) agree that parents' beliefs about their own involvement motivate their participation behaviors. They also state that parents' construction of their own role contributes to their decisions to partner with schools. Reed, Jones, Walker, and Hoover-Dempsey (2000) demonstrated that parents beliefs about their role in their child's education, of their ability to working with professionals and contributing to their child's education, and of invitations of partnership account for 35% of the variance in parent involvement behaviors. Also, parent beliefs about their child's intelligence and how they learn and develop – either as a matter of luck or external influence - can affect parents' participation in partnerships with schools (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

The contexts parents experience may also present barriers to their partnership with schools. The level of parents' education can influence their views about their own skills and ability to work with schools (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007). Limited English proficiency and cultural mismatch may create an overwhelming chasm in communication between parents and schools (Harry, 2008). Family size and form, geographic location, employment and economic status, adaptability and cohesion, and ability to fulfill and balance of emphasis on its functions all play a part as potential barriers to parental partnership with their child's schools (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin & Soodak, 2006).

Hornby and Lafaele (2011) also point to factors of class and gender as potential barriers to partnership. They cite Reay's (1998) conclusions that working-class families and middle-class families have differing views about the connectedness of home-school

relationships, shaping their respective attitudes about their involvement with their child's school. They again cite Reay in his assertion that mothers are predominately involved in their children's education. Constructed gender roles may position women as gatekeepers of male parent involvement in family functions, including working with schools (Allen & Hawkins, 1999).

**Parent-teacher factors.** The third category of barriers in the Hornby and Lafaele (2011) model explains the barriers to partnership that result from differing goals and agendas between family and school, differing parent teacher attitudes, and the different language used between professional and parent and the institutions of school and home. They indicate that the goals of parent partnership may be focused on increasing school accountability, managing cost, or addressing cultural inequality and conflict with the goals of parents whose goals are for improving their child's performance, desire to influence the school climate and culture, or increase their understanding of the school context. Landeros (2011) demonstrated that such influence by parents with strong cultural capital may have a large impact on teacher job satisfaction and on the climate of the entire school. Others have indicated that parents and teachers conflicting goals may exist in regard to student compliance and discipline (Delpit, 2006) or values and beliefs about individual excellence versus collective success (Quiroz, Greenfield, & Altchech, 1999; Tamis-LeMonda, Way, Hughes, Yoshikawa, Kahana, Kalman, & Niwa, 2009).

Hornby and Lafaele (2011) state that,

[T]eachers and parents each bring to the melting pot of [parent involvement] personal attitudes that are deeply rooted within their own historical, economic, educational, ethnic, class and gendered experiences (p. 45).



Teachers sometimes have negative attitudes about parents as problems, assigning blame for poor student achievement (Thompson, Warren, & Carter, 2004) while some parent's attitudes about teachers and schools have shifted from deference to awareness and pursuit of rights (Bastiani, 1993) that may lead to distrust and animosity. Some teachers also have negative attitudes about including certain students in their classrooms (Boyle, Topping, & Jindal-Snape, 2013; Ross-Hill, 2009) while some parents attitudes about inclusion may clash with district policy and school practices (de Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2010).

The language used in education, even to define and describe parent-school relations sets up a power dynamic that seems to marginalize parents that defines one as expert (professional) and the other as non-expert (parent) (Bastiani, 1993). Hornby and Lafaele (2011) point out that feel-good terminology used in education, such as partnership, sharing, collaboration, participation and reciprocity mask the inequalities that actually exist in practices of parent involvement. This language may set greater expectations and give false images that can lead to disillusionment and distrust between parents and schools when lived experiences are less than the rhetoric.

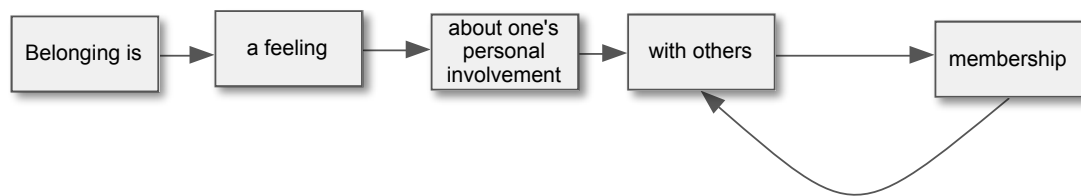
**Child factors.** The last category of barriers in the Hornby and Lafaele (2011) model addresses barriers to parent-school partnership related to the child, including age, learning difficulties and disabilities, gifts and talents, and behavioral problems. As children grow older and progress through their school careers, parent involvement with their schooling tends to decline (Brough & Irvin, 2001; Gonzalez-DeHass & Willems, 2003; Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow, & Fendrich, 1999). School efforts to work with parents also appear to decline (Becker & Epstein, 1982; Patrikakou, 2004), and students appear to increase resistance to parent involvement as they seek increasing independence from their parents

(Eccles & Harold, 1993). While children's learning difficulties can act as a facilitator to parent partnership, they may also act as barriers to parent involvement. According to Hornby & Lafaele (2011), learning difficulties and disabilities may act as a barrier to parent partnership when parents consider their children more academically capable or when teachers want more parent support for school efforts. Similarly, they say, children's gifts and talents may either encourage parents to participate in school when the child is doing well, or discourage parent involvement when the school does not share the parent's views of their child's abilities and provide appropriate academic support. Additionally, children's behaviors may encourage or discourage parent partnership for similar reasons (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

### **Belonging in the Context of School**

Belonging has been explained as an individual's sense of personal relatedness to others (McMillan & Chavez, 1986; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). This feeling of belonging is the core factor in developing and sustaining a community (Block, 2008; Osterman, 2000). Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema and Collier (1992) identify two defining attributes of partnerships that relate to sense of belonging in those relationships: 1) the person experiences being valued, needed, or important, and 2) the person experiences a fit or congruence with others. Achieving a sense of belonging is experiencing a sense of membership with another, contributing to a process of reciprocity among members (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1993; Schwarz, Trommsdorff, Albert, & Mayer, 2005). A thwarted or threatened sense of belonging can result in negative behavioral reactions (Gere and MacDonald, 2010). Some studies have shown that thwarted or threatened belonging can lead individuals to react antisocially

toward collaborators (Leary, Twenge, & Quinlivan, 2006; Thau, Aquino, & Poortvliet, 2007; Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001; Gaertner, Iuzzini, & O'Mara, 2008). For the purposes of this study, I have combined these views to define belonging as a feeling one has about his or her personal involvement with and acceptance by others that leads to a reciprocal membership status (Figure 7).



**Figure 7.** Semantic map of belonging

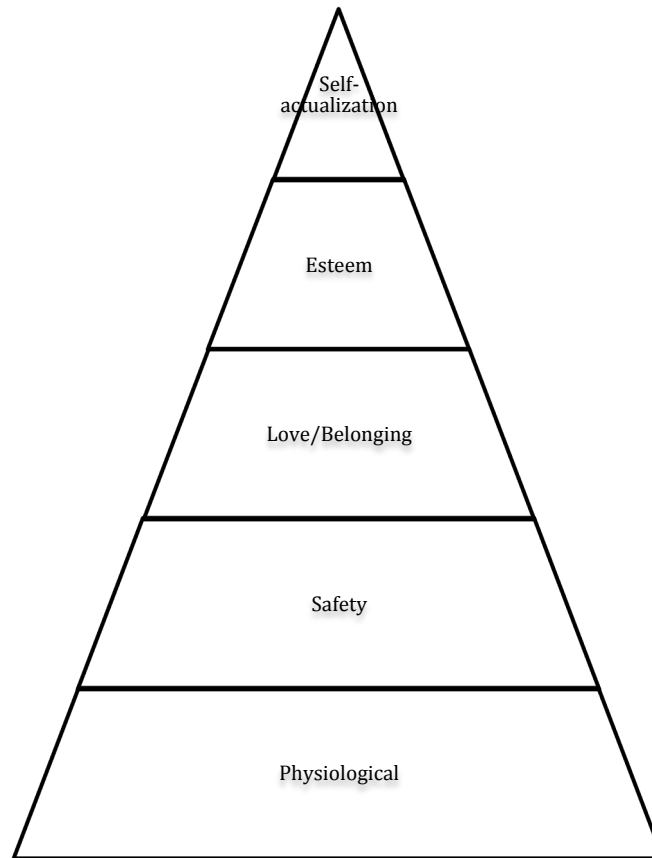
Maslow (1970) theorized that belonging is one of several basic human needs (Figure 8), each requiring successive fulfillment within a structured hierarchy. He suggested that humans must first fulfill the physiological needs to sustain life (e.g., food, water, sleep, bodily excretion). Once the physiological needs are met, humans are able to address their safety needs (e.g., security of personal health, shelter, job security, safety within community). When the physiological and safety needs are met, humans are then able and seek to full their social needs, to develop a sense of their place in the world, to belong with others. When these social needs are met, the individual is able and seeks to fill esteem needs (e.g., self-esteem, self-confidence, respect for and from others), and finally to achieve a need for self-actualization (e.g., self-awareness, personal growth, realization of self-potential). As Baumeister and Leary (1995) state, “people seek frequent, affectively

positive interactions within the context of long-term, caring relationships” (p. 522).

Additionally, several studies have found that possessing a sense of belonging has positive effects on physical and mental health (e.g., Hagerty & Williams, 1999; Hale, Hannum, & Espelage, 2005, McNeely & Falci, 2004; Vanderhorst & McLaren, 2005).

In a review of literature on student belonging, Osterman (2000) found strong and consistent evidence that students who felt school belonging were more highly motivated, engaged, and committed to school. In their study of 5,494 high school students from four ethnic groups in California and Wisconsin, Faircloth & Hamm (2005) found a strong relationship between belonging and motivation, and belonging and achievement. They also found that students experienced school belonging in multiple ways that included relationships with teachers, involvement in school activity, perceived ethnic-based discrimination, and friendship, although friendship was less relevant for African American students or those of Asian descent. Ryan and Patrick (2001) and Stipek (1996) have also linked students’ sense of belongingness to better school performance.

Studies of school belonging have also found evidence of the importance of belonging to teachers. Johnson’s (2009) study of teachers and students at two high schools in the U.S. found that teachers who experience a sense of belonging in the school context have greater job satisfaction and collegiality that may contribute to student learning and commitment. In their study of 2,560 Norwegian teachers in elementary and middle school, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011) found that teachers’ sense of belonging contributes to job satisfaction and career retention. In a multi-level analysis of data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS-K), Byrd, Huffman, and Johnson (2007) found that administrators who created



**Figure 8.** Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs.

a “climate of collective learning and sense of belonging among teachers have the greatest impact on student achievement” (p. 2).

There appear to be few studies that address parents' sense of belonging regarding their working with their child's school. However, there is evidence that suggests parents' sense of belonging is important to them in partnering with their child's teachers. Stewart, Makwarimba, Reutter, Veenstra, Raphael and Love (2009) found that parents in their study reported their children's schools as prominent in fostering a sense of belonging where they could connect and participate with other parents for socialization and support. Bassani's (2008) study of parents and teachers working together in a partners in education program

found that increased in-class parent-teacher collaboration enabled parents to develop a sense of belonging that led to increased contributions in their working with students. This study attempts to contribute to the overall body of literature on belonging by developing understandings of parents' sense of belonging in parent-school partnerships.

## **Summary**

Parent-school partnerships have been proposed as a means for improving student school outcomes. Evidence suggests that when parents and schools work together, students demonstrate better academic achievement and improved cognitive, social, and behavioral skills. Four models of parent-school partnership were discussed: 1) Epstein's six forms of parent involvement; 2) Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's of the parent involvement process; 3) deFur's family partnership model, and; 4) the Systems of Care approach. Partnership literature reviewed for this study were reviewed indicating that partnership authors indicated a total of 12 characteristics of effective partnership that include: developing shared objectives, forming mutual trust, establishing and maintaining effective communications, sharing responsibilities, sharing in the process of problem solving, sharing power, developing and maintaining mutual respect, demonstrating commitment, participating in the partnership, managing the aspect of time in which the partnership takes place, sensitivity to the needs of other partners, and the importance of confidence in partner skill set. The chapter discussed barriers to parent-school partnerships, including a review of Hornby and Lafaele's (2011) model of factors that act as barriers to parent involvement with their child's school. The chapter ended with a review of literature on belonging as related to the context of school as a possible characteristic of effective parent-school partnerships.

## **CHAPTER THREE:**

### **METHOD**

I've seen things. I know things.  
I want you to see and know, too.  
I want to know what you know.  
no one here thinks Words  
are holy. but you do.  
I can't not.

(VonBargen, 2012)

This chapter presents the study's research method. It begins by restating the research questions and presenting the philosophical and theoretical foundations, followed by a description of the parents, and ethical considerations including informed consent to participate. I then provide a detailed description of the research design and end the chapter with a discussion of additional quality criteria.

The purpose of this study is to describe how some parents of children with autism experience belonging and make sense of their relationships with their child's school. This information has the potential for informing initial teacher education and professional development programs and school based and district level service providers and administrators to support practices that encourage and enhance collaborative partnerships with parents of children with autism. As legislation and policy regarding special education has continued to emphasize the importance of meaningful collaboration between school and home, there is a need for education professionals to develop understandings of parent perspectives of their experiences in partnering with schools, what has worked in those

partnerships to support students' development, and what challenges parents encounter in order to achieve an appropriate education in the least restrictive environment as mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004).

### **Restatement of Research Questions**

The research questions for this study were developed to access and examine the perspectives of parents of middle school students with autism regarding their own sense of belonging in working in partnership with their child's school. The study seeks to examine a small group of parents' perspectives in an effort to develop understandings of the concepts of partnership and belonging, and explore how these understandings may be used to develop and improve parent-school partnerships. Specifically, the research questions that guided this study are:

- 1) How do parents of middle school students with autism describe their experiences with parent-school partnership?
- 2) How do parents of middle school students with autism define and exemplify belonging, particularly with regard to their own sense of belonging in the school-family partnership?
- 3) What are parents of middle school students with autism's experiences of belonging with their child's school?
- 4) How can understandings of notions of belonging help schools improve partnering relationships with parents of students with autism?

### **Philosophical and Theoretical Foundations**

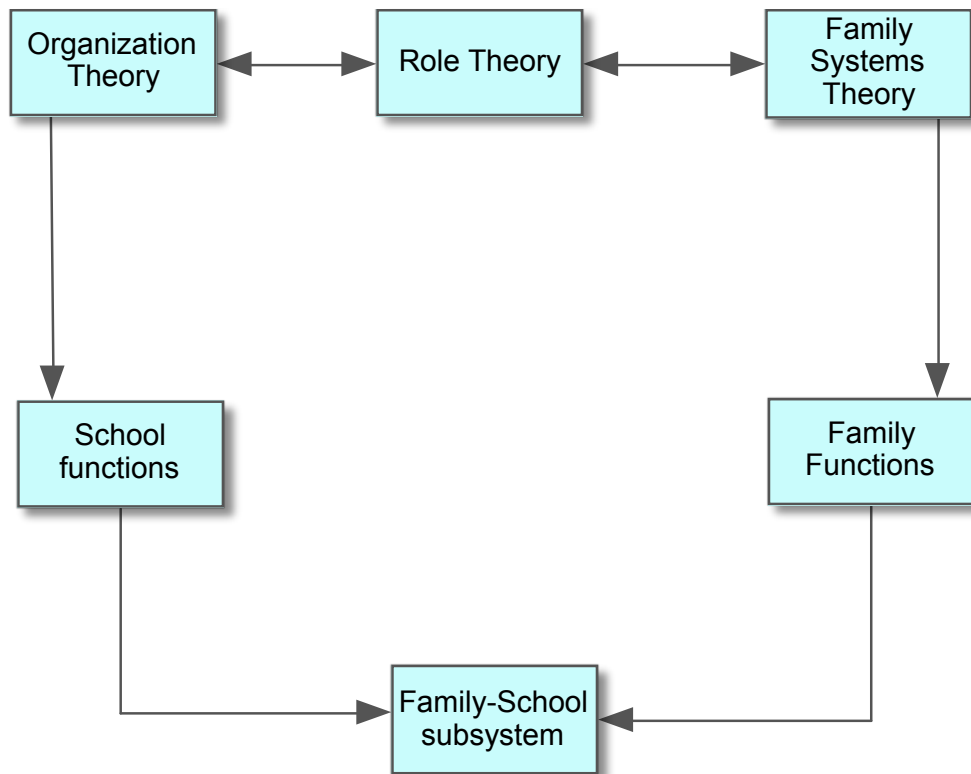
This study is framed in the philosophical traditions of phenomenology in that belongingness is a personal experience of individuals interacting with others (Maslow,



1970, 1999; Turner & Oakes, 1989; Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Bowsema, & Collier, 1992). In other words, a sense of belonging is not achieved in being told by others that they belong with them, but in the individual's feelings about their social relationships. As Gergen (2009) wrote, "The ways in which we describe and explain the world are the outcomes of our relationships" (p. 6). As such, the voices of personal experiences about social relationships are the doorways to understandings of what is meaningful, valuable, and real in the lives of others. This study is also guided by the traditions of social constructionism in that it provides a lens for viewing reality as a construct of social processes in which individuals attempt to make sense of the world by developing mental representations that provide order to our subjective experiences (Gergen, 2009; Berger & Luckman, 1966).

To develop understandings of parent perspectives of belonging in partnerships with schools, I have drawn on the theoretical foundations of role theory, including specific aspects of organizational systems theory and family systems theory that interact to produce a school-family subsystem (Figure 9). Role theory is applied in this study as a means of framing understandings of parents as members of the family-school subsystem, rather than as external clients of school systems.

**Role Theory.** According to Biddle (1986), role theory is concerned with "the fact that human beings behave in ways that are different and predictable depending on their respective social identities and the situation" (p. 68). Biddle further explains that role theory is concerned with three concepts, as he says, "patterned characteristic social behaviors, parts or identities that are assumed by social participants, and scripts or expectations for behavior that are understood by all and adhered to by performers" (p 68). It is the scripts or expectations that include the rules and traditions of the organization or



**Figure 9.** Interactions of theory toward understanding the family-school subsystem.

social system that inform members of their expected behaviors, define and differentiate positions of responsibility and status, and regulate the enactment of member behaviors within social systems. As described in the following sections, distinctly different scripts and role identities developed respectively within organizational systems and family systems are reshaped when they intersect to form a family-school subsystem.

**Organizational Theory.** Organizations, such as schools, are established to accomplish those things that are beyond the reach of the individual (Johnson & Fauske, 2005; Musgrove, 2012). Part of the work of organizing is in defining the rules of membership that confer status and identity, and create a hierarchy for administration and management of the organization (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Rules and traditions are

created when forming the organization in order to optimize performance and maintain good order and discipline among students, school employees and other stakeholders (Cunliffe, 2008).

In examining the roles of formal organizations, organizational role theorists have focused on how individuals are informed of, accept, and enact roles within task-oriented, hierarchical systems (Biddle, 1986,). Organizational role theory is based on four assumptions (Biddle, 1986). First, individual roles are defined by the traditions and expectations of the system. To achieve membership and a sense of belonging with the organization, individuals must perform the pre-defined role the organization confers upon them (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Kerr, 1978). In the context of school as a system, parent's roles are defined by a complex interaction of multiple systems that model the parenting role (Hoover-Dempsey & Jones, 1997). For example, family, community and political systems, each with their own definitions and models of the parent, work together to collaboratively develop an overall concept of the role of parenting within each of their various contexts. Specifically, public policy in education has defined parenting with expectations for procedural behaviors within schools, such as in expectations for communicating with teachers and, for parents of children with disabilities, attending individualized education plan meetings.

Second, for organizations to function efficiently, there must be a consensus among members regarding the expectations for respective roles (Biddle, 1986). Levine (1999) says that, "Schools expect parents to get involved, both at home and at school, [and] parents are supposed to ask questions" (p. 1). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (1998), schools expect parents to be involved in providing academic

supports to their children in helping with homework, developing reading skills, attending parent-teacher conferences and other school events, and supplementing in-class instruction. However, consensus, even with these seemingly innocuous statements, may be difficult to attain as there are multiple schools in the U.S., each with the potential for an independent set of rules and expectations for its stakeholders, including parents. The point is, that when there is a lack of consensus, conflict among members may arise as a barrier to effective partnership.

Third, members must consistently adhere to institutional norms (Biddle, 1986; Stein, 1982). This is closely related to the second assumption in that if there is a lack of consensus, there may also be an associated resistance to the organization's rules and traditions. Lastly, organizational role theory assumes that conflict will arise when members fail to behave according to the organization's role expectations (Miles & Perrault, 1976).

The relationship between organization theory and role theory lies in the observation that the former explains the construction and normalization of rules and traditions for member behavior, while the latter explains the individual's assumption of those rules and traditions through their behavior as a function of membership with the organization. For a prospective member to achieve belonging, he or she must act upon the stage as set by the stage manager. The member continues to act out his role in harmony with as a member of the group only as long as he or she continues to act the part prepared for him or her.

**Family Systems Theory.** Family systems theorists suggest that families are interactional social systems in which events affecting one member can impact all members

(Bowen, 1966; Minuchin, 1974). Turnbull, Summers, and Brotherson (1984) developed a conceptual framework of the family system to illustrate its interdependent structure of inputs, processes, outputs, and mediating factors. The inputs of the family system are the characteristics of its members (family resources). These characteristics describe the individual members (e.g., age, health status, strengths, challenges) and the characteristics of the family as a whole (e.g., size, cultural heritage, socio-economic status). Members, with their many characteristics, are involved in multiple interactions with each other in member subsystems, such as parent-child, brother-sister, and husband-wife subsystems. These subsystem interactions contribute to what Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin and Soodak (2006) identify as the eight family functions: Affection; self-esteem; spiritual; economic; daily care; socialization; recreation; and, education. These functions of the family may intersect with the functions of other systems that retain their own dynamics, as may be seen in the educational functions of the family and school systems (de Carvalho, 2000). When each of the intersecting systems view their ability to perform a common function to be beyond their abilities to achieve without the other, a new subsystem may emerge, as seen in the development of family-school subsystems (Lewis, 1996; O'Callaghan, 1994).

**Family-School Subsystem.** Figure 9 illustrates how the three social theories described above (Role Theory, Organizational Theory, and Family Systems Theory) interact to provide a framework for examining family-school relationships. Role theory contributes to understandings of how role identities are collectively formed and managed by a system, yet individually interpreted and enacted by members. Whereas organizational theory contributes to understandings of how organizations, such as schools, structure and define membership, family systems theory suggests that familial social interactions take place

within several subsystems in which role identities are expressed (i.e., parental, marital, sibling) and that each family process affects family outputs, including education. In the case of schools and families, these theories contribute to understandings of how membership may take place in a family-school subsystem in which functions and roles overlap. This framework of intersecting theories allows for the examination of parents' sense of belonging in parent-school partnerships as part of a process of role construction that takes place separately within school and family systems, and how these roles may be negotiated redefined within a school-family subsystem.

**Role Ambiguity and Role Conflict.** Role theory hypothesizes that performance within organizational systems may arise when the definition of a role is ambiguously defined or when there is incongruity in the definitions of a role with the expectations one has for role performance (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). Lawson & Briar-Lawson (cited in Lawson, 2003) have stated that, within the parent-school subsystem, stress may occur within the subsystem when the meaning and functions of parents are unclear or compete with other definitions. The role of parents may have competing definitions between those constructed in the family system and those in the organizational system. Similarly, roles may be ambiguously defined when one or both systems make assumptions about the role of parents within the combined parent-school subsystem.

### **Parents who Participated in the Study**

I chose for this study to examine the perspectives of belonging among a small group of parents of students with autism for several reasons. First, parents of children with autism appear to experience greater levels of stress than those of typically developing children or children diagnosed with other exceptionalities (Hayes & Watson, 2013) that

may act as a barrier to forming and maintaining effective parent-school partnerships (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Second, according to Zablotsky, Boswell, and Smith (2012), although parents of students with autism are more likely to participate with schools in their child's education, they are still more likely to be less satisfied with certain characteristics of effective parent-school partnerships than other parents. Third, only a slight majority of parents of students with autism appear to be satisfied with their child's education (Starr & Foy, 2012; Starr, Foy, Cramer, & Singh, 2006).

Parents in this study were recruited through purposive sampling (Berg, 2009) by distributing flyers (Appendix D) through local autism support groups/networks for dissemination. These flyers contained a brief description of the purpose of the study, participant eligibility criteria, a statement of the time parents would be asked to commit in participating, along with principal researcher contact information, and a statement regarding participant confidentiality.

### **Inclusion Criteria**

All parents participated in this study on a voluntary basis. To be included in this study, parents were required to self-identify as filling the role of parent to a middle school (grade 6 through 8) child with autism. In situations in which more than one parent of the same child desired to participate in the study, both parents were treated as individual cases and interviewed separately. Only parents of middle school students currently eligible and receiving exceptional education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004), as reported by parents, were included due to the unique challenges parents of middle school students face in working in partnership with schools that include changes in the child's development from childhood to adolescence, potential

difficulties in accessing teachers due to high numbers of students a teacher serves in relation to elementary schools, an often increased number of teachers students may work with in secondary schools, and an increasing complexity of choices that can complicate parent involvement (Hill & Tyson, 2009).

### **Description of the Parents**

Table 1 provides demographic information for the six parents who participated in this study. All parents self-identified as the biological parent of a child with autism in middle school. Parent 1 and Parent 2 are husband and wife, residing in the same household and sharing equal responsibility for working with their daughter's education support team. Although these parents shared in parenting of one child with autism, each was treated as a separate case in order to examine their unique experiences and perspectives in working with their child's school. Other than this husband and wife, no other parent in this study had children who attended the same school or knew the other parents prior to participating in the study.

Parents represented three adjacent school districts located in the Southeastern United States. District X is a large district serving a total student population of over 187,000 students of which approximately 43,000 attend middle schools. District Y has a total student population of approximately 69,000 of which approximately 15,300 attend middle schools. District Z has a total student enrollment of approximately 101,000 of which approximately 21,000 attend middle schools. Parents represented five middle schools, with only Parent 1 and Parent 2 (husband and wife) representing the same child and school. At the time of this study, four parents reported their children with autism were assigned to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, while one parent each reported their child in grade 6 or 7,



**Table 1.** Participant demographics.

Participant	Parent Gender	Student Gender	District	School	Student's Grade	Autism Support Level (DSM-5)
Parent 1	Female	Female	X	A	8	3
Parent 2	Male	Female	X	A	8	3
Parent 3	Female	Male	Y	B	8	2
Parent 4	Female	Male	X	C	7	1
Parent 5	Female	Male	Z	D	6	3
Parent 6	Female	Male	Y	F	8	1

respectively. Autism support levels reported in Table 1 are those used by the Fifth Edition of the *Diagnosics and Statistics Manual* (American Psychological Association, 2014), in which level three indicates the student requires very substantial supports, level two indicates the student requires substantial supports, and level one indicates that the student requires supports. The assignments of these support levels were my estimations based on parent descriptions of their child's needs and services. Three parents indicated that their children required very substantial supports; one parent indicated their child requires substantial supports; two parents indicated their child requires supports.

### **Ethics and Informed Consent**

This study was approved through the University of South Florida's Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Appendix E) and adhered to that organization's requirements for ensuring the ethical treatment of human subjects. Several steps were taken as part of this study to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of participating parents and other

individuals who were named or identified through the data collection process. Informed consent to participate in this study, including an explanation of the purpose of the study and an explanation of participants' rights to refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time prior to final data analysis was obtained from all participants. Informed consent assured participants that their personally identifiable information would be kept confidential and reported anonymously. All documents that contained personally identifying information – including informed consent forms and parent produced relational maps) were retained by me in a locked cabinet accessible only by me and inspected on a bi-weekly bases to ensure completeness and that tampering had not occurred. Within all working documents – including interview transcripts - all the names of individuals and of specific locations that might lead to identifying specific persons or organizations were replaced in with generic labels (i.e., Parent 1, the school, etc).

### **Research Design**

This study examines the phenomenon of belonging by using “thick description” (Denzin, 2001; Geertz, 1973; Ryle, 1949) to work in partnership with parents to collect, construct, describe and interpret their experiences of belonging in parent-school partnerships. According to Ponterotto (2006), thick description evolved as an ethnographic method in which the researcher’s task was to:

...both describe and interpret observed social action (or behavior) within its particular context...Thick description accurately describes observed social actions and assigns purpose and intentionality to these actions, by way of the researcher’s understanding and clear description of the context under which the social actions took place. Thick description captures the thoughts and feelings of participants as well as the often complex web of relationships among them. Thick description leads to thick interpretation, which in turn leads to thick meaning of the research findings for the

researchers and participants themselves, and for the report's intended readership.

Ponterotto, 2006, p. 543

In this study, thick descriptions were a co-construction between researcher and participants in which the participants were themselves researchers by constructing thick descriptions of their experiences that expressed not only their action, but also the contexts and meanings of their actions and interpreted intentions of their and others behaviors and actions.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection and analysis took place as an iterative process within this study. Analysis began immediately upon recording the first piece of data with participants and continued through completion of analysis. Figure 10 depicts the processes of data collection and analysis in this study. To reach trustworthy and credible conclusions from data that represent multiple and diverse realities, multiple methods of collecting data were required (Golafshani, 2003). Further, triangulation of qualitative data uses different sources of information in order to increase the reliability of a study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Stake, 2006). To gather a body of representative data and increase the trustworthiness of thematic analysis, this study used three methods of data collection: Arts-based relational maps, individual interviews, and focus group interviews. Each method systematically addressed the research questions as displayed in Table 2.

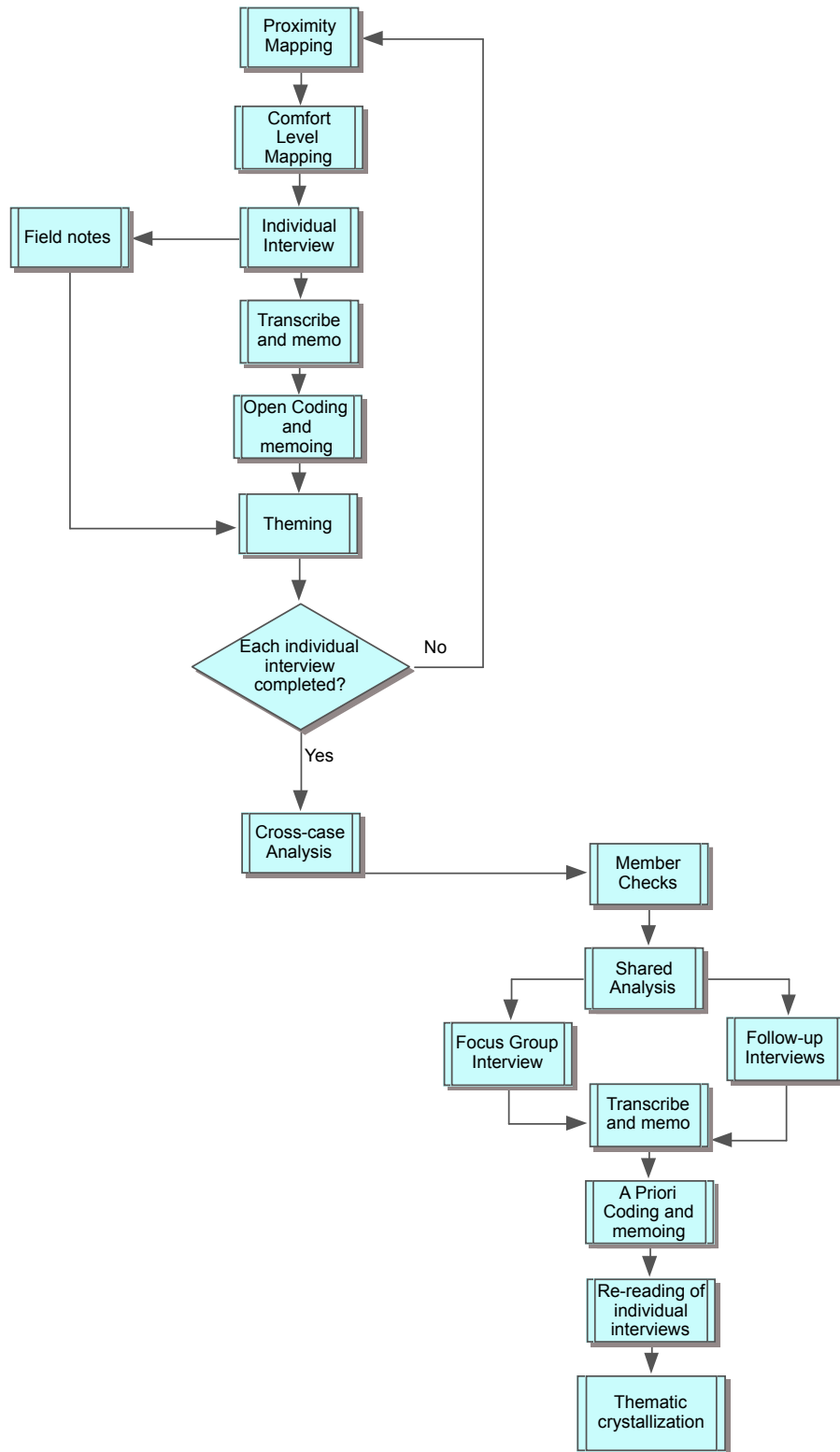
**Relational Maps.** Arts based educational research (ABER) enhances understandings of perspectives pertaining to human activities and are defined by aesthetic qualities that infuse the inquiry process and the research text (Barone & Eisner, 1997). I

**Table 2.** Relationship of research questions to method of data collection

Research Question	Arts-based relational mapping	Individual interview	Focus group interview
1	X	X	X
2		X	X
3	X	X	X
4	X	X	X

employed a method of graphic elicitation through parents' construction of two forms of arts based relational mapping: 1) A relational map (RM) and a comfort level map (CLM) (Appendix D). Relational mapping involves participants constructing diagrams to represent the interconnectivity of elements within a concept or domain and serve as a means of stimulating conversation regarding the topic of research (Bagnoli, 2009; Crilly, Blackwell, & Clarkson, 2006). Comfort is an indicator of trust for others and feelings about others' competencies and skills (Jeffries & Reed, 2000). A comfort level map was developed for this study to elicit parent perceptions of how comfortable they feel in working with the individuals identified on their relational maps and how those levels might indicate perceptions of trust, competency and skill. Additionally, both the relational and comfort level maps served as a means of stimulating conversation regarding the topic of research (Bagnoli, 2009; Crilly, Blackwell, & Clarkson, 2006).

Immediately before conducting individual semi-structured interviews (described below), parents were introduced to the concept of belonging and the use of relational mapping by the researcher using a standardized script (Appendix D). Parents were shown



**Figure 10.** Process of data collection and analysis.

an example of a completed relational map and provided an explanation of the purpose of such a map. Parents were then given writing materials and an enlarged print relational map template. Examples of the completed relational map example and blank relational map template are included in Appendix D. Parents took approximately seven to ten minutes to construct their relational maps, depicting their perceptions of how closely other individuals worked with them regarding their child's schooling. Parents were encouraged to include other immediate and extended family members, teachers and other school personnel, employers, friends, and any other persons in their lives they felt worked that with them regarding their child's schooling.

After completing the relational map, parents were asked to complete a comfort level map to represent the level of comfort he or she experiences in working with persons identified in their relational map. Parents were shown an example of a completed comfort level map (Figure D.3) and provided an explanation of the purpose of such a map. Given an enlarged version of a comfort level map template, parents took approximately 5 to seven minutes to construct a comfort level map depicting the level of comfort they experience when working with the individuals they identified in their relational map. Examples of the completed comfort level map sample and template are included in Appendix D. In addition to stimulating conversations, relational and comfort level maps served as both a separate data source for analyses and as a reference tool throughout the processes of interviewing and thematic analysis.

**Individual Interviews.** In designing and conducting individual interviews for this study, I drew upon Rubin and Rubin's (2012) responsive interviewing approach that emphasizes flexibility in design and enables the researcher to respond to the personalities

of both the interviewer and the person being interviewed. This approach allows the researcher to use a limited number of semi-structured questions to conduct extended, in-depth conversations on a topic that is guided by a limited number of semi-structured questions with follow-up questions and probes that emerge from the conversations. While semi-structured questions prepared in advance acted as a conversational guide, follow-up questions sought to increase depth and detail regarding responses to semi-structured questions. Similarly, probes (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) were used to gain depth and detail about the topic and to manage the conversation by seeking elaboration and clarification.

Each parent was individually interviewed for approximately 60 minutes following their construction of relational and comfort level maps. Semi-structured interview questions used to guide interviews are contained in Appendix E. These questions were designed to incorporate language parents would understand and relate to, and provide them with focus while allowing flexibility to express a range of perspectives, experiences and understandings about the parent-school partnership belonging. Follow-up questions and probes were determined on a situational basis to fill in missing pieces from the conversations, narrow the conversations away from generalizations, clarify meanings, and explore new ideas related to the research questions.

Individual interviews were arranged in collaboration with participants in order to accommodate time and space requirements, comfort, and confidentiality. Parent 1 and Parent 2 were interviewed in their home on a non-work/non-school day during which one parent could care for the child while the other participated in the interview. Parents 3, 4 and 5 were interviewed in private booths at restaurants convenient to their place of employment or met their needs for scheduling and/or comfort level in meeting in a public,

yet semi-private location. Parent 6 chose to be interviewed at her place of work after working hours when no other individuals were present in the room. Each interview was digitally recorded with the parent's permission. These recordings were transferred from the recording device to my personal password protected laptop computer for transcription. Following transcription, original recordings were deleted from the recording device to prevent inadvertent access by others.

**Field Notes.** Field notes were recorded throughout each of the individual interviews and focus group interview, including while parents constructed their relational and comfort level maps. Field notes were used to record my general thoughts and impressions, and make note of analytic ideas as they emerged in the field (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Field notes were recorded on paper and later digitized by scanning into separate portable document format (PDF) files. The thoughts and impressions recorded on field notes were used as a source for expanded analytic thinking in the processes of coding and theming the interview data.

**Transcription and Memoing.** I personally transcribed each individual interview recording, as suggested by Rubin & Rubin (2012). These transcriptions were recorded in rich text format documents for later analysis in qualitative data analysis software. While transcribing, I continued to record analytic memos about the events or my thoughts, impressions and questions about the parent's perspectives, and of my own developing understandings about the data (Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Stake, 2006). The memos were then directly transcribed and attached to their associated data source in qualitative analysis software during the open coding process.



**Open Coding and Memoing.** Once transcribed, I uploaded the individual's transcription and analytic memos, along with the parent's relational map and comfort level map and interview field notes into Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software as a single hermeneutic unit (Muhr, 1991). The Atlas.ti software package provided a means for electronically managing data files, for labeling and annotating data units within and across interview transcripts and arts-based data, and for organizing data elements into manageable units. Within Atlas.ti, I conducted open coding on each interview on a sentence-by-sentence basis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) in order to retain representations of parents' complete thoughts represented within sentence structures. As codes were developed and assigned, I continued to record analytic memos regarding my own thoughts and impressions of parent's comments (Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Stake, 2006). Again, these memos served to make connections between the data and my own thought processes throughout analysis, including making comparisons with previous analytic memos, helping to develop understandings of what was happening within the data and contributed to making sense of the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1984).

**Theming.** Stake (2009) frames one of the purposes of multiple case study analysis as finding what is common among cases rather than what is unique to each case. One method used in qualitative data analysis to reveal commonalities across cases involves the theming of multiple data sets (Moustakas, 1994; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Saldaña, 2009; Stake, 2009). While Creswell (2009) asserts that there is no consensus on how to analyze qualitative data, there is general consensus that analysis should include a thorough reading of data that includes a process analytic memo writing, that data should be thematically

categorized and subsequently sorted and resorted by theme, and that themes should be integrated across cases (e.g., Creswell, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Stake, 2006).

After having thoroughly read, re-read, and coded an interview, I reviewed all codes to identify co-occurring or substantially similar codes, which were then collapsed for clarity with each iteration of individual interviews. I then sorted and categorized these collapsed codes into tentative themes (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The codes and themes that emerged while analyzing an interview provided an opportunity for additional questions and lines of inquiry to emerge prior to conducting succeeding interviews. This cyclic process of interview-analysis-interview was followed throughout the process of individual interviewing, with the exception of interviews for Parent 1 and Parent 2, as these interviews were conducted consecutively on the same day and did not allow time for analysis between interviews.

**Cross Analysis.** While cross analysis (Stake, 2006) took place as part of the coding and theming of interviews, I initiated an additional level of cross analysis specific to relational and comfort level maps. Cross analysis was conducted on parent mappings in order to compare the frequencies of partners that parents identified by category (family and close friends, school based direct/routine service providers, school based indirect/occasional non-school based service providers, school/district administration, and non-school based service providers), and the intensity of comfort levels experienced by parents in working with individuals within those categories ranging from very comfortable to very uncomfortable.

**Member Checks.** Once all individual interviews had been conducted, transcribed, coded and themed, and cross analysis was completed identifying the frequency of partners

by category and intensity of comfort level, I presented each parent with a copy of their transcribed interview and comfort level maps. Parents were asked to review these documents and confirm that they were accurate representations. All parents confirmed the content of their transcript and relational maps.

**Focus Group and Follow-Up Interviews.** Focus group interviews have been widely used in qualitative research in combination with individual interviews (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008; Morgan, 1996). One format for conducting this qualitative mixed-methods approach is by initially interviewing individual participants separately, then bringing these participants together as a group (Beitin, 2012). In applying this format, separate interviews have been used to explore specific opinions and experiences of each individual followed by a collective group interview that seeks to address continuity of personal experiences and develop a sense of crystallization of emergent themes across participants (Harrell & Bradley, 2009; Lambert & Loiselle, 2008; Morgan, 1997).

In the process of seeking multiple representations of experiences and share the process of analysis with parents, I conducted a single focus group with parents who were previously interviewed individually. The purpose of the focus group was to explore and seek a sense of crystallization of emergent themes. A set of focus group interview questions was used to guide the focus group (Appendix F) with additional questions and probes emerging within and as a byproduct of the conversations that developed. The focus group was conducted in a private conference room at a local university and lasted approximately 75 minutes. However, only two parents of the six parents (Parents 4 and 5) attended the scheduled focus group. The focus group interview was digitally recorded with original recordings transferred from the recording device to my personal password protected lap

top computer for later transcription in order to document the results of parent-involved analysis and thematic crystallization.

To include Parent 1, 2, 3 and 6 in sharing in the analysis process, separate follow-up individual interviews were conducted with each of parent by phone. Each follow up interview followed the same format as the focus group and guided by the focus group semi-structured questions of Appendix F. As with the focus group, the purpose of the follow-up interviews was to explore and seek a sense of crystallization of emergent themes. Parent follow-up interviews were also digitally recorded with original recordings transferred from the recording device to my personal password protected lap top computer for later transcription in order to document the results of parent-involved analysis and thematic crystallization.

**Axial Coding.** As a final stage toward developing more complete understandings of parent perspectives of belonging and partnership with their children's schools, I reconstructed all the data through a process of axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). While thematic analysis constructed data into representations of overarching themes, axial coding deconstructed thematic data within a framework of the elements of effective partnership discussed in Chapter Two. Data previously grouped by theme was recoded with each element of effective partnership serving as an a priori code.

**Re-Reading and Thematic Crystallization.** Corbin and Strauss (2008) point out that rereading qualitative data helps to stimulate thinking. They also state that this is a particularly useful tool when used to look at data with a broad and generalized view that looks at main issues. As a final tool in analysis, I re-read each individual interview in order to ensure each parent's main issues and concerns were adequately represented in the

themes, and that parents' individual stories were not overwhelmed either by the collective stories that emerged or by the meticulous detail of coding and theming.

### **Additional Quality Criteria**

The data collection methods in this study provide rich descriptions of parent perceptions about their sense of belonging in a school-parent partnership, or lack of such a sense of belonging. Parents of children with autism serve as primary, first-hand sources of information about the topic and provide constructed knowledge of their own experiences. To promote confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), I conducted member checks with individual parents in two stages. First, prior to conducting the focus group and follow-up interviews, I provided each parent with a copy of his or her own transcribed interview for review and comment. Next, I provided each parent with a summary of the emerging themes and understandings developed through analysis of the individual interviews for review and comment by email and solicited their feedback. Finally, the focus group and follow up interviews themselves provided a vehicle for conducting a collective and collaborative member check in addition to promoting exploration and crystallization of emerging themes.

As an additional means of supporting credibility, I recruited a peer reviewer to examine the findings of this study (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The peer reviewer was a fellow doctoral candidate experienced with the phenomenon of parent-school partnerships as an educator at the secondary and post-secondary education levels. The peer reviewer had a working knowledge of the data collection and analysis methods used in this study, having participated with me in bi-weekly dissertation writing group sessions (Lee & Golde, n.d.) that, over time, allowed the reviewer to accomplish the

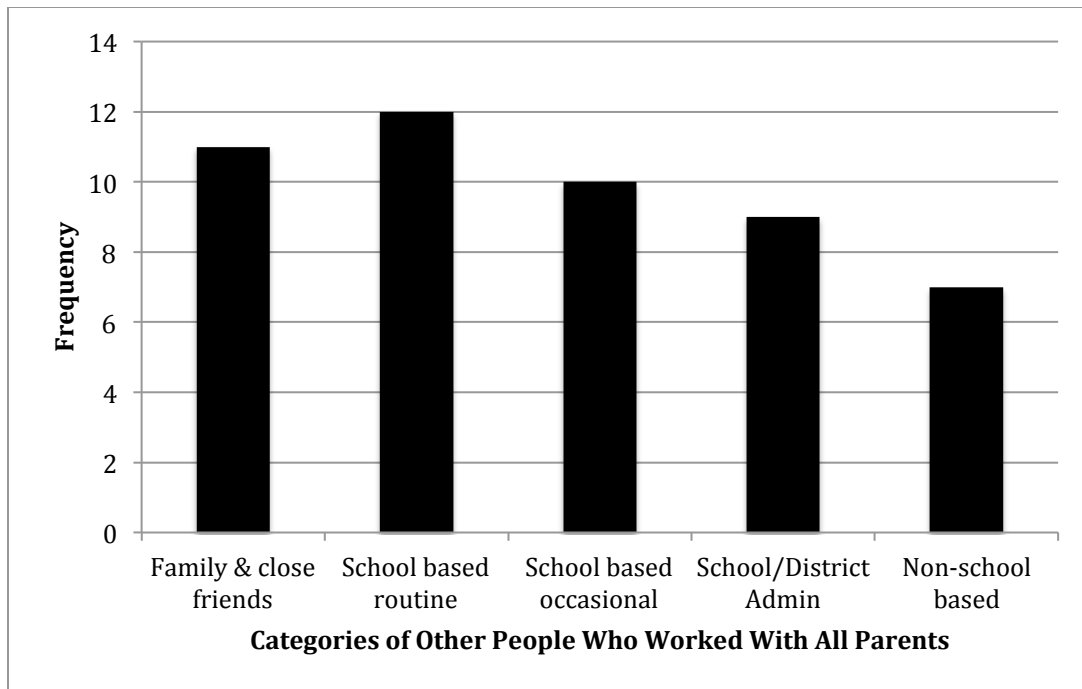
purposes of peer review described by Creswell and Miller (2000) to “play devil’s advocate, challenge the researcher’s assumptions, push the researchers to the next step methodologically, and ask hard questions about methods and interpretations” (p. 129).

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

The purpose of this study is to describe how some parents of middle school children with autism experience belonging and make sense of their relationships with their children's schools. Six parents of middle school students with autism participated in the study. Their perspectives were collected through arts-based relational mappings that included proximity and comfort level maps and individual and group interviews. In this chapter, I present the findings of the study that resulted from analysis of the data regarding the composition of their parent-school partnerships, the parents' definitions of belonging, including examples and non-examples of belonging in the context of parent-school partnerships, and of the themes that emerged from parents' discourses around knowledge and expertise, relationships, sensitivity, aims and objectives, and communication.

### **Partnership Compositions**

In constructing proximity maps and comfort level maps (Appendix D), parents created visual representations of who they worked with regarding their children's education, how closely they worked with those individuals, and how comfortable they felt in working with them. A combined summary of these data is contained in Appendix G. Figure 11 represents the categories and combined frequencies of people who have worked with all parents regarding their children's education. These categories include: 1) family

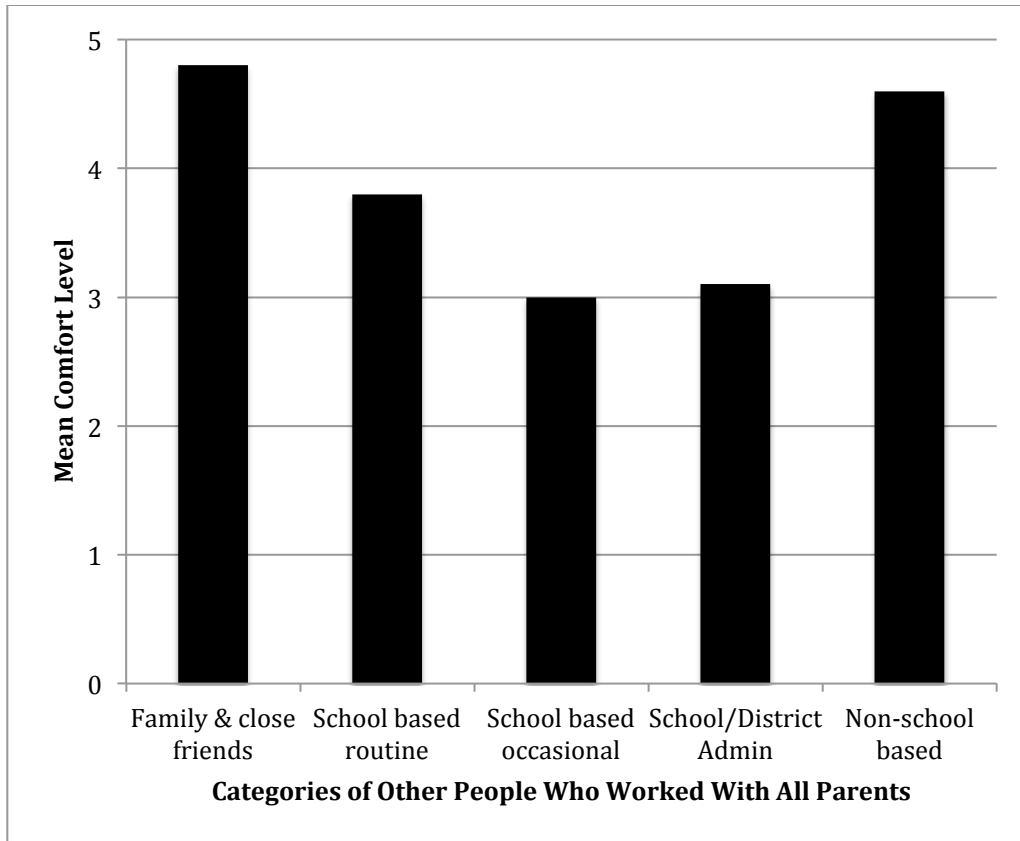


**Figure 11.** Frequencies with which parents worked with other people by category

and close friends; 2) school based routine service providers; 3) school based occasional service providers; 4) school and district administration, and; 5) non-school based service providers. Parents worked most frequently with school based direct service providers (f=12), followed by family and close friends (f=11), school based occasional service providers (f=10), school/district administration (f=9), and non-school based service providers (f=7).

Figure 12 represents the mean levels of comfort parents experienced in working with individuals by category, transcribed to a five point scale ranging from very comfortable (comfort level 5) to very uncomfortable (comfort level 1). Parents felt most comfortable in working with family and close friends ( $\bar{x} = 4.8$ ), followed by non-school based service providers ( $\bar{x} = 4.6$ ), school based routine service providers ( $\bar{x} = 3.8$ ), and



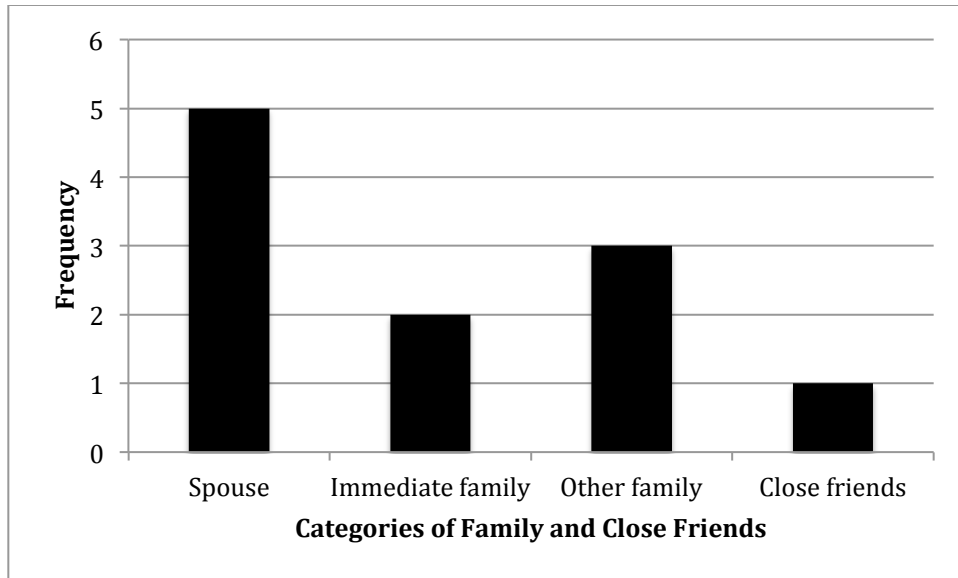


**Figure 12.** Mean level of comfort parents experienced in working with individuals by category

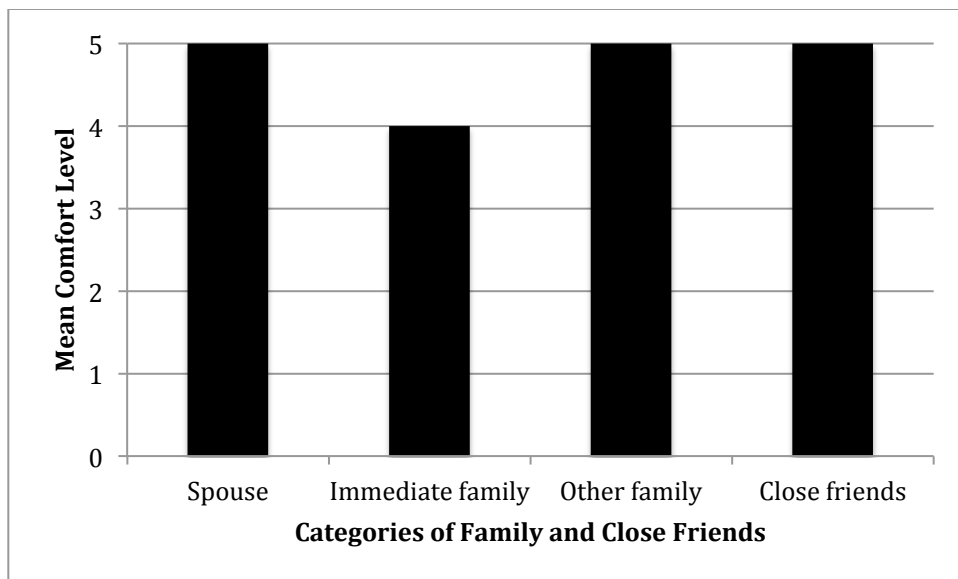
school/district administration ( $\bar{x} = 3.1$ ) and school based occasional service providers ( $\bar{x} = 3.0$ ).

### **Family and Close Friends**

Figure 13 reflects the frequency with which parents identified specific family members or close friends worked with them regarding their child's education. Figure 14 demonstrates the mean comfort level parents reported working with family members or close friends based on a five-point scale ranging from very comfortable (level 5) to very uncomfortable (level 1). Five parents (Parents 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6) indicated having worked



**Figure 13.** Frequencies with which parents worked with specific family members or close friends



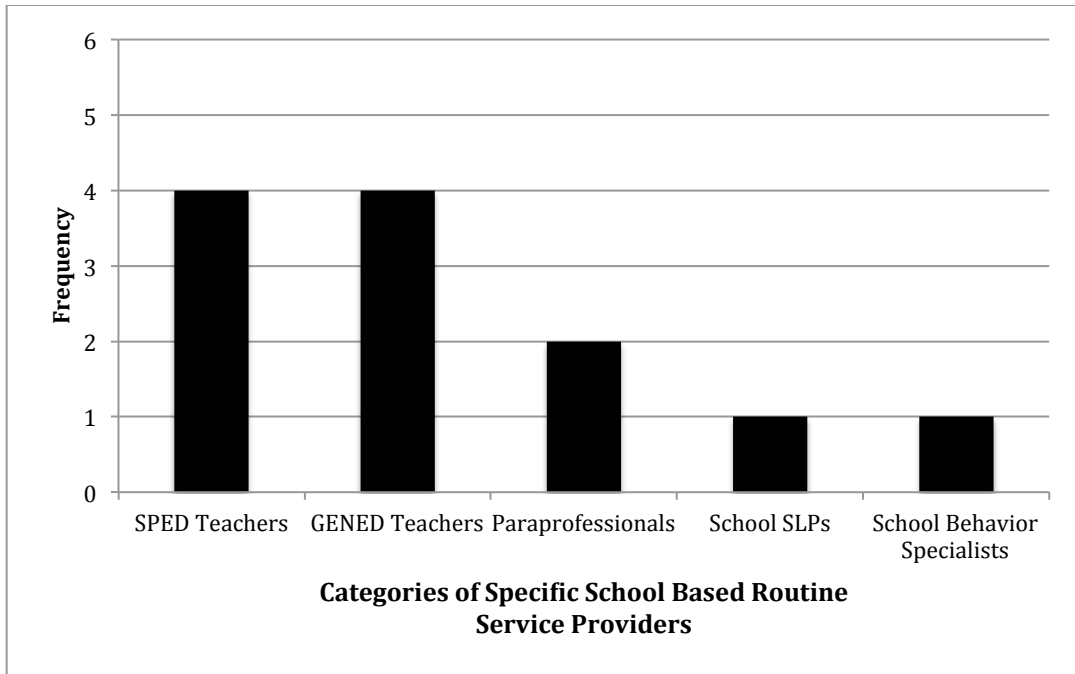
**Figure 14.** Mean comfort level parents experienced in working with family members and close friends

with four categories of family members and close friends, including spouses and one former spouse with a mean comfort level of 5.0. Two parents (Parents 5 and 6) indicated having worked with other immediate family members (including the child's grandparents) with a mean comfort level of 4.0. Three (Parents 3, 5 and 6) indicated having worked with other family members that included aunts, uncles, and cousins with a mean comfort level of 5.0. One (Parent 3) indicated having worked with close personal friends with a comfort level of 5.0.

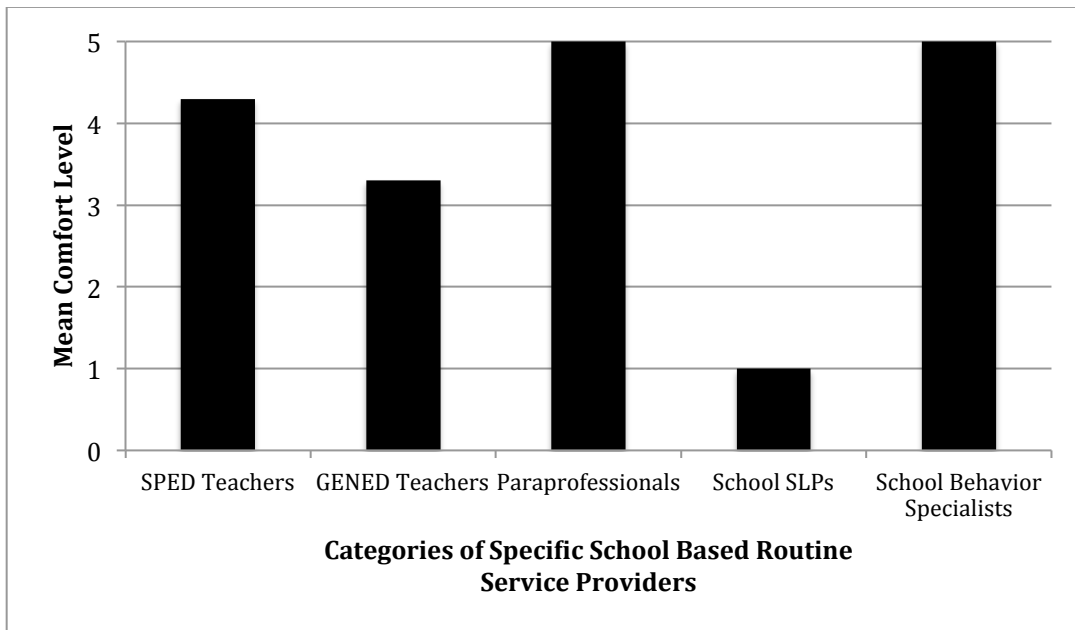
### **School Based Routine Service Providers**

School based routine service providers included those individuals who provided direct, routinely scheduled services to their child with autism in school. These individuals included the child's special education teachers, general education teachers, paraprofessionals, speech/language therapists, occupational therapists, and behavior specialists. Figure 15 reflects the frequency with which parents identified school based routine service providers as working with them regarding their child's education. Figure 16 indicates the mean comfort level parents experienced in working with school based direct service providers by category.

Four parents indicated that they worked with special education teachers at their child's middle school with a mean comfort level of 4.3. Two parents (Parents 3 and 4) did not indicate that they work with a special education teacher as their children were receiving special education related services entirely within the context of a general education classroom setting. Four parents (Parents 3, 4, 5 and 6) indicated that they worked with general education teachers with a mean comfort level of 3.3. Parents 1 and 2 did not indicate working with a general education teacher as their child was receiving



**Figure 15.** Frequencies with which parents worked with specific school based routine service providers

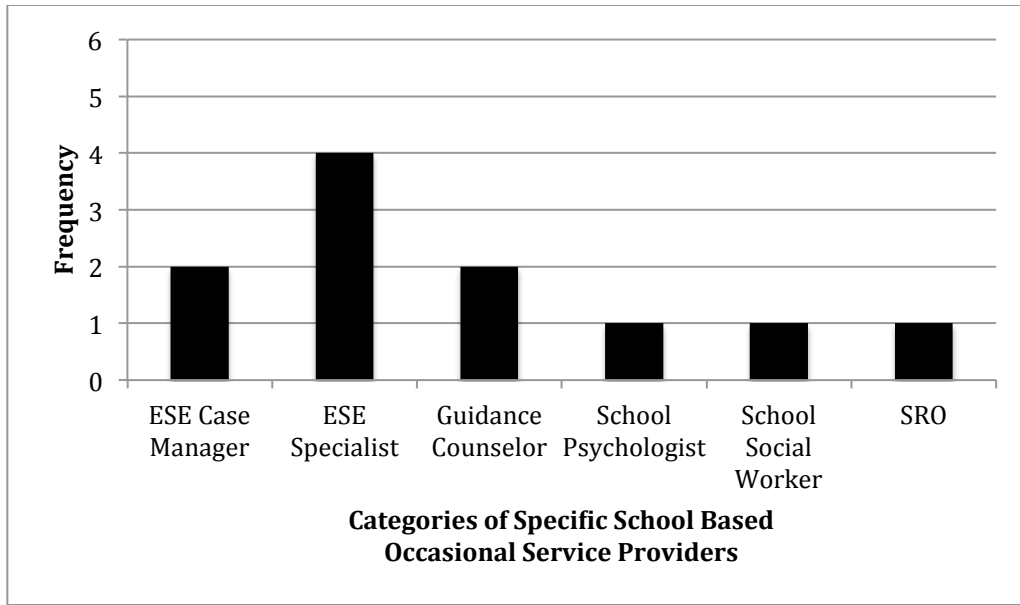


**Figure 16.** Mean comfort level parents experienced in working with specific school based routine service providers.

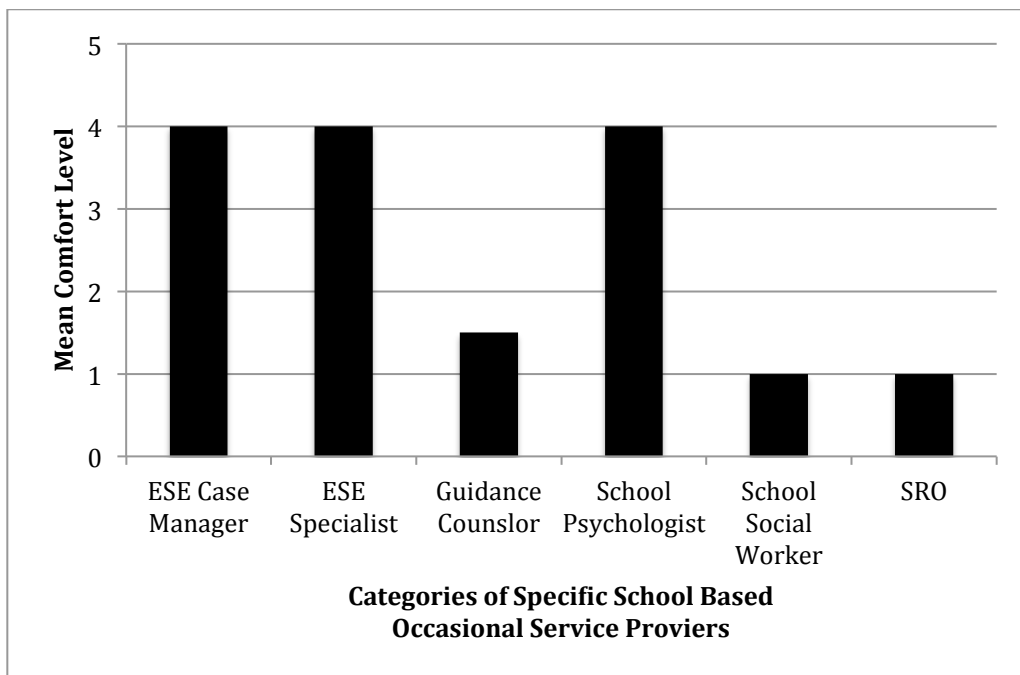
special education services entirely within the context of a special education classroom. However, Parents 1 and 2 did indicate that they work routinely with classroom paraprofessionals at their child's school and felt very comfortable in working with them (mean comfort level of 5.0). One parent (Parent 6) indicated working with her son's school based behavior specialist with a comfort level of 5. Only one parent (Parent 5) indicated on her proximity and comfort level maps as having worked with a Speech/Language Pathologist at her son's school and feeling very uncomfortable in that relationship (comfort level of 1). Additionally, no parent in this study indicated on their proximity or comfort level maps as working with an occupational therapist at their child's middle school. However, during their interviews, Parents 2 and 3 spoke extensively of working with school based speech/language pathologists at their children's current middle schools, and Parents 1, 2, 3 and 5 of working with school based occupational therapists at their children's current middle schools.

### **School Based Occasional Service Providers**

School based occasional service providers included those persons employed in the child with autism's middle school who provide occasional or unscheduled services to child. These individuals included the child's school-based Exceptional Student Education (ESE) case manager, the school ESE specialist, school guidance counselor, school psychologist, school social worker, and school resource officer (SRO). Figure 17 reflects the frequency with which parents identified specific school based occasional service providers as working with them regarding their child's education. Figure 18 indicates the mean comfort level parents experienced in working with those individuals by category. Only two parents (Parents 4 and 6) identified working with their child's school-based ESE case manager with



**Figure 17.** Frequencies with which parents worked with specific school based occasional service providers.

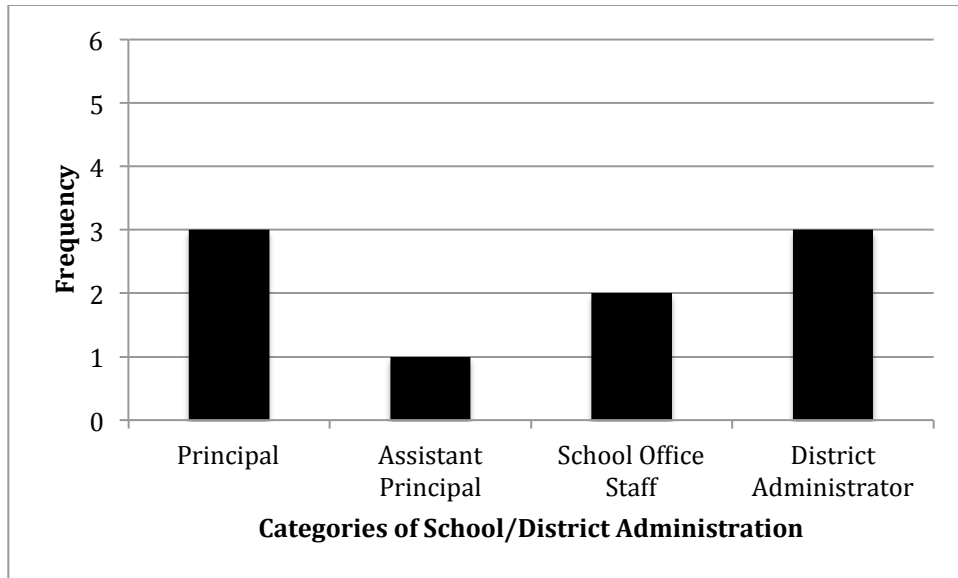


**Figure 18.** Mean comfort level parents experienced in working with specific school based occasional service providers.

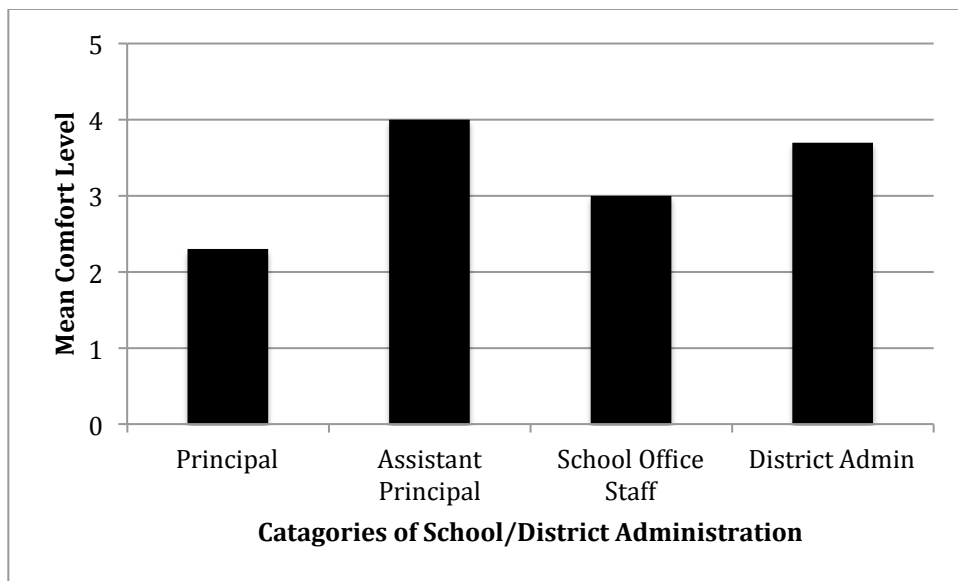
a mean comfort level of 4.0. Four parents (Parents 1, 2, 3 and 4) identified working with an ESE specialists at their child's middle school, with a mean comfort level of 4.0. While each school in the three school districts represented by parents in this study established the position of ESE case manager for all students receiving special education services, that role appears to often have been blended with that of the child's primary special education teacher or school ESE specialist. For this reason, although each child would be expected to have an individual assigned to the role of ESE case manager, parents may not have identified this as a distinct role. For example, in one parent's experience (Parent 3), neither a special education teacher nor an ESE case manager were mapped or discussed during interviews, however the functions of case manager appear to have been demonstrated as being fulfilled by the school ESE specialist. Two parents (Parents 4 and 6) indicated working with a school guidance counselor with a mean comfort level of 1.5. One parent (Parent 4) indicated working with a school psychologist and a school social worker with a comfort level of 4.0 and 1.0, respectively. One parent (Parent 6) indicated working with a school resource officer (SRO) (a law enforcement officer assigned to a public school to implement crime prevent and safety programs) with a comfort level of 1.0.

### **School/District Administration**

The category of school/district administration includes individuals who guide and carry out the administrative and management functions of the school, including principals, assistant principals, district administrators, and school administrative staff. Figure 19 reflects the frequency with which parents identified specific persons in the category of school/district administration as working with them regarding their child's education. Figure 20 reflects the mean comfort level parents experienced in working with those



**Figure 19.** Frequencies with which parents worked with specific school/district administrators and staff.



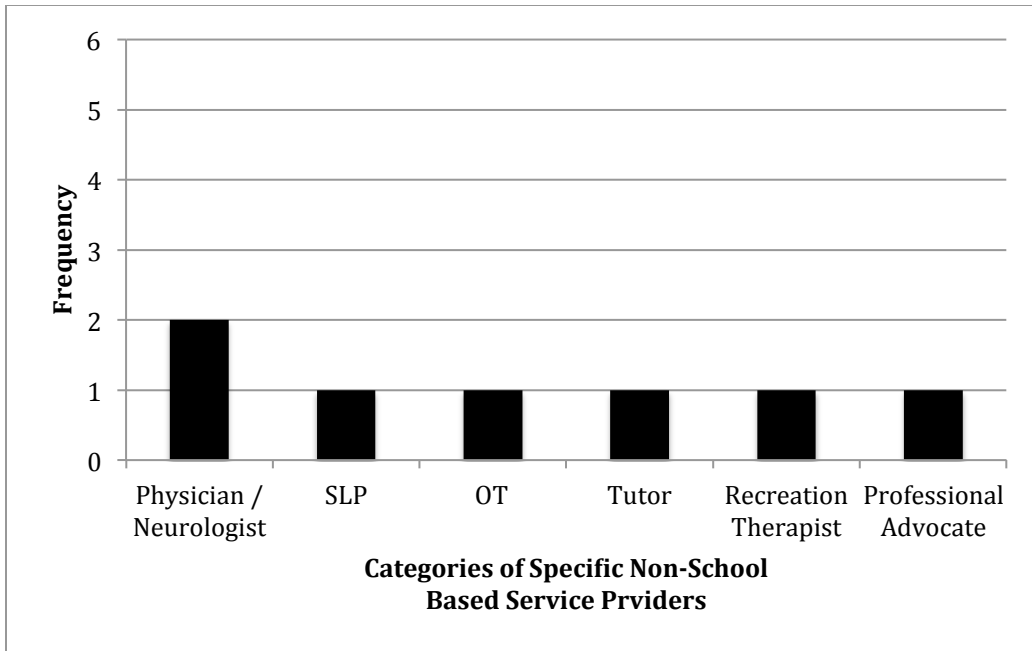
**Figure 20.** Mean comfort level parents experienced in working with specific school/ district administrators and staff.



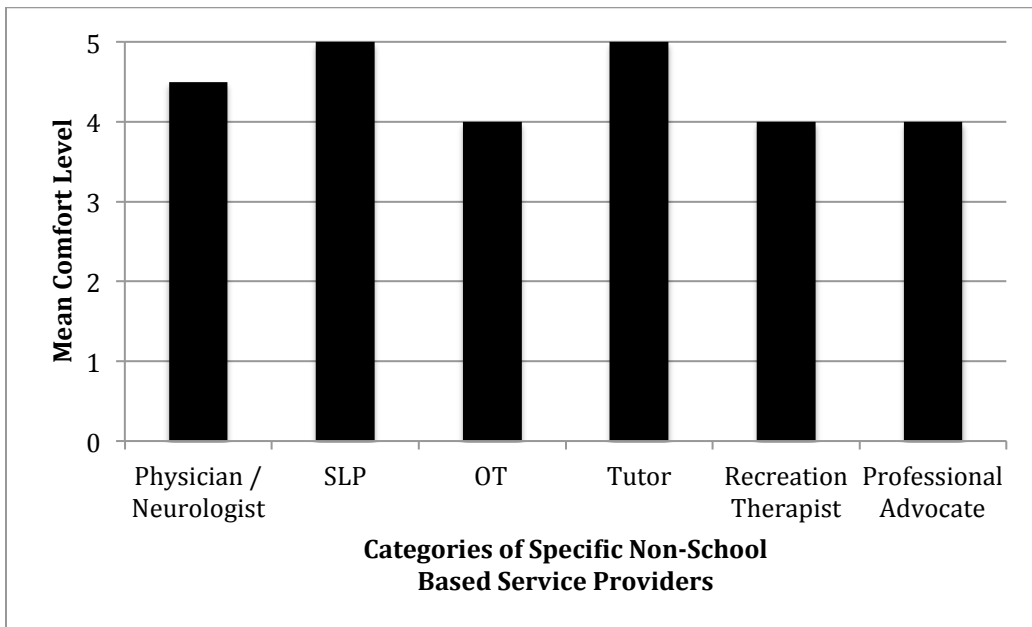
individuals by category. Three parents (parents 3, 4 and 6) indicated on their proximity and comfort level maps that they worked with their child's school principal with a mean comfort level of 2.3. One parent (Parent 2) discussed during interviews of having worked with his child's school principal on an occasional basis, however, with such a low frequency that he didn't feel it appropriate to include in his mappings. One parent (Parent 6) indicated having worked with a school assistant principal with a comfort level of 4.0. Two parents (Parent 2 and 5) indicated having worked with school administrative staff (i.e., school secretaries) with a mean comfort level of 3.0. Three parents (parents 3, 5 and 6) indicated having worked with school district level administrators with a mean comfort level of 3.7.

### **Non-School Based Service Providers**

Non-school based service providers included a variety of service providers not employed by the school or district that parents indicated having worked with regarding their children's education. Figure 21 reflects the frequency with which parents identified specific persons in the category of non-school based service providers as working with them regarding their child's education. Figure 22 reflects the mean comfort level parents experienced in working with those individuals by category. Two parents (Parents 3 and 6) indicated that they worked with a physician regarding their children's education with a mean comfort level of 4.5. One parent (Parent 3) indicated working with a speech/language therapist and a private tutor, and feeling very comfortable (level 5) in working with each. Another parent (Parent 5) indicated currently working with a private occupational therapist and private recreation therapist and feeling comfortable (level 4)



**Figure 21.** Frequencies with which parents worked with specific non-school based service providers



**Figure 22.** Mean comfort level parents experienced in working with specific non-school based service providers

with each. Two parents (Parents 3 and 4) indicated having worked with a professional advocate with a mean comfort level of 4.0.

### **Parent Definitions of Belonging**

Asked to share their definitions of belonging, parents responded as follows:

Parent 1: To be a part of; to have an association with someone or something.

Connection.

Parent 2: To me it comes back to the words I've used before: Safe and happy. And I think, if you belong to a group, that makes you feel happy and safe.

Parent 3: Every person on my team sees me as an integral member of the team. And that our family is an integral member of our team. Because, if you're not invested, then you don't belong there.

Parent 4: Really, like you count. Really, like you're in the know.

Parent 5: I think, part of a team.

Parent 6: I think it means closeness...some sort of union, some sort of togetherness.

These definitions served to set the tone for further discussion of parents' experiences in working in parent-school partnerships and promote reflection on their experiences in working with their children's schools. Parents' definitions of belonging consistently reflected a positive outlook toward interpersonal relationships, including partnering relationships with their children's middle schools.

## Examples of Belonging

Parents were asked during individual interviews to share an example of what it felt like to belong when working with their child's school. Their examples emphasized the importance parents placed on personal connectedness with others in working together for their children. The experience of having a personal relationship was strongly expressed by one parent who described her feelings of belonging in working with her child's education support team as being like "a bunch of friends sitting down, having to do their income taxes" (Parent 1). She reflected a sense of personal relationship with others, particularly with those involved in the processes of individualized educational planning, as a bond with others who share her beliefs, values, expectations and commitments regarding her child's development and wellbeing. This bond was further discussed in an example shared by Parent 1, which reflected her own sense of belonging in a partnership with the school and was exemplified in how a general education teacher greeted her child:

Walking her to class one day and having a typical teacher, a teacher of a typical non-ESE student say, '*Hi, Joyce* (a pseudonym for her child). *How are you today?*' Knowing that someone who is not ESE knew who my daughter was, by name, called out to her, asked her how she was doing. Huh! Okay, she's part of the school. She's not one of *those kids over there*. They knew who she was.

Parent 1

In experiencing a sense of her child's belonging, this parent experienced her own sense of belonging in what she reflects as a culture and climate of acceptance. For this parent, her daughter's inclusion and acceptance within the school culture and climate equated to her own inclusion and acceptance as a partner with her child's school.

For Parent 2, a sense of belonging was characterized by the ability of partners to interact with him, both formally and informally. Many of the encounters this parent had

with his child's education support team took place before and after school while dropping off or picking up his child from school. At these times, the parent and professionals talked on a personal level, as friends might chat, both about school and current events in their lives and in their shared communities, developing in the parent a sense of mutual investment in each other as individuals. As he says, "Always, always, I felt like I belonged with them. Cause, you know, we would talk about different things, not just the kids. Just whatever, you know, with them" (Parent 2). Parent 2 also shared an example of belonging that took place during a school sponsored Special Olympics event. During the event, his child was becoming increasingly agitated from an apparent overstimulation by the sights, sounds and activities of an unfamiliar context. Rather than removing the child from the event, the teachers enlisted the parent as a facilitator on the field to support his daughter through the remainder of the event. In this example, the parent felt a sense of belonging at being able to participate with school personnel to support his child's management of sensory overload.

The example of belonging Parent 3 shared involved a time when her son was routinely experiencing intensely disruptive behaviors in school over a period of several weeks while undergoing adjustments in medications. According to the parent, someone other than a school or district employee suggested that she withdraw her son from school "on a medical" (Parent 3) until his behaviors stabilized. When the parent approached the school with this suggestion, it was received enthusiastically as a means of supporting the student and family in time of need. As Parent 3 described, she experienced belonging within a context that demonstrated belonging for her son:

He would have usually been suspended for his actions, but because he was an ESE kid and because we all knew that he

was working on medications, they were able to say, “That’s a great idea if you pulled him out on a medical, because we all understand that this is a medical issue and we want to see him graduate with us.” And that was it. It was, “We want to see him graduate, and he belongs here.”

Parent 3

Parent 4 found it difficult to provide a specific example of when she felt like she belonged when working with her son’s elementary or middle schools. However, later in the interview, Parent 4 talked about a sense of unity she had with one of her child’s current general education teachers. This teacher appeared to be able to understand her son’s strengths, challenges and needs that resembled her own understandings. Within the context of her son’s school, that single general education teacher was the only individual the parent felt very comfortable working with. She also felt her knowledge and experiences as a parent were valued by this teacher in developing instructional accommodations for her son.

Parent 5 also found it difficult to provide an example of belonging in her son’s school. When asked if she could think of a specific time when she felt she belonged in working with her child’s school, she simply replied, “No” (Parent 5). Later during our initial interview together, Parent 5 talked about all her relationships with those she worked with at her son’s middle school and school district as adversarial, with the exception of her son’s physical education teacher who appeared neither confrontational nor conciliatory. In describing this teacher, the parent said, “He’s just a non-entity. He kind of doesn’t count” (Parent 5).

Parent 6 talked about belonging as a personal relationship in which comfort in working with each other was an important characteristic. She explained that her relationships with those she worked with for her son’s education were built over time, and

brought up the point that when relationships were strong, it was difficult to transition out of them. This point was emphasized as she discussed her child's forthcoming transition from middle to high school, which would take place in the next few months, saying that she found it "hard to think that this was my last time in the room with those people, to do this...I felt like we were a family at that point. I felt like they understood where I was coming from" (Parent 6). While she felt her son's transition had been made easier by having a family-like relationship with certain middle school personnel, she was also concerned over having to construct that type of relationship anew with an entirely different set of school based partners at a new school site. Understanding that building strong relationships takes time, Parent 6 said that she and her family have already started working with her son's prospective high school by communicating with administrators, teachers and behavior specialists at the high school and attending family events for prospective students at the high school. As she summed up her hopes for building personal relationships with those at her son's new school in the coming year, she said: "My hope is that it will be similar to what we have now; and that everyone will understand that we're here, you know, we're all here for a common reason" (Parent 6)

### **Non-Examples of Belonging**

Parents were also asked during individual interviews to share an example of an experience when they felt they didn't belong when working with their child's school. Their examples again emphasized the importance parents placed on personal connectedness with others in working together for their children.

As described above, Parent 1 exemplified her own sense of belonging in working with her daughter's school by relating an incident that demonstrated her child's belonging

contributed to her own sense of belonging. In her example of what non-belonging felt like, Parent 1 described a situation in which her daughter's class (a self-contained room serving students with intensive education related needs who did not participate in typical standardized assessments) was required to move from their assigned classroom to an alternative setting during state-wide student achievement testing. The parent described this move as convenient for the school, but not in the best interest of her daughter. As Parent 1 described the event:

They all got crammed into the chorus room. Regular kids had to take the statewide assessment, and they needed the space. So, out...I kept thinking, '*Okay, don't play it too much, cause my daughter loves it.*' But it still gnawed on me. And I went to them, and said, '*I can't tolerate this.*'

Parent 1

In telling herself not to *play it too much*, the parent used gaming as an analogy for the process of advocacy. She initially refrained from challenging the school's practice of reassigning her daughter's class so as not to deny her child something she enjoyed. However, in the interest of promoting her daughter's education, the parent eventually confronted school administration, convincing them of the importance of having her daughter and her classmates continue learning in their regularly assigned classroom.

Parent 2 found it difficult to provide an example of when he felt he didn't belong in working with his child's middle school. However, without further prompting, he stated that his only real current frustration regarding belonging involved his perception of procedures the school has in place for restricting access to the campus at the end of the school day. When he and other parents come to pick up their children, as the parent described:

It's frustrating, because we used to go in this back gate area; big gate where the busses come out. And they would open it; used to keep them open all day. Now, they lock them after the



busses leave from the morning drop off, and sometimes they forget to open them (again).

Parent 2

While Parent 2 acknowledged the necessity for having the gate locked and restricting access in order to ensure the safety of students, the instances in which he has had to wait for access beyond the time stated by the school for pickup, created a mild sense of separation rather than partnership with the school. Although the parent acknowledged the necessity of maintaining a high level of security to protect students, these instances were the only occasions when he experienced something other than partnership with the school, admitting that this example was “a stretch to feel like I didn’t quote unquote belong” (Parent 2).

Parent 3 shared a specific instance in which she felt as though she didn’t belong in parent-school partnership where her son’s school principal stated the school’s position regarding educating her child. The parent was participating in an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meeting at the school when the principal, not serving as a member of the IEP team entered the meeting unannounced. As the parent described:

Two hours into this meeting, in walks the principal. She was asked not to come to our meeting. We had the Assistant Principal there, because the principal was not what you would call the warmest human being...to us or to children with disabilities.... She walks in – the nicest thing I can say to you is that she pissed her line in the sand and walked out. After two-plus hours of meeting, she said, *‘I just want you to know that your son will be held to the exact same standards as every other child in this school. The fact that your child has a disability is irrelevant, and you will be treated like every other student.’* And then she walked out. She said that and then literally walked out of the room.

Parent 3

In this instance, the principal was exercising her role to enact school policy contrary to the guarantees of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004. This experience left the parent with a strong sense of separation from the school's leadership over divergent philosophy and the parent's resultant belief that the principal was enacting practices at the school that were unlawful, and that the principal did not care about her as a partner or about her son's educational development.

While Parent 4 found it difficult to provide an example of what belonging felt like in her relationships with her child's school, she easily offered examples of what it felt like not to belong in working with her child's school. She described her relationship with her child's school as feeling as if "they want you to come up with all the answers. With everything. Very one sided" (Parent 4). In sharing her experiences with her child's middle school, she said, "It's almost like they get in middle school, it's like, 'We have your child, it's us. We will make him grow. We are in control'" (Parent 4). The parent's use of the word *they* may indicate that she identifies her sense of non-belonging as a result of a collective philosophy within her child's school and district. This philosophy appears to marginalize and disregard her own parent knowledge, experience, and concerns, and denies her meaningful participation in the processes of planning and implementation of her child's education.

Parent 5, who had similar difficulty in discussing what belonging felt like in working with her child's school, expressed a similar sense of general conflict with her child's school and district as that of Parent 4. In offering an illustration of what non-belonging felt like, she said, "I guess that I always feel that it's an adversarial relationship" (Parent 5) in which she had to advocate against school and district personnel to obtain necessary services and

supports for her child. She also described an emotional barrier in working with the school personnel as “a wall; I mean, I think you really feel like you don’t belong there ever. I don’t think you ever really feel that welcome” (Parent 5).

Parent 6, who talked about a successful partnership and felt comfortable throughout most of her child’s middle school years, shared what was for her family an event that singularly destroyed their sense of belonging with the school and replaced it with fear and distrust for school personnel. In the situation she described, her son had been using a self-talk strategy to self-manage his behavior during a frustrating moment. Another typical child heard her son using his self-talk, assumed he was making suicidal comments and reported this to the teacher. According to Parent 6, during subsequent questioning by the school guidance counselor and school resource officer, her son was unable to understand what was being asked of him. Because of his social communication challenges, he responded affirmatively to questions that he was making suicidal comments. In essence, according to the parent, the child was rephrasing the questions as an answer without understanding their meaning or implications. Parent 6 indicated that school personnel failed to consult the child’s records, including the child’s behavior intervention plan, or to consult with the child’s school behavior intervention specialist before determining that the child met legal criteria of the state’s Mental Health Act as a threat to his own safety. After interrogation, the child was removed from school and admitted to a mental health treatment facility for evaluation. Following the incident, a meeting of the parent-school education team was held in which the parent shared that the school personnel involved could not, or would not, demonstrate empathy with her concerns about the incident. For Parent 6, the personnel who made the decision to forcibly admit her son for a mental health

evaluation without following procedures detailed in her son's behavior intervention plan (which she had been involved in constructing), and not consulting with either the child's behavior specialist or herself created a powerful example of non belonging.

### **What Parents Talked About Across Interviews**

Parents in this study talked about their relationships with school and district personnel, their own and professionals' knowledge and expertise, their experiences of others' sensitivity to their children as individuals and to the challenges of parenting a child with autism, experiences of shared or divergent aims and objectives between home and school, and communication.

#### **Relationships**

Four parents (Parents 1, 2, 3 and 6) spoke with apparent pride at the strength of their relationships with the school and district personnel they worked with. These parents talked about their relationships as personal connections with others who show caring about working with them, driven to meet the needs of their children, and in a willingness to problem solve together beyond the bounds of legal or procedural obligation. For example, as Parent 1 and I sat in her kitchen sipping chilled water from plastic bottles, I asked her why she felt such a close personal relationship with her daughter's teachers. She leaned slightly forward and, squinting her eyes slightly, said:

Because I could walk in the school Monday morning and ask any of those teachers for a favor, ask any of those teachers for something for my daughter, and boom! No problem. They would do it, and I know that, [and] they can tell me anything they need to tell me about my daughter. And they know we'll help them any way we can.

Parent 1

Parents 2 and 3 also spoke of a sense of closeness in their relationships to school or district personnel demonstrating sensitivity to the experiences, challenges and needs of their children and families. For example, Parent 2 spoke about his observations of his daughter's teachers supervising all students in the school cafeteria at the end of the school day, just prior to student dismissal. He described a particular afternoon in which he arrived early, as was his custom, and chatted with his daughter's teachers as they simultaneously supervised their students' activities. While the teachers supervised the students, they were also able to engage with the parent. Yet, as Parent 2 pointed out, their discussions were more than that of teacher and parent – they were between individuals who took an interest in each other on a personal level, talking “about stuff, and football games or gators or something like that” (Parent 2). While Parent 2 described this one experience as an example, he clarified that this type of open, personal discussion was a common occurrence, adding, “They want to get to know me, not just as a parent, but as a person too” (Parent 2).

Parent 3 went so far as to describe her relationships with school and district personnel she worked with in terms of a family. She talked about knowing each other as individuals, of being cognizant of each others' strengths and needs, and responding to support each other in achieving the best possible outcomes for her son, saying, “It's a level of knowledge. Like, you need to understand who we are. We're a family unit; we work this way. And we walk together” (Parent 3).

Parent 6 also spoke of her relationships with school and district personnel she worked with in terms of family. She described a sense that the majority of people she worked with shared with her objectives for her son's schooling and valued her concerns

and hopes for her child. For example, in describing her experience of meeting with her son's education team at school in preparing for his transition to high school, Parent 6 said:

I felt like we were a family at that point. I felt like they understood where I was coming from, which is not the legal, lawyer sort of way...I think by now they understand that I just want what's best for my son, and I want to help him be as successful as he can be, but without taking away from who he is.

Parents 4 and 5, however, talked about their relationships with the school and district personnel they worked with quite negatively. Rather than experiencing close personal relationships, they talked about relationships that were dissatisfying, dysfunctional, and even adversarial. For example, both Parents 4 and 5 talked about consistently working with others who held their power and authority to make decisions close without sharing, who did not work well together, either with the parent or among themselves, and made little effort to understand and respond to their concerns. In a moment of tearful frustration, Parent 4 summed up her experiences of working with school and district personnel who it seemed isolated themselves from her, saying, "Sometimes it's like those old fashioned knights, that you have to find the armor and you have to find that open spot, or you have to find that little place that you can get in there." In summarizing her relationships with school and district personnel, Parent 5 also expressed distance, but in the form of conflict between herself and professionals. As she said about meeting with those professionals, she said, "It's never a comfortable thing. Because, I guess, that I always feel that it's an adversarial relationship."

### **Knowledge and Expertise**

Parents spoke of their experiences of how knowledge and expertise related to their sense of belonging in parent-school partnership. They not only spoke about the knowledge

and expertise of professionals' as educators and administrators, but also of their own knowledge and expertise as a valuable resource in meeting their children's school related needs.

**Parents' Knowledge & Expertise.** In describing why she felt her relationship with her child's school was successful, Parent 1 talked about having a solid understanding of her daughter as a person, with unique strengths and challenges and how this empowered her to advocate for her child within the public schooling system. She felt that the productive relationship she had with her daughter's school and district was affected by her working knowledge of her and her daughter's rights under IDEIA. However, in talking about what she brings to the partnership, Parent 1 discussed her knowledge and expertise of parenting her daughter as a valuable resource for the success of the partnership. As she said:

I think they know that what we bring to the partnership is that we're not clueless about [our daughter] and her situation, and that we would do anything they need us to do; we'll back them up one hundred percent...We know what her capabilities are.

Parent 1

Parent 2 shared an experience that exemplified the value he sees in sharing with teachers his knowledge of his daughter's strengths and challenges to solve practical issues in the classroom. While his daughter was still in elementary school, Parent 2 modified a chest expander exercise tool by cutting the handles away from the springs. When frustrated at home or at school, the child was able to shake and twirl the springs to calm herself. After transitioning to the middle school, his daughter experienced increasing frustrations in the new school context. Although teachers attempted several strategies to support his daughter when frustrated, they appeared to have little effect. Parent 2 told

teachers of his daughter's success in using springs to calm herself and this idea was welcomed by them. As parent 2 retold the story:

I said, 'Look, I am willing to work with you to wean her off of this, but this is why she does that.' And they said they were very fine with that. And what they usually do is, when my daughter has to do something fine motor or what ever, they will tell her, "Okay, we're going to put this spring aside." And they will, you know, put it in her backpack or in the desk or whatever, and then she'll tend to the task, and then they'll let her take it back out. Which is just a wonderful real world, real world accommodation. Which, once again, if she had a bad homeroom teacher, they would either let her do it all the time, cause that was easy for them, or they would be idiotic and say you could do it never. You know? So, I'm very pleased with them.

Parent 2

Parents 3 and 4 talked about their sense of responsibility when working with their children's schools, as a function of their role as informed parents to advise others with knowledge about their children in order to help achieve an appropriate education. For example, as Parent 3 said:

I'm the glue; because I'm the mom. And I don't get blindsided at meetings. I don't walk into anything I don't know or understand. And I'm incredibly open to understanding many, many things. And I ask a lot of questions, because I want to know the answers.

Parent 3

Affirmed by Parent 4 when discussing what she brings to partnership with her child's school:

I think I bring resources to them. What I bring to the partnership is information; information about my son and not BS information. I [can] tell her exactly what I know he's going to do in a situation.

Parent 4



Although Parent 5 discussed her knowledge and expertise as a factor in effective partnership relations, she and Parent 4 also talked about the need to build up their own knowledge. For example, in discussing the content of her proximity and comfort level maps, Parent 4 pointed to an area outside the comfort level map and said:

I feel this is, kind of, they're here. And I'm here in the trenches looking for tools, for answers. And then I have to get through the minutia and educate myself, and finally ask the rights questions.

Parent 4

When asked if she felt that she received support from her child's school or school district to help her develop that knowledge, she also said, "They would be happy if you didn't find the answers. Because any passive person is easier to deal with" (Parent 4).

**Professionals' Knowledge and Expertise.** Parents 2, 4 and 5 talked specifically about teachers' knowledge and expertise. In discussing his relationships with those individuals he listed on his proximity and comfort level maps, Parent 2 talked about the impact of reaching a balance between the quality of caring and professional knowledge and expertise. In talking about his experiences in working with both his children's schools, he said he had experienced some teachers who showed they cared about his daughter's education, yet didn't demonstrate a high level of knowledge and expertise in their professional actions, and of other teachers who showed a high level of professional knowledge and expertise, yet did not demonstrate that they cared about his children as individuals. To demonstrate this, he talked about a particular experience, saying:

We had this one ESE Specialist for our son who was the nicest person in the world and loved the kids, but was just totally and completely incompetent. And that was difficult...At my daughter's current school, the ESE specialist is good; she's competent, and she cares about the kids.

Parent 2

Parent 4 discussed her surprise and frustration at having learned that the State Department of Education had only recently enacted a requirement for special education teachers to participate in a certain amount of specialized training in the field of exceptional student education to maintain certification. It appeared to her that special education teachers, including those working to support her son's needs could have entered classrooms year after year without maintaining currency in evidence-based practices, saying "You turn to these people [teachers] and you think, okay this is their realm. This is what they do and should know? ...Isn't it [continuing professional development in special education] a no brainer?" (Parent 4). Along these lines, Parent 5 also talked about her concern for teachers' knowledge as she discussed her experiences when working with a newly certified teacher who would be responsible for the majority of her son's academic instruction throughout the coming year. While recognizing a level of knowledge the new teacher brings, she is concerned about the experience level of all teachers who do not live with a child with disability day in day out: ,

I think that she has...she's knowledgeable, to a degree. But to be honest with you, I've never been impressed with too many teachers and their knowledge. Because, if you don't live with it, you don't know what you're dealing with.

Parent 5

Parent 5 also talked about her experiences with another of her child's teachers and her impressions of his professional knowledge and skill set. This particular person, a physical education (PE) teacher, appeared to have no knowledge or experience in working with students with autism. However, Parent 5 was less concerned about this since this PE teacher did not appear to interfere with her son's school related development and success. As she said of this teacher:

He is nice. But he knows nothing. I mean my son does very well in PE, as far as he likes it. He's got his headphones on the whole time, because he can't stand the noise. But he's there, and he does follow directions. And physical things, because it does involve a lot of sensory things he needs, he does fine. He's never had a problem with it. And the PE teacher admits he doesn't know anything. At least he's honest.

Parent 5

However, as already quoted above, Parent 5 also said this teacher that, "He's kind of a non-entity. He kind of doesn't count" (Parent 5).

Parents 2, 4 and 6 also talked about their experiences of knowledge and expertise across professionals at their children's schools. In Parent 2's experience, school personnel develop higher levels of professional knowledge and expertise over time as they serve students with special education needs. However, those who have not had the opportunity to teach this group of learners do not develop a level of knowledge and skill. This combined knowledge and skill set develops into a culture that permeates the school. At his daughter's current middle school, Parent 2 was enthusiastic in saying that he was impressed with how the school's professional proficiency, characterized by a climate of knowledge and expertise, was evident and a result of a substantial history of serving students with autism. As he said of the school:

You can tell they've been an ESE school for a while. That really helps. Because the staff is used to these things and have become skilled and confident in their skills in serving students with exceptionalities...It always comes back to the teacher, but when you're talking about the next level up, how experienced they [the school as a whole] is in dealing with ESE kids. Because there's a whole different dynamic there.

Parent 2

Parent 4 talked about her experiences of disappointment with the knowledge and professionalism of those on her son's IEP team. She was highly frustrated that it appeared

team members could speak with a sense of professional competence and authority, yet fail to make obvious connections with official documentation of her son's strengths, challenges and needs. In one experience during an IEP team meeting, the parent was particularly aggravated with her son's teachers as they discussed her son's performance in school without seeming to understand the goals, objectives, or accommodations required by his IEP. As she said:

I brought the IEP. I brought the social worker's report. I brought the reports from the psycho-educational evaluation that gave the whole overlay of my son. And I said, '*Has anybody in this room taken the time to look at these?*' No teachers [said they had]. And [they] can! They can do that! It's in the cumulative file!"

Parent 4

Parent 6 discussed her experiences with administrators' professional knowledge and expertise in relation to the mental health situation already discussed. According to the parent, the decision to remove her child was made without demonstrating adequate or appropriate professional knowledge or skills. As she said in speaking of the school's principal, guidance counselor and school resource officer (SRO):

The bottom line is, these people are not trained in special education. None of them. The SRO doesn't even go to any type of training. They have no idea. They are street cops and are pulled in to work with kids. I mean it's ridiculous. The guidance counselor, I couldn't even believe that he didn't know, but he's the 7<sup>th</sup> grade guidance counselor, so my son had been in 7<sup>th</sup> grade for seven days. Like seven school days. Of course you don't know who he is. And the principal was brand new, and he didn't know up from down.

Parent 6

### **Sensitivity**

Parents talked about their experiences with others sensitivity to the unique strengths, needs and challenges of their child with autism, and towards them, as parenting

a child with autism. Parent 1, for example, talked about how impressed she was with teachers who were able to perceive personalities, often hidden or obscured due to students' challenges with communication. Sensitivity to individual personalities enabled teachers to recognize their students' uniqueness and use those understandings to support learning and development in school. As Parent 1 said about her daughter's teachers, "They pick up on the kids' personalities. They've told us things about [our daughter] that only someone who is actually paying attention to her, and actually cares about her, would know" (Parent 1). Parent 1 also shared her experiences of what seemed to be an issue of sensitivity to the needs of the child and family within both school and larger communities. She pointed out that, although her daughter's teachers were sensitive to the experiences of parenting a child with autism, school and community supports for families of children with autism are sometimes limited. She made a comparison with opportunities at school for typical children to receive before and after school care and tutoring that is unavailable to children with moderate to intensive learning needs, saying:

After school care – that's the only thing that I feel my daughter has lost out on, that parents like my husband and myself have lost out on. They do such a phenomenal job of integrating these kids, at least at [our school], and at least at her elementary school. But, if you can't pick your child up when the bell rings, then you can't have a child. There are no programs for kids like this. And I think that's what [our school district] still lacks. For the typical child there are the tutorials, you know? There's the after school programs.

Parent 1

Parent 2 talked about the need for school administrators to develop awareness for students with autism and other disabilities that support sensitivity to the individualized learning/developmental and needs of these students. He proposed that, to become certified in administration, all potential school administrators who will lead schools in

which students with special needs are served should be given first hand experience in the classroom. As he said:

Anyone who wants to be an administrator should be in an ESE class for a week. Not a day, but a week. And not as an observer, but as a participant...I don't think anyone should be allowed to be principle at a school that has an exceptional education population if they haven't spent at least a week actually in the classroom. And I'm not talking about observing in the back. I'm talking about making them be a substitute (teacher).

Parent 2

Parent 2 told of one experience with a particular principal who didn't appear to be sensitive to the needs of his son and other students with physical challenges in the school.

The parent tells a story of advocating with a school principal for accommodations to provide physical accessibility for his son who used a wheelchair. As he described:

It was horrific. The principle didn't understand what needed to be done. Just simple things, like that the thresholds were so high that you had to wheelie wheelchairs to get over them. And she did not understand why that was a problem. They assigned the kids a portable that was so shaky that whenever a bad storm came, they had to move all the kids into the library, while popping wheelies; that sort of thing. She just didn't get it.

Parent 2

Like Parent 2, Parent 5 talked about the development of professionals' sensitivity and responsiveness to the challenges and needs of students with autism and their families as a matter of prolonged experience. She was skeptical of education professionals who lack experience with the multiple contexts of living with autism. For example, Parent 5 discussed how frustrating it was to work with professionals who appeared to lack sensitivity for challenges of parenting a child with autism. She described unique challenges of parenting a child with autism that many professionals seemed not to understand, yet

have a direct impact on schooling, such as her son's tactile hypersensitivity to clothing, her son's need for a system of rigid routine throughout the day, and difficulties in his ability to self-manage even minor disruptions. As she said:

If you don't live with the day in, they don't realize how much it takes to get a child to school...I mean they [school personnel] don't have a clue about what these kids are basically...They don't understand that there's every single thing. And only when I've been irritated, somebody'll say, 'Oh, I know it's hard.' No, you don't. Every single thing I do is hard with him.

Parent 5

Parent 3 discussed an example of school personnel's demonstrating sensitivity for both herself and her son by recognizing potential challenges the child and parent might experience during a transition in medication for the child. In that situation, school personnel supported the parent's decision to retain her child at home during the transition and tutor him until she felt he could manage the school environment again. But they also advised the parent not to place too much emphasis on tutoring the child in academic content until after he had developed a tolerance for the new medication. While the school supported the parent's request to provide classwork for her son to complete while absent, teachers expressed their concerns for the challenges the parent might experience in tutoring her son while he transitioned between medications. However, the parent did not heed the teachers concerns and quickly realized her error. As the parent said:

My brain was like, 'Yep, I can totally do this. It's not a problem.' And then I got home and realized, 'Oh my god, I just asked for all this work and he's not going to be on any medicine. I called [the teachers] up and [they said], 'We tried to tell you. Seriously, we tried to tell you, but you just wanted to do the work.'

Parent 3

The parent appreciated the teachers' sensitivity to the challenges she would face. In this instance, although things worked out well in the end and her son eventually returned to school, the parent said she'd wished she'd been able to recognize what the teachers had recognized at the beginning.

Parent 4 found it offensive when a school based professional participating in an education team meeting compared her son to a fictional character from a popular television program, *The Big Bang Theory* (Lorre, 2007). As the parent said:

She compared [my son] to Sheldon Cooper. She's like, '*Do you guys know, do you watch this program?*' I'm like, '*What? No. What are you talking about?*' And she said, '*Oh, it's a person and you know, and this is kind of what Asperger's is.*'

Parent 4

Parent 4 continued to reflect on the need for teachers to be sensitive to her son's challenges and needs in describing what her vision of an ideal parent-school partnership would look like. She talked about how she hoped for a future in which professionals were sensitive to her son's personhood, to his individual strengths, challenges and needs, saying:

I guess that it (would look like) my son will be taken for who he is. That he's got these great facets. That he's got these deficits that frustrate him, (and) that probably frustrate people around him. And you know, if you get him. Sometimes he just clicks. But you have to find those tools and find those ways.

Parent 4

Parent 4 added that sensitivity should be observable in the way school and district personnel respond to parent experiences and concerns. In her experience, however, few education professionals made such demonstrations. As she said, "It's almost like they don't know or they don't want to know. Then they don't have to fight for you, or they don't need to advocate for you. Unless you're the squeaky wheel" (Parent 4). Being *the squeaky wheel* by asking detailed questions and making suggestion for services was not something this



parent enjoyed, but was done to, as the parent described, make educators and administrators respond to her concerns.

Parent 6 shared a similar experience in which a school professional - a school ESE specialist - generalized her professional knowledge and experience with students with autism to assure Parent 6 that her son would eventually develop skills to accommodate his challenges in social contexts in school and the community as a matter of course. The professional characterized the child as “just kind of quirky and kind of different, and he’s going to have a hard time fitting in now, but later he’ll be fine” (Parent 6). However, the parent felt offended by this statement that seemed to lack sensitivity of the parent and her son’s experiences of living with autism. As she said in describing her response to the ESE Specialist:

I have to deal with now. I don’t have a crystal ball. I don’t know what’s up about tomorrow. I don’t even know about high school. My son is an individual and I need to understand him now and need tools. I need things now. And I don’t need him to be compared to somebody else.

Parent 6

Sensitivity as a means of understanding and responsiveness to the unique challenges and needs of individual students is a topic Parent 5 discussed. She had been working with her son’s school and district representatives to come to an agreement over what education related services her son required and how they would be addressed by the school system. To Parent 5, it seemed as though the professionals either could not recognize or were unwilling to acknowledge her son’s unique needs, and consistently trying to generalize services across groups of students that would fail to meet the particular needs of her son. She described one experience in which they were negotiating the quantity and quality of speech/language services her son would receive in the coming

school year. In this situation, the parent was explaining to the school speech/language therapist that her son's speech was characterized by echolalia, and that he required intensive therapy in order to communicate meaningfully. As the parent described:

*The Speech/Language Therapist told me, 'Well, if you can understand 80% of what he says, then we consider it that he doesn't need the speech therapy.' And I'm like, 'Well, okay. Let me ask you this. How many things does he voluntarily say things? Because he doesn't speak. He'll echo you, and honestly, you'd better understand it cause you just said it. I mean, if you don't know what you just said, that's ridiculous.' So, I said to her, I said, 'Are you kidding me? He doesn't even say four words, and so you understood two? Cause it was 'no' or 'yes'.' So they didn't take it away. So I said, 'I don't think you know him well enough to make that decision.'*

Parent 5

Parent 5 shared another experience of apparent lack of sensitivity to her son's autism in which it seemed that school personnel were unable or unwilling to recognize their own actions as prompting her son's behavioral outbursts due to frustration. As she described:

*I swear to you, I think they needled him. Or knew what buttons to push to get him to escalate.... [One day] they sent him home right before pizza on Friday Pizza Day. So he thought he was going to get his pizza. No, he was getting put in mommy's car. And then he figured, 'Well, I'm going to break the windows out of the car.' He was upset. He was that upset. So, I mean, and they don't have a clue about that.*

Parent 5

### **Aims and Objectives**

Parents talked about experiences that reflected the shared or divergent aims and objectives that existed between themselves and their children's schools and school districts. Three parents spoke of experiences where aims and objectives were agreed across school and district personnel and parents, and these appeared to be aims and

objectives that were child focused. Parent 1 discussed a situation in which she and her child's teachers believed that the child required a dedicated paraprofessional to assist with academic, social and self-management tasks. Across the IEP team, teachers appeared to be conflicted with school district policy that was understood by the IEP team to restrict such service to only the most intensive cases of need. To the parent's pleasant surprise, she observed teachers using their professional writing skills in drafting the child's IEP with language that appeared to defy district policy in order to assist the parent in advocating for a dedicated paraprofessional for her child. As the parent described:

So, it was getting close to her next IEP and they send the paperwork, the current levels and all that stuff. And I read through what the teachers wrote. They had, in my opinion, peppered it with language to help us get a one-on-one (aide)... These women (had) peppered this for us... But they did it because they know it's the best way for her to learn. And they care... They want her learning.

Parent 1

Parent 3 felt that the middle school and district personnel she worked with demonstrated shared objectives regarding her son. She talked about how professionals' caring about her son was related to understandings about her son's challenges and how they would be addressed. For example, as she said while talking about those on her proximity and comfort level maps she felt were partners with her:

Everybody. You wouldn't be there, you wouldn't be in the relationship, if you didn't care and have an academic interest in (my son) succeeding, and you aren't looking for him on going a going forward basis. He's not a number to anybody. He's not a number to anybody on this list.

Parent 3

All parents in this study shared experiences reflecting school and/or district objectives that appeared to diverge from their own. Rather than demonstrating child focus,

these differing school and district objectives appeared system focused. Parents 1 and 2 spoke of experiences in which school and district occupational and physical therapists, in particular, appeared to demonstrate system-focused objectives. For example, Parent 1 observed:

We had this one OT last year who, you know, it was the county telling her to cut hours. And this woman was doing her job. And I got that....There's absolutely no doubt that the county is telling their OTs and PTs, 'Consult only. Consult only. Consult only. There's too many kids. Consult only!' It's not their [the individual service providers] fault at all. They always try to cut services, because they're always being told from the school district to cut services.

Parent 1

Parent 2 spoke of his experiences in confronting school and district personnel proposing to cut what he believed to be essential services for his daughter. As he said, "I always tell them, 'I know your supervisor told you to cut services. I don't expect you to acknowledge that, but I know it's true'" (Parent 2). In reducing the quantity or quality of services for his daughter, Parent 2 experienced conflict between parent and school objectives for his child's education. He also talked about how the language used by educators has changed over time to promote a student centered justification for change in services. As he said:

The way they do it now is they don't say 'cut hours' anymore. Cause they tried that and everybody went crazy. They say, 'Your child will learn better in a group setting.' So she's got 30 minutes of one-on-one and they'll try to put you in 45 minutes of group setting. Well, if you do the math, that's cutting it. And I go, 'How can my child learn from a child who's not doing well?'

Parent 2

Parent 1 also spoke about differences in aims and objectives among schools within the same school district. When asked if she felt other parents in her school district received

the same high quality of experiences in partnering with their children's schools as she had,

Parent 1 said:

"You know, it depends on the school, and it depends on the location. I've had friends who (would) go to support group meetings with our son, and it seemed like the south district schools for some reason worked really hard to make sure that the child's needs were being met. You know, their hearts were there. Whereas other parents I knew who would come to these meetings would just cry because they were just fighting for just basic things for their kids in other schools."

Parent 1

Parent 2 shared an experience in which he and his wife negotiated with school personnel to secure a dedicated assistant for another of his children who required health and safety supports. In this experience, the objectives of school personnel appeared to be focused on policy and budgetary constraints rather than on the needs of the child. In essence, the parent was told that the school could not afford to provide his child with a dedicated assistant since they had reached the maximum number of dedicated assistants allowed by the school district. As Parent 2 described, "They said the school had too many aides. Not that my son didn't need it. They literally told me, to my face, this school has too many aides" (Parent 2). After several weeks of advocating with the school and school district, the issue was resolved by direct intervention of the district's Assistant Superintendent who authorized the hiring of a dedicated assistant for the child under discretionary funds assigned to his office. In summarizing the resolution, the parent said:

Luckily, this Assistant Superintendent was a smart man and realized that this was ridiculous. But he couldn't fight the program either. So, the way he resolved it and made everybody happy, we got it and he just assigned the aid to himself so it did not show up on the books for the school, it showed up as a downtown employee.

Parent 2

Parent 3's experience in moving from a large district in the northeast to another large school district in the southeast presented a situation in which it appeared that her son's new school and district also demonstrated objectives focused on fiscal compliance and procedure regarding speech/language therapy services. As parent 3 said:

I went from, I had 10 hours of speech in (northeastern state school district); they (southeastern school district) offered me one. They said, *'That's what children are offered here.'* And I said, *'I don't care what any child is offered here; I only care about what's good for my child. And my child is what we're talking about. We're not talking about all children here.'*

Parent 3

In advocating for appropriate services for her son, Parent 5 also experienced conflicting objectives with school and district personnel regarding the availability of resources. In her experiences, school and district objectives have been directed more toward personnel and fiscal resources than on meeting her son's needs. For example, while talking about working with school and district personnel who consistently worked to reduce the quantity and/or quality of occupational therapy services for her son, she said:

I foolishly thought, I think early on, that they're here to help my son. But then it really becomes clear that it is about budgetary concerns – not that they say that – but it's about that. It's not about what would be good for him, that he would benefit from this or this could help him. It's not about that."

Parent 5

Parent 6 also talked about how school and district objectives focused on resources and procedural compliance at the expense of her child's educational needs. She described her experience in participating in her son's IEP meeting in preparation for matriculation from sixth to seventh grade in which educators advocated for reducing specialized supports and services in order to meet the needs of the school. As the parent said:

Basically there were supports that were just pulled back. And it was all based on [student] numbers [rather than needs]...and I said, 'No. This isn't okay. The numbers don't tell the supports, the kids tell us the supports...What they were saying was, 'We have so many students on all these different teams that have needs, so we can only have our support facilitator over here for this many, thus much of the day.'

Parent 6

### Communications

Parents talked about the types of communications they experienced with school and district personnel, about issues of access to communicating with others, and quality of communications in working with school and district personnel. Table 3 is a summary of the methods of communicating parents talked about.

Each parent in this study shared experiences that indicated they communicated with school and/or district personnel face-to-face. The majority of parents' face-to-face

**Table 3.** Methods of communication.

	Face-to-Face			Electronics			Documentation	
	At School	At district	At home	Telephone	Texting	E-Mail	Draft IEP	Daily notes
Parent 1	X	X					X	
Parent 2	X	X		X				X
Parent 3	X		X	X			X	
Parent 4	X			X		X		
Parent 5	X			X		X		X
Parent 6	X			X	X	X	X	

communications took place in the context of the IEP Team meeting. Parents 1 and 2 also shared experiences of meeting with district personnel in a central district office building to address challenges that could not be resolved at the school level. Parent 3 shared experiences of working with school and district personnel at her home.

Parents 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 shared experiences of communicating with school and district personnel by telephone. Parent 6 shared experiences of routinely working with one school-based behavior specialist through phone texting. Parents 4, 5 and 6 shared experiences of communicating with school and district personnel through e-mail.

Parents 1, 3 and 6 shared experiences of communicating with school and district personnel through IEP documentation. In these experiences, parents were provided an advance copy of IEPs prior to IEP Team Meetings to share information with the parent and solicit parent input to constructing the IEP. Parents 2 and 5 also discussed communicating with their children's teachers through daily written notes between home and school.

Parents also talked about the accessibility to communicate with school and district personnel. For example, Parent 1 talked about how she and her husband both experienced easy access to direct face-to-face communications with their daughter's teachers. As she said:

There's no wall there. There's no line as far as me being able to approach them. I don't need to go through the office and make an appointment first. I don't have to be on tiptoes and be afraid I'm going to disturb them.

Parent 1

Parent 4, also used the word *wall* in talking about her experiences of communicating with teachers and other school personnel. However, in her experiences a barrier was evident that prevented frequent and meaningful communication with professionals,



particularly after her son matriculated from elementary to middle school. Parent 5 also experienced this change in access to communicating with her son's middle school:

I feel with the middle school, more than anything – again, this is my only experience with middle school other than when I went myself – but there's a gate. You're not let in. There's a big division. You don't know what's going on in the classroom.

Parent 5

Parent 6 talked about experiences in which barriers to accessing communication with a particular school-based behavior specialist were greatly reduced through electronic communication. While the parent used e-mail to communicate with several administrators, teachers and other service providers at her son's school, the behavior specialist used both e-mail and text messaging on a routine basis to communicate with the parent. She explained that the behavior specialist's willingness and responsiveness to communicating through texting as a particular factor in developing a sense of comfort in working with him. Through texting, the parent experienced rapid, meaningful two-way communication that both parent and school benefitted from in supporting her son's needs. As she said:

If [my son] has a bad morning, I'll send a text message and say, 'Could you just check on him and make sure that he's okay? This morning he seems anxious.' And as a teacher, I know, that's not the average think I need to do for every student, but at the same time, allowing him to know that he started out his morning that way and that if [my son] is going to escalate. It might take it down before anything happens, just the check-in.

Parent 6

In discussing the value she has for texting and e-mail communications with the school behavior specialist, Parent 6 said:

I feel like it's a circle. And if he sees something, he can communicate that to me, without it being a formal note home. And sometimes that's the best part of the whole thing. If I am concerned about my son, I maybe don't want my son to know that I'm concerned that he's anxious. And the behavior

specialist has a relationship with my son and with me enough that he can check in with me without my son knowing that, without him seeing that. And that's a great thing. And the same, vice versa, if he sees my son's really frustrated...he can send me a message and I can address it in a different way.

Parent 6

In discussing communicating through IEP drafts, Parent 3 shared how she takes control of her input to the IEP. As she said:

I redraft my IEPs and hand them over. And they say, 'Well, why don't you just give us your piece of paper?' [i.e., parent comments documented on a formal district prepared planning form]. And I'm like, 'No. I'll just read it to you; you can take dictation, because I may decide to change something while I'm doing it and I don't want you to just copy it out. Because, you may say something that makes me want to change my mind about something else, and I may hear something different. So, as of now, this is what I want, but once we get to the next goal, I may want it changed. So you can't have it.

Parent 3

Parents also talked about their experiences of responsiveness by school and district personnel to parent initiated communications. While four parents talked about experiences in which their questions and concerns were quickly and comprehensively addressed, two experienced slow and incomplete responses to their communications. For example, Parent 4 said about communicating with the ESE specialist at her son's school, "I would ask questions and [send] emails. And she would answer some questions, but not answer some questions" (Parent 4). Parent 4 also discussed the challenges of communicating with professionals in a system that has a particular language. As she said of the school and district personnel she has worked with, "They have their own code. They have their own double speak. If you ask a question, you go, 'What was the answer?' Or, I don't feel that what they offered was the answer" (Parent 4).

Parent 5 shared similar experiences regarding responsiveness to e-mails she initiated with a district level ESE supervisor. In one experience of having e-mailed three questions to the supervisor, the most significant in her view asking about the validity of the model of services enacted at her child's school, the parent received an incomplete response. As she said:

My last letter to the ESE director was, 'Can you tell me where there is any research that shows positive outcomes, anything that absolutely shows that our kids benefit from this kind of structure? And, I don't want anecdotal from an administrator.' And she gave me nothing. She answered two other questions I had within the email and avoided that one, and didn't say a thing about the model.

Parent 5

Afterward, Parent 5 initiated an e-mail to another district level ESE assistance group supervisor the same question regarding the validity of the service model in her child's school. She received a response from that individual stating that she would pass the questions on to yet another district administrator who would get in contact with her. After waiting for several weeks, the parent said she had not received any further communications from the school district regarding her question.

Parents also talked about the quality of communications about their children's performance in school. Parent 2 and 5 talked about their experiences with the content of communications required by their children's IEPs reporting daily performance. For example, Parent 2 said that while he appreciated the school providing daily reports, they were of little usefulness since the parent experienced direct and comprehensive face-to-face communication with teachers when he picked his daughter up from school at the end of each school day. Parent 5, however, was dissatisfied with the lack of meaningful information contained in her son's daily reports from teachers. Concerned for her son's

daily school behaviors, and expecting the content of daily reports stipulated in her son's IEP to have some level of depth, she felt frustrated by the brevity of teachers' daily reports, saying:

I get a note that comes home that'll say, "Struggled in the morning.' I mean this was the extent of the note. Or it may be, 'Better afternoon.' Okay. In what way? And it's usually about three words. It used to be just a happy face or a sad face. I have nothing. I have no notes from daily notes. And what's really weird is the communication folder that they bring home after the week is gone, they take that sheet out, so you couldn't flip back to previously and say, 'Well, what happened this day?' You have nothing like that.

Parent 5

## **Summary**

The findings in this study reflect parents' complex and multi-faceted experiences in working with their children's middle schools. Parents worked with a range of individuals in developing and supporting their child's education in the middle school context. Parents most frequently worked with school-based routine service providers, and least often with school and/or district administrators. Parents felt most comfortable in working with family members and close friends, and least comfortable in working with school-based occasional service providers. Parents exemplified their own sense of belonging in working with their children's schools (and school systems) that reflected a range of positive and negative experiences. Parents' experiences in working with their children's schools and school districts were related to relationships between parents and professionals, parent and professional knowledge and expertise, parents' experiences of others' sensitivity to the needs of their children and to the challenges of parenting a child with autism, shared and divergent aims and objectives between parents and professionals, and the varied mediums of communication employed.

## **CHAPTER FIVE:**

### **DISCUSSION**

In this chapter I discuss the findings in relation to the research questions that guided the study. Additionally, I present a discussion of the limitations of the study and implications for professional preparation and continuing development, as well as recommendations for future research.

This study sought to contribute understandings of parent-school relationships involving parents of students with autism by exploring notions of belonging with a small group of parents. The purpose of the study was to describe how some parents of children with autism experience belonging and make sense of their relationships with their child's middle school. This study was undertaken in response to legislation and literature supporting parent-school partnership as a means of improving student outcomes (e.g., Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004; No Child Left Behind Act, 2002). While literature on parent-school partnership delineates and explores several elements to effective parent-school partnership (Clarke, Sheridan & Woods, 2010; de Fur, 2012; Keen, 2007; Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006; Blue-Banning, Summers, & Frankland, 2004), there appears to be little discussion regarding parent perspectives of partnership, particularly regarding the notion of belonging in such partnerships. It is important to understand parent perspectives of their own belonging in partnerships with

their children's school as they have an essential role in forming, maintaining and achieving parent-school partnerships.

Six parents of middle school students with autism participated in this study. As participants who shared and collaboratively interpreted their experiences through conversations with me and other parents in the study, we became co-investigators of the concept of belonging, particularly with regard to belonging in partnership with schools. As co-investigators, they explored their own relationships with the school and district personnel they worked with through arts-based research involving proximity and comfort level mapping, individual interviews, and a focus group interview. Parents also acted as co-investigators by conforming and clarifying the meanings of their experiences by offering thick descriptions and interpretations of their experiences in partnering with their children's schools.

A major contribution of this study is in exploring the complexity of parents' experiences of belonging in parent-school partnerships through systematic investigation. This is important to the field of education in that it reveals parents expectations, goals and desires for their relationships with their children's schools and contributes insights for education professionals that contribute to developing and sustaining meaningful and productive home-school relations. The research questions that framed the study are:

1. How do parents of students with autism describe their experiences with parent-school partnership?
2. How do parents of students with autism define belonging, particularly with regard to their own belonging in the school-family partnership?
3. What are parent of students with autism experiences of belonging with their child's

school?

4. How can understandings of notions of belonging help schools improve partnering relationships with parents of students with autism?

Each of these questions will be discussed in light of the study findings and literature in the area of parent school partnership.

**Question 1: How do parents of middle school students with autism describe their experiences with parent-school partnership?**

Parents in this study described having worked with a variety of individuals regarding the education of their children with autism that span the contexts of home, school, and community. Parents worked most frequently with school-based service providers, such as special and general education teachers, speech/language therapists and occupational therapists. Family members followed this in order of frequency, and then close friends, school-based occasional service providers, school and district administrators, and non-school based service providers. Among the family members that worked with them regarding their children's education, parents worked most often with their spouses. However, five parents worked closely with their own parents, siblings and cousins. One parent also worked closely with close personal friends, supporting Lytle and Bordin's (2001) position that friends of parents of children with disabilities offers social supports to the parent in reducing stress, increasing knowledge about disabilities and school programs, and providing support through common experiences between parents. In working with the parents, family members and friends also shared in performing several of the family functions discussed by Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin and Soodak (2009), such as sharing in affection, building self-esteem for and with the parent and child, providing and

participating in opportunities for socialization and recreation,, as well as supporting the child with daily-care, communication, and developing self advocacy skills.

Parents in this study felt most comfortable in working with family members and close friends and non-school based (privately employed) service providers, followed by school based service providers, school and district administrators and, lastly, school-based occasional service providers. The comfort parent experienced in working with others was largely a product of their feelings of personal connectedness with those individuals, connections that indicated for the parent that those individuals cared about their children and about their relationships with the parents themselves. Among family and friends they worked with, parents experienced others as having a mutual investment in the relationship with parent and child.

These findings support research that suggests parents of children with autism experience working within multiple individuals and systems to support their children's needs. For example, Brookman-Frazee, Baker-Ericzén, Stahmer, Mandell, Haine, & Hough (2009) studied a stratified random sample of 1715 children and adolescents with autism or intellectual disabilities (InD) who were receiving services from at least one public service system (mental health, special education, child welfare, alcohol and drug intervention, or juvenile justice). They found that one third of participants received services in more than one service system. In a survey of 301 parents of a child with autism by Thomas, Morrissey, & McLaurin (2007), parents reported working with a mean number of 7 services support their children (including a mean of 2 in school services and mean of 5 out of school services). In Kohler's (1999) study of 25 parents of children with autism, he found a mean of 6.44 different services children received over 6 months, with a mean of 4.4 agencies



involved in providing services, and a mean of 7.7 professionals involved in working with the family and child with autism. In supporting their children's education, parents in this study experienced working with others across the contexts of their children's lives, including family members, friends, school and school district service providers and administrators, and out of school service providers.

Parents talked about their experiences of working with their children's middle schools through some, but not all, of the forms of parent involvement described by Epstein and her associates (2009) (Table 4). For example, all parents experienced involvement through communicating and decision-making with their children's middle schools. However, only a two parents experienced involvement through volunteering at their child's middle school. Parents 1, 4 and 6 talked about a lack of volunteer opportunities made available to do them after their child transitioned to middle school in comparison with opportunities to volunteer at their children's elementary schools. While each parent talked about their experiences of separately partnering with their child's school and with those in their communities, no parent discussed experiences of partnering within a triad of parent-school-community. Nor did any of the parents discuss experiences of partnering with their children's middle schools in regard to developing parenting skills. These findings suggest that either parents may have felt more strongly about communicating and decision-making in partnership with their children's middle school than the other forms of involvement, or that parents experienced fewer opportunities in the middle school context to partner with their children's schools through volunteering, learning at home, parenting or coordinated collaboration between home, school, and community. While some forms of parent involvement may decline between elementary and middle school, other forms may take on

**Table 4.** Parents experiences of partnering with their child with autism’s middle school through Epstein and associates (2009) six forms of parent involvement.

	Parenting	Communication	Volunteering	Learning at Home	Decision Making	Collaborating with Community
Parent 1		X	X	X	X	
Parent 2		X	X	X	X	
Parent 3		X		X	X	
Parent 4		X			X	
Parent 5		X			X	
Parent 6		X			X	

more significance to parents (Singh, Bickley, Trivette, Keith, Keith & Anderson, 1995).

Additionally, as suggested by the works of Boyd (2005), opportunities for parent involvement appear to significantly decline due to differences in philosophy about how parents should be involved in their children’s education between elementary and middle schools.

Parents also talked about their experiences of working with their children’s middle schools that more closely aligned with the notion of partnership than either involvement or engagement (Ferlazzo, 2011). The terms involvement, engagement and partnership are

often used interchangeably to describe the parent-school relationship. According to Ferlazzo (2011), parent “involvement implies doing to; in contrast, engagement implies doing with” (p. 10), yet engagement is not partnership. As he also says, “When schools engage parents they are leading...in an effort to develop a genuine partnership” (Ferlazzo, 2009, para 4). This seems to indicate that, although the terms of engagement, involvement and partnership are often used interchangeably to describe parent-school relationships, terms other than partnership “focus on the actions and efforts of parents but hide the requirement for schools and communities to take for organizing programs that make it possible for all parents to become involved in their children’s education in productive ways” (Epstein, 2011, p. 226).

While the parents experiences did not uniformly follow the paths of either de Fur’s (2011) family partnership model or the stages of developing a Systems of Care approach to meeting the needs of students (Stroul & Blau, 2010; Stroul, Blau, & Sondheimer, 2008; Stroul & Friedman, 1986), each parent spoke of their relationship with their child’s middle school that reflect some of the principles of partnership in these models, and the characteristics of effective partnership discussed in Chapter Two. For example, both the de Fur and Systems of Care models of partnership are founded on the principle that parent-school partnerships must be child centered and family focused. However, all the parents discussed experiences in which the aims and objectives of their children’s schools or districts appeared system-focused, and only three who discussed experiences with school or district aims and objectives appearing child focused. They also discussed situations that indicate experiences with the principles of both the de Fur and Systems of Care models for problem solving and planning and implementing action. However, parents did not discuss

experiences with the principles of cultural responsiveness, joint reflection and celebration, or of schools assisting parents in making connections with out-of-school support systems and service providers. Regarding the elements of effective partnership, all parents talked about the elements of effective communication, shared objectives, and skill sets, while no parent discussed experiences around the partnership elements of shared responsibilities, participation or time.

In this study, the absence or disagreement in one or more of the characteristics of effective partnership acted as a barrier to parents' partnerships with their children's schools. This finding supports Mohr and Spekman's (1994) work that, while partnerships may take place in the absence of one or more of the elements of effective partnership, such absence may degrade the effectiveness of partnership. It appears to me that among the parents in this study, the absence or disagreement about one or more of the characteristics of partnership contributed to parents questioning the ability of the partnership to succeed. For example, when parents perceived an absence or disagreement in one or more of the characteristics of effective partnership, their sense of trust for those they worked was negatively affected, as suggested by Blue-Banning and her associates (2004), de Fur (2012), and Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin & Soodak (2006).

Parents experienced several of the barriers to effective partnership as suggested by the work of Hornby and Lafaele (2011) (Figure 6). Hornby and Lafaele (2011) identified four areas of barriers to parent-school partnership: Individual parent and societal factors; individual parent and family factors; parent-teacher factors, and child factors. In the area of societal factors, all parents talked about barriers to their belonging in partnership involving school and district inflexibility toward policy and process, of going "by the book"

(Parent 1), as was the case in Parent 2's experience of obtaining an aide for his daughter, described in Chapter Four, that require an Assistant Superintendent's intervention to resolve the issue by assigning and hiring an aide directly through his office rather than through the school, as would typically have been done. Parent 6's experience, also describe in Chapter Four, demonstrated a society barrier in which se was denied the power to participate in the decision to remove her son from school to a mental health facility for evaluation. In the area of Parent-Teacher Factors, school and district personnel resistance and inflexibility regarding maintaining speech-language and occupational therapy services for their children was experienced by Parents 1, 2, 3 and 4, placing parents in a position of having to defend their children's educational rights and creating discord between parent and school. Interestingly, it appears that neither individual parent/family factors nor individual child factors acted as a barrier to parent involvement. Rather, these factors appear to have contributed to parents' pursuing partnership with their children's schools in order to advocate for their child's education. For example, child factors of learning and behavioral challenges often served as the purpose for, rather than a barrier to, parents' pursuit of partnership with their children's middle schools. Additionally, although demographic data was not recorded for this study beyond identifying parents' gender, observation during interviews indicates that the parents in this study were all educated above the secondary school level, were successful in their chosen profession, and economically secure, such that these factors acted as supports rather than barriers to their partnership with their children's schools.

Throughout this study, parents talked of mixed experiences in working with their children's schools. Each parent at some time had experienced conflict, distrust and

adversity in working with their children's schools and/or school districts. Again, all parents in this study talked about experiences of conflict with school and district personnel regarding aims and objectives involving the education of their children. Parents 1, 2, 3 and 4 experienced conflict with school and district personnel over maintaining speech-language and occupational therapy services for their children, and Parents 1 and 2 in obtaining a dedicated aide for their daughter. Parents 4 and 5 talked about their lack of confidence in school and district personnel working to meet their children's individual needs. However, four of the five parents in this study talked about having a history of strong positive relationships with their children's middle schools. For each of these parents, the majority of their challenges occurred while their children were in elementary school. By the time their children transitioned to middle school, these parents felt their knowledge and skills had evolved to a degree that enabled them to successfully advocate for their children. Additionally, although they continued to experience conflicts with their children's middle schools, these parents tended to experience more of the characteristics of effective partnership within the middle school context than in the elementary. This suggests that those parents may have had the opportunity to develop greater knowledge about their children's autism, and about the laws, policies and practices of exceptional student education, as well as developing the skills of partnership during their children's elementary school experiences. This supports the findings of Wang, Hasheem and Poston (2004) who found that parents of children with autism experienced greater self confidence and assertiveness as advocates for their children as they developed understandings of their child's disability, of their rights as parents, and knowing how to obtain resources.

Only two parents in this study expressed consistently strong dissatisfaction with their relationship with their children's middle schools. While they diligently advocated for their children and sought to form a partnership with their children's middle schools, they reported a continuous struggle in advocating for their children with middle school and district personnel. For one of the parents (Parent 5), her son's middle school was less inclined toward partnership with her than was her son's elementary school had been. Rather than partnership, this parent sensed consistent opposition in the middle school experience. As quoted in parents' examples of non-belonging in Chapter Four, she said, "I guess that I always feel that it's an adversarial relationship" (Parent 5). The other parent (Parent 4), whose son received a diagnosis of autism after transitioning to middle school, expressed frustration in working with her son's middle school. There appeared to be tension in the relationship in which it appeared educators and administrators were unable to understand the needs of her son, and know how to support his educational development to her satisfaction.

As stated above, this study affirms the works of Brookman-Fraze and associates (2009), Thomas, Morrisey and McLaurin (2007), and Kohler (1999) who demonstrated that parents of students with autism work with multiple service systems in supporting the education of their children. However, in describing their partnerships, including their partnerships with school and district personnel, parents in this study expressed partnership as a product of personal connections with those they worked with, affirming the works of authors who suggest that personal connections between parent and school professionals are important to partnership efficacy (e.g., Ammon, 1999; Johnson, Møller, Pashiardis, Vedøy, & Savvides, 2009; Minke, 2000). What is uniquely significant about this

study in relation to how parents described their experiences with parent-school partnership is the relationship parents made between partnership and child-focused aims and objectives. When parents experienced others demonstrating child-focused aims and objectives, they described their relationships with those individuals as partnerships. Conversely, when parents experience others aims and objectives to be system-focused, they described their relationships as adversarial, non-partnerships.

**Question 2: How do parents of middle school students with autism define and exemplify belonging, particularly with regard to their own sense of belonging in the school-family partnership?**

As discussed above, parents in this study described their experiences of partnership in parent-school partnerships in terms of personal connectedness with other individuals. Each parent in this study also defined belonging in terms of interpersonal relationships, rather than as organizational memberships. They spoke of belonging as a personal connection, association or union with other individuals. This affirms the theory of McMillan and Chavez (1986) that belonging is a sense of personal relatedness that contributes to a broader sense of community - as in the community of school - and that belonging is a prerequisite to group membership. While membership may be assigned as an administrative function or ascribed to the roles of individuals, this is an organizational or group conference of a condition that may not be experienced by the individual upon which membership is bestowed in name. Experiencing membership requires regular contact and the perception that relationships are stable, present affective concern for each other, and is ongoing (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In other words, while parents may be



told they are partners in a parent-school relationship and that they belong, if the parent does not experience belonging, then belonging is not achieved.

Parents were asked to share examples of experiences of when they felt they belonged, and about when they felt they didn't belong when working with their children's schools. All parents spoke of their belonging and non-belonging in terms of personal connectedness with others, particularly with school and district personnel. Their sense of personal connection was realized when others shared with them a common set of understandings about their children's strengths, challenges and needs, and a common vision for the actions to be taken to meet those needs.

Parents' sense of belonging in working with their children's middle schools was also contingent on their experiences of their children's belonging within the school. When parents had experiences in which their children's school and district had a personal connection with their child and valued him or her as a member of the school community, parents experienced their own sense of belonging as a partner with the school. This supports the theory of Hagerty and her associates (1992) that belonging is attributed to a sense of value, importance and fit of among members, and extends the concept of partnership to recognize the student as a member of the partnership community. The value, importance and fit associated with parents' experiences of belonging was predicated to experiencing the belonging of their children. In short, when they experienced their children's belonging in school, they experienced their own belonging in working with his or her school.

The literature on parent school partnership reviewed as part of this study (Blue-Banning, Summers & Frankland, 2004; Clarke, Sheridan & Woods, 2010; de Fur, 2012;

Keen, 2007; Pires, 2008; Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006) neglects to identify belonging as an element of partnership. The element of belonging in partnership may have been omitted from the discussions of partnership in those works as a product of assumptions that belonging is inherent in partnerships. However, the findings of this study contribute to the literature on parent-school partnerships by directly identifying belonging as a requisite element of effective parent-school partnerships.

### **Question 3: What are parents of middle school students with autism's experiences of belonging with their child's school?**

In speaking of their partnerships with their children's schools, parents in this study talked about their relationships with individual administrators, teachers and other service providers. They talked about their experiences and understandings about their own and others' knowledge and expertise related to educating their children's education and development. They also talked about others' sensitivity to the needs of their children, and to the experiences of parenting a child with autism, and of how others demonstrated connectedness with them through word and deed that their aims and objectives for their children's schooling corresponded with those of the parents. Together, these experiences were connected by a common theme of caring for and about the object of their partnerships – their children.

The establishment of shared objectives between parent and school has been discussed as one of the essential elements of parent-school partnerships. de Fur (2012), for example, discusses shared objectives as a common vision with clear goals as critical to a strategic long-term student centered planning; Keen (2007) discusses mutually agreed upon goals between parent and school as important to effective planning and decision-

making; Clarke, Sheridan and Woods (2010) state the first principle of a health family-school relationship involves common beliefs about the goals and objectives for children. All parents in this study expressed their own objectives within their parent-school relationships as focusing on meeting their children's individual needs. However, parents' shared experiences indicating that the school and district personnel they worked with demonstrated objectives that focused either on meeting their children's needs or for complying with the strictures of policy and procedures, often at the expense of meeting their children's individual needs.

Parents' experiences with others objectives affected their sense of personal connectedness with them, affirming the work of Clarke, Sheridan and Woods (2010) who suggest that trust in parent-school partnerships is built upon confidence in each other's commitment to the goals of the relationship. Simply put, when parents perceived others as sharing their vision for meeting their children's individual needs, their sense of belonging in partnership was strong and contributed to a sense of mutual trust and respect. Conversely, when parents experienced others as focusing on objectives for achieving compliance with policy and procedure that reduced or denied what parents felt were necessary and appropriate services or accommodations to meet their children, the parents experienced personal disconnectedness, contributing to a sense of distrust and lack of partnership.

Clarke, Sheridan and Woods (2010), Turnbull and associates (2006), and Blue-Banning and associates (2004) discuss professional competence and skill as an element of effective parent-school partnerships. In talking about working in partnership with their children's schools, parents in this study not only talked of their experiences of knowledge

and skill demonstrated by the professionals they worked with, but also of their own knowledge and expertise regarding parenting their children as a vital component in meeting the school related needs of their children. Each parent expressed a sense that they had developed a high level of knowledge about special education law and policy that was necessary to negotiate their children's education and defend their children's educational rights and advocate for their children within the system of public schooling. Among parents in this study, such knowledge of law and policy was developed over time through independent exploration and study, in which they experienced little support from school or district personnel other than offering general information.

Four parents in this study experienced working with professionals who valued their knowledge and expertise in working together to promote their children's school related success. This supports the work of Fish (2008), who found that parents positive perceptions of their working with schools during IEP team meetings was associated with their perceptions of educators valuing their input and respecting their opinions as equal partners. However, as Finders and Lewis (1994) state, "It is assumed that involved parents bring a body of knowledge about the purposes of schooling to match institutional knowledge. Unless they bring such knowledge to the school, they themselves are thought to need education in becoming legitimate participants" (p. 50). Each parent in the present study discussed experiences in which their knowledge and experiences were either ignored or undervalued by teachers, other school service providers, or administrators. When parents experienced others they worked with as ignoring or devaluing their knowledge and experience, they sensed a relationship that marginalized parent knowledge

and expertise and restricted parents ability to participate in the decision making processes involving their children's schooling.

Parents in this study also discussed the acquisition and use of professional expertise among school and district personnel as a developmental process. They viewed professionals' expertise progressing as individuals and schools experienced students with autism over time. Parents who worked with professionals who had a prolonged history of working with students with autism expressed a sense of trust that those individuals would recognize and respond appropriately their children's needs, a phenomenon also found by Lerkkanen, Kikas, Pakarinen, Poikonen, and Nurmi (2013) in their study of mothers in Estonia.

Clark, Sheridan and Woods (2010) and Pires (2008) discussed sensitivity in parent-school partnerships as awareness and responsiveness to cultural and linguistic diversity. In this study, parents' experiences of sensitivity by those they worked with were related to others' awareness and responsiveness to the individual needs of their children and experiences of the parents, as suggested by Keen (2007). When parents experienced others demonstrating sensitivity for their children's unique experiences of autism and their unique challenges and needs, parents also experienced a sense of personal connectedness with those individuals. They also found it challenging to work with others who appeared not to be sensitive to or understand their experiences of parenting a child with autism and frustrated by those who appeared not to comprehend the challenges in accomplishing what for typical families might be considered routine and uncomplicated. Parents even suggested that future educators and administrators be required as part of their training to develop sensitivity to families and children with autism by participating in prolonged

observation and interaction with children and families in home, school, and community contexts, or as Valesky, Greene, and Isaacs (1997) suggest, through preparation activities that combine theory and practice through coursework and field experiences involving students with special needs. Parents' experiences of others' sensitivity appear to have affected their sense of personal connectedness with those they worked with, supporting the findings of Bender, Walia, Kambhampaty, Nygard and Nygard (2012) who demonstrated that team effectiveness is influenced by its members' perceptions of each other's social sensitivity.

Parents experienced multiple methods of communicating with schools. Each parent discussed having participated in at least three methods of communication, with all parents talking about face-to-face communications at their children's schools, and all but one communicating by telephone. Parents valued easy and open access in communicating with others and tended to experience more personal connections with those who were accessible and timely in their responses that contained enough information to satisfy Parents' needs. I found it somewhat surprising, in what has been coined, *The Information Age* (Castells, 2011), that only half of the parents talked about communicating with school and district personnel through digital phone texting and e-mails, especially since each parent communicated routinely with me through both of these methods. Regardless of the method of communication, accessibility to communicating with other individuals at the school and district levels, along with the timeliness and sufficiency of information received from others were fundamental to parents' experiences of belonging. The findings of this study support the work of de Fur (2012), Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin and Soodak (2006), and Blue-Banning and her associates (2004) who discusses the importance of effective

communication to great extent, addressing both the quantity and quality of information shared between home and school. For example, de Fur (2012) describes partnership between parents and schools as “playing on the same side [in which] partners communicate honestly and openly, sharing and seeking information; they learn from one another; they use one another’s strengths and help compensate for one another’s limitations” (p. 59). Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin and Soodak (2006) state that effective parent-school partnerships require effective communication of sufficient quality and quantity. In their study of 137 family members, Blue-Banning and associates (2004) found parents strongly emphasized the importance of communication in partnering with their children’s schools. Their analysis of interviews with parents provide several indicators of positive parent-school communications, including clarity, honesty, tact, and coordination of information through frequent contact. The findings of the present study contribute to this literature by demonstrating how some parents experience communication with schools through multiple means that include face-to-face meetings, electronic communications, and documentation. This study also expands the literature on parent-school partnerships by revealing how the quality of communications and others’ responsiveness to parent initiated communications may affect some parents’ sense of personal connectedness with education professionals. For example, parents in this study expressed a greater sense of belongingness in partnership with others who shared meaningful, child-focused content and responded to their own communications with sufficient content to respond to parent questions and concerns in a timely manner.

The findings of this study contribute to understandings of parent-school partnership by identifying some of the factors that influence parents’ experiences of belonging in

parent-school partnerships. These include experiences with child- and/or system-focused aims and objectives, others' sensitivity to the individual needs of their children and to the experiences of parent a child with autism, and experiences of communicating with others. The findings of this study challenge the assumption that parents and schools consistently share common child-focused aims and objectives, confirming Keen's (2007) observation that when parents and professionals experience goals differently from each other, confusion and distrust are often the result. This study also extends the concept of sensitivity as discussed by other authors (e.g., Clarke, Sheridan, & Woods, 2010; Keen, 2007; Pires, 2008) who frame sensitivity in parent-school partnerships only in relation to cultural and linguistic diversity by demonstrating the need for sensitivity to neurodiversity (Baker, 2006) and to the diversity of experiences in parenting a child with autism (Woodgate, Ateah, & Secco, 2008), highlighting the need for public programs (such as schooling) to become more rigorous in recognizing and responding to the many manifestations of diversity that occur in society (Macgillivray as cited in Baker, 2006).

**Question 4: How can understandings of notions of belonging help schools improve partnering relationships with parents of students with autism?**

Maslow (1970) theorized that a sense of belonging is a basic human need. Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggest that understandings of human relationships tend to underappreciate the value of belongingness, as humans are continually motivated to seek and achieve a sense of belonging across their relationships. The experiences of the parents in this study suggest that parents of middle school students with autism seek a sense of belonging in their relationships with those they work with regarding their children's



schooling. This also suggests that a sense of belonging may be an essential element of effective parent-school partnerships.

When parents in this study experienced a sense of belonging, they talked about their relationships with their children's schools as being effective in that their children were receiving appropriate school related services. This finding is significant in light of Montes, Halterman and Magyar's (2009) findings that among 2,123 parents of children with autism, parents experience greater dissatisfaction with school and community services than other parents. In their study of 3,104 parents of children with disabilities, Bitterman, Daley, Misra, Carlson and Markowitz (2008) found that parents of children with autism not only reported less satisfaction with their children's schooling than other parents, but almost half (47.1%) reported dissatisfaction in the quantity of services their children were already receiving, and a quarter (25.1%) felt their children required services that were not being offered to their children. Parents' experiences of belonging appeared to be a product of their personnel connections with others. Schools, as social organizations, provide a context for experiencing the basic psychological need for belongingness (Osterman, 2000), not only for students and school employees, but for all those involved in the community of schooling (Furman, 2002). Several researchers have addressed student and teacher experiences of belonging have been topics of investigation (e.g., Byrd, Huffman & Johnson, 2007; Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Johnson, 2009; Osterman, 2000; Ryan & Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; Patrick, 2001; Stipek, 1996). This study appears to be the first to address parent experiences of belonging in their relationships with schools. It additionally provides evidence of how education professionals value for parents' knowledge and expertise as experts in their children's lives, sensitivity to the unique strengths, challenges of their children's needs and

to the experiences of parenting a child with autism, in how professionals demonstrated their objectives as either child- or system-focused, and in the ability of parents to easily communicate with and receive timely and sufficient information about their children's education contribute to parents sense of connectedness (and thus their sense of belonging) in parent-school partnerships.

Many educators feel unprepared to partner with parents (MetLife, 2005). Evidence also suggests that many teachers do not receive adequate preparation for effectively working with parents as partners (Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Flanigan, 2007). While the findings of Epstein and Sanders (2006) suggest that special education and elementary education teachers receive more preparation than other categories of school professionals, there appears to be a need for improved professional preparation across school related professions for working with the parents and families to enhance student outcomes.

Several authors have explored methods for preparing school professionals for partnering with parents (e.g., Brown, Harris, Jacobson, & Trotti, 2014; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002). To improve the effectiveness of parent-school partnerships between schools and parents of middle school students with autism, these efforts may benefit by intensifying instruction and field experiences within initial professional preparation (IPP) and continuing professional development (CPD) programs. First, IPP and CPD should incorporate opportunities for professionals to develop understandings and skills to develop, communicate, monitor and assess child-centered objectives. Second, while IPP and CPD activities must continue to address the foundations of policy and procedure as guides for serving students, they should also develop professional skills in collaboratively enacting policies and procedures to

demonstrate a child centered rather than system centered focus. This must include opportunities for professionals to understand and demonstrate the ability to share power and responsibility with parents, particularly in the area of instructional program programming and problem solving. Third, IPP and CPD activities should prepare professionals to recognize and demonstrate sensitivity to the individual experiences of students with autism and of parenting a child with autism. Fourth, professionals should be taught how to access and utilize parent knowledge and experience as a resource for developing their own body of professional knowledge and skills. Fifth, IPP and CPD activities should develop professionals' skills for supporting the development of parents' knowledge and skills to support their children with autism's education from the commencement of initial evaluation procedures for special education services through transition from high school. Sixth, IPP and CPD activities should prepare professionals to communicate professionally yet personably with parents and develop skills to construct and employ systems of communication that support parent access to both information and to their school partners.

To achieve these six objectives, IPP and CPD activities might be infused with instruction and modeling in the use of the characteristics and skills of effective partnership following a model similar to that proposed by Le Page, Darling-Hammond, Akar, Gutierrez, Jenkins-Gunn & Rosebrock (2005) in which a spiraling curriculum provides repeated consideration of professional issues including, the skills of parent-school partnership, with extended field opportunities that engage learners in developing skills through practical experience. In formal classroom and field experiences, professionals may learn and practice the skills do demonstrate child-focused caring through communications that are

professional yet personable, that employ multiple methods of communicating with parents according to parent preference, and that provide meaningful, useful and sufficient information for parents to understand their children's progress and act as partners in meeting their children's education related needs. Additionally, IPP and CPD activities should include parents as facilitators in developing professionals' understandings of the lived experiences of students with autism and their families across the contexts of home, school and community, and develop understandings and provide opportunities for professionals to work directly with parents as partners.

### **Limitations**

This study presents several limitations, including the participation of a small number of a rather homogenous group of parents. While demographic data about parents' culture, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status were not collected as part of this study, each parent could be characterized as representing a group of white, middle class families with high levels of social, cultural and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1985) that may have affected their experiences and perspectives of parent-school partnership.

This study is also limited in its ability to confirm parents' experiences beyond themselves. There was, for example, no opportunity in the design of this study to observe parent-school interactions or to examine the artifacts of parent-school partnership, such as individualized education plans or samples of communications between home and school. However, the study design did allow for confirmation and constructive understandings of parent perspectives as a whole through focus group and follow-up interviews combined with cross analysis of data.

Another limitation presented by this study is in the potential for my own beliefs, values and experiences to have influenced its progress and results. As a teacher of students with autism and as a teacher educator, I have developed certain beliefs about the value of parent-school partnerships. These beliefs, values and experiences contributed to the structure of the study and the research questions, and were present in the rich discussions between parents and myself.

### **Implications for Professional Preparation and Continuing Development**

This study informs professional preparation and continuing development activities by offering insights into parents' experiences in partnering with their children's schools. This may help develop programs to support professionals in developing and improving parent-school relationships that benefit children with autism. First, professional development activities should provide opportunities for those who will work with students with autism to experience prolonged and meaningful observation of children with autism across the contexts of home, school and community. Additionally, these activities should incorporate parents as collaborators in supporting professionals' understandings of the complex experiences of parenting a child with autism and assist in developing professionals skills to work in partnership with parents to establish, communicate, and enact common goals and objectives.

Second, professional development activities should incorporate opportunities for professionals to develop skill in demonstrating each of the elements of effective partnership discussed in this study. For example, professional development activities may incorporate opportunities for professionals to work with parents and teacher educators through case studies and field experiences to promote effective parent-professional

communication, developing and supporting shared objectives, methods of developing and sharing responsibilities between home and school, problem solving, and sensitivity to the individual and unique challenges and needs of children with autism and of parents' experiences of parenting a child with autism.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Future research in parent-school partnerships should expand the study of belonging to include the perspectives of parents, teachers and other school and district personnel. This may be undertaken, for example, by a combination of single or multiple case studies of parent-school partnership. For example, a single case study research design might examine the perspectives of belonging and partnership among partners involved in supporting the education of a single child. A multiple case study research design might approach examining the perspectives of belonging and partnership among multiple partnerships in a single school or school district.

Future research in the field of parent-school partnership should also examine the relationship between parents' and others' sense of belonging in partnership and student outcomes. A mixed methods approach in which thematic analysis of qualitative interview data is combined with a quasi-experimental approach of static-group comparison (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007) following treatment group exposure to partnership mentoring may lead to improved understandings of the effect of partnership training on student achievement. Additionally, future research should examine both the qualitative and quantitative effects of partnership development activities targeted at improving skill in enacting the effective elements of partnership on the sense of belonging and partnership effectiveness among parents and school professionals.

There is also a need for research to examine aspects of each of the elements of effective partnership and how school professionals may develop partnership skills that affect parents' sense of belonging in partnership with them. As institutions of higher education (IHE) continue to increasingly include parent-school partnership as a topic of professional development (Epstein & Sanders, 2006), IPP activities should examine how partnership skills may be developed through a combination of coursework and field experiences across programs to improve professionals' knowledge, skill and confidence in working with parents as partners.

### **Conclusion**

Parent-school partnerships involve relationships between human beings. As human beings, partners tend to desire a sense of belonging with their partners. When partners experience belonging, the potential for the partnership to achieve its objectives is enhanced. Without the experience of belonging, that potential is diminished. In this sense, the experience of belonging acts as an element of effective partnership, just as does the experience of trust. One cannot experience a sense of belonging with us by being told that they belong with others any more than they can experience trust by being told they can trust them. Although belonging and trust may be shared among partners, they are experienced individually.

Feelings of belonging have been shown to be a mediator in teacher job satisfaction, collegiality, and impact on student achievement (Byrd, Huffman & Johnson, 2007; Johnson, 2009; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011) and cultivating student academic motivation and achievement (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Goodenow, 1993; Osterman, 2000, Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Stipek, 1996). In the present study, parents' experiences of partnership have been

shown to mediate their feelings of belonging as partners with their children's schools. The experiences of the parents in this study suggest that parents of middle school students with autism seek a sense of belonging in their relationships with those they work with regarding their children's schooling. This also suggests that a sense of belonging may be an essential element of effective parent-school partnerships. If education professionals are dedicated to forming and maintaining partnerships with parents, they would benefit by understanding and developing the elements of effective partnership, including the element of belonging.



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## APPENDIX A:

### TYOLOGY OF FAMILY STRUCTURES

<b><u>Family Type</u></b>	<b><u>Description</u></b>
Adoptive family	A family where one or more of the children has been adopted. Any family structure may also be an adoptive family.
Bi- or multi-racial family	A family where the parents are members of different racial identity. Includes Trans-racial adoptive family, in which the adopted child is of a different racial identity group than the parents.
Blended family	A family that consists of members of two (or more) previous families.
Co-custody family	An arrangement where divorced or separated parents both have legal responsibility for their child(ren).
Conditionally separated	A family in which a family member is separated from family the rest of the family (i.e., for employment far away, military service, incarceration, hospitalization, etc.) yet remain a significant member of the family.
Extended family	A family where grandparents, aunts and uncles, other relations, or individuals considered to have the status of family member assume roles in the children's upbringing. These family members may be in addition to the child's parents or instead of the child's parents.
Foster family	A family where one or more of the children is legally a temporary (either for a few days or as long as the child's entire childhood) member of the household. This includes kinship care families where there is a legal arrangement for the child to be cared for by relatives of one of the parents.
Gay or Lesbian family	A family where one or both of the parents' sexual orientation is gay or lesbian.

Immigrant family	A family where parents have immigrated to the U.S. as adults in which children may or may not be immigrants.
Migrant family	A family that moves regularly to places where they have employment.
Nuclear family	A family consisting of a married man & woman and their biological children.
Single parent family	A family of either a father or a mother who is singly responsible for the raising of a child by birth or adoption, by choice or by life circumstances.
Transnational family	Families living in more than one country in which the family may spend part of each year in their country of origin returning to the U.S. on a regular basis. The child may spend time being cared for by different family members in each country.

Note: Adapted from Edwards (2009).

**APPENDIX B:**

**STATE POLICIES ON PARENT-SCHOOL COLLABORATIONS**

<b>S t a t e</b>	<b>Source</b>	<b>Policy Statement</b>
A K	Alaska Department of Education (n.d.). Standards for Alaska's Teachers. Retrieved from <a href="http://www.eed.state.ak.us/standards/pdf/teacher.pdf">http://www.eed.state.ak.us/standards/pdf/teacher.pdf</a>	A teacher works as a partner with parents, families and the community.
A L	Alabama Department of Education (n.d.) Alabama Quality Teaching Standards. Retrieved from <a href="http://alex.state.al.us/leadership/alqts_full.pdf">http://alex.state.al.us/leadership/alqts_full.pdf</a>	Key Indicators: Ability to involve parents and/or families as active partners in planning and supporting student learning; Ability to communicate and collaborate effectively with colleagues, students, parents, guardians, and significant agency personnel who are included and valued equally as partners.
A R	Arkansas Department of Education (n.d.). Arkansas Teaching Standards. Retrieved from <a href="http://www.arkansased.org/public/userfiles/HR_and_Educator_Effectiveness/Educator_Prep/Arkansas_Teaching_Standards_2012.pdf">http://www.arkansased.org/public/userfiles/HR_and_Educator_Effectiveness/Educator_Prep/Arkansas_Teaching_Standards_2012.pdf</a>	The teacher seeks appropriate leadership roles and opportunities to take responsibility for student learning, to collaborate with learners, families, colleagues, other school professionals, and community members to ensure learner growth, and to advance the profession.

A Z	Scottsdale Unified School District (n.d.). Arizona's Professional Teacher Standards. Retrieved from <a href="http://btc.susd.curriculum.schoolfusion.us/modules/locker/files/get_group_file.phtml?gid=1015687&amp;fid=7230239">http://btc.susd.curriculum.schoolfusion.us/modules/locker/files/get_group_file.phtml?gid=1015687&amp;fid=7230239</a>	Standard 5: The teacher collaborates with colleagues, parents, the community and other agencies to design, implement, and support learning programs that develop students' abilities to meet Arizona's academic standards and transition from school to work or post-secondary education.
C A	California Commission on Teacher Credentialing and the California Department of Education (1998). California Standards for the teaching profession. Retrieved from <a href="http://redlandsusd.net/modules/groups/homepagefiles/cms/14429/File/Human%20Resources/california_standards_for_the_teaching_professional.pdf">http://redlandsusd.net/modules/groups/homepagefiles/cms/14429/File/Human%20Resources/california_standards_for_the_teaching_professional.pdf</a>	Strand 6: Working with families to improve professional practice
C O	Colorado Department of Education (n.d.). Colorado Professional Teaching Standards. Retrieved from <a href="http://www.cde.state.co.us/EducatorEffectiveness/downloads/Council%20Meeting%20Documents/1.28.11/1.28_Mtg_Attachment_1-CO_Teacher_Standards_and_Elements_Jan_30.pdf">http://www.cde.state.co.us/EducatorEffectiveness/downloads/Council%20Meeting%20Documents/1.28.11/1.28_Mtg_Attachment_1-CO_Teacher_Standards_and_Elements_Jan_30.pdf</a>	Teachers work collaboratively with the families and significant adults in the lives of their students.
C T	Connecticut State Department of Education (1999). Connecticut's Common Core of Teaching. Retrieved from <a href="http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/educatorstandards/Board_Approved_CCT_2-3-2010.pdf">http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/educatorstandards/Board_Approved_CCT_2-3-2010.pdf</a>	Collaborating with colleagues, administrators, students and their families to develop and sustain a positive school climate
D C	Office of the State Superintendent of Education (2013). District of Columbia Professional Standards for Teaching. Retrieved from <a href="http://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page_content/attachments/DC%20Professional%20Teaching%20Standards%20%28Final%29_1%2029%2013_1.pdf">http://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page_content/attachments/DC%20Professional%20Teaching%20Standards%20%28Final%29_1%2029%2013_1.pdf</a>	Teachers work collaboratively with all school personnel, families, and the broader community to gain a deep understanding of teaching in an urban environment and to create a professional learning community that supports the improvement of teaching, learning, and student achievement.

D E	Delaware Department of Education (2012). The Delaware professional teaching standards. Retrieved from <a href="http://www.doe.k12.de.us/csa/dpasii/specialist/DPASISpecApp.pdf">http://www.doe.k12.de.us/csa/dpasii/specialist/DPASISpecApp.pdf</a>	The teacher understands the role of the school in the community and collaborates with colleagues, parents/guardians, and other members of the community to support student learning and well-being.
F L	Florida Department of State (2011). Florida Administrative Register & Florida Administrative Code Rule 6A-5.065: The Educator Accomplished Practices. Retrieved from <a href="https://www.flrules.org/gateway/ruleNo.asp?id=6A-5.065">https://www.flrules.org/gateway/ruleNo.asp?id=6A-5.065</a>	The effective educator consistently collaborates with the home, school and larger communities to foster communication and to support student learning and continuous improvement.
G A	N/A	N/A
H I	Hawai'i Teacher Standards Board (n.d.). Teacher Performance Standards: Strand 10 - Leadership and Collaboration. Retrieved from <a href="http://www.htsb.org/standards/teacher/teachstandard-10/">http://www.htsb.org/standards/teacher/teachstandard-10/</a>	The teacher seeks appropriate leadership roles and opportunities to take responsibility for student learning, to collaborate with learners, families, colleagues, other school professionals, and community members to ensure learner growth and to advance the profession.
I A	Iowa Department of Education (n.d.). Iowa Teaching Standards and Criteria. Retrieved from <a href="http://educateiowa.gov/index.php?option=com_content&amp;view=article&amp;id=1684&amp;Itemid=3309">http://educateiowa.gov/index.php?option=com_content&amp;view=article&amp;id=1684&amp;Itemid=3309</a>	The teacher collaborates with students, families, colleagues, and communities to enhance student learning.
I D	Idaho State Department of Education (2010). Idaho standards for initial certification of professional school personnel. Retrieved from <a href="http://www.boardofed.idaho.gov/incorporated_documents/documents/Idaho%20Standards%20for%20Initial%20Certification%20of%20Professional%20School%20Personnel%20-%20approved%20November%202017,%202010_edit.pdf">http://www.boardofed.idaho.gov/incorporated_documents/documents/Idaho%20Standards%20for%20Initial%20Certification%20of%20Professional%20School%20Personnel%20-%20approved%20November%202017,%202010_edit.pdf</a>	Partnerships: The teacher interacts in a professional, effective manner with colleagues, parents, another members of the community to support student's learning and well-being. Performance indicator: The teacher actively seeks to develop productive, cooperative, and collaborative partnerships with parents/guardians in support of student learning and well-being.

I N	Indiana Department of Education (2010). Indiana Content Standards for Educators - Exceptional Needs-Mild. Retrieved from <a href="http://www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/educator-effectiveness/exceptional-needs-mild.pdf">http://www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/educator-effectiveness/exceptional-needs-mild.pdf</a>	Teachers...have...the ability to communicate and collaborate with students...and their families to help students achieve desired learning outcomes, including students from diverse cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds.
K S	Kansas State Department of Education (n.d.). Regulations and Standards for Kansas Educators: 2011-2012. Retrieved from <a href="http://www.ksde.org/Portals/0/Licensure%20Documents/CertHandbook8-2011%20FINAL.pdf">http://www.ksde.org/Portals/0/Licensure%20Documents/CertHandbook8-2011%20FINAL.pdf</a>	Certification requirements in Professional Education: The educator establishes respectful and productive relationships with parents or guardians from diverse home and community situations and seeks to develop cooperative partnerships in support of learning and well-being for all students.
K Y	Kentucky Education Professional Standards Board (2008). Kentucky Teacher Standards. Retrieved from <a href="http://www.kyepsb.net/teacherprep/standards.asp">http://www.kyepsb.net/teacherprep/standards.asp</a>	The teacher collaborates with colleagues, parents, and other agencies to design, implement, and support learning programs that develop student abilities to use communication skills, apply core concepts, become self-sufficient individuals, become responsible team members, think and solve problems, and integrate knowledge.
L A	Louisiana Department of Education (n.d.) Louisiana Components of Effective Teaching. Retrieved from <a href="http://www.louisianaschools.net/lde/uploads/5564.pdf">http://www.louisianaschools.net/lde/uploads/5564.pdf</a>	The teacher creates partnerships with parents/caregivers and colleagues.
M A	Department of Education, State of Massachusetts (2012). Regulations for Educator Licensure and Preparation Program approval. Retrieved from <a href="http://www.doe.mass.edu/lawsregs/603cmr7.html?section=08">http://www.doe.mass.edu/lawsregs/603cmr7.html?section=08</a>	Works actively to involve parents in their child's academic activities and performance, and communicates clearly with them.
M D	Maryland State Department of Education (n.d.). Maryland Teacher Professional Development Standards. Retrieved from <a href="http://mdk12.org/instruction/professional_development/teachers_standards.html">http://mdk12.org/instruction/professional_development/teachers_standards.html</a>	Effective professional development ensures that all teachers have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to involve families and other community members as active partners in their children's education

M I	Michigan State Board of Education (2008). Professional Standards for Michigan Teachers. Retrieved from <a href="http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/SBE_approved_PSMT_May_13_2008/coverpg_258601_7.doc">www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/SBE_approved_PSMT_May_13_2008/coverpg_258601_7.doc</a>	Involve and work effectively with parents/guardians and implement school-wide parent involvement plans to maximize opportunities for student achievement and success
M N	Department of Education, State of Maine. (2007). Maine's Ten (10) Initial Teacher Certification Standards. Retrieved from <a href="http://www.maine.gov/education/aarbec/tenstandards.html">http://www.maine.gov/education/aarbec/tenstandards.html</a>	Describe ways to proactively develop partnerships with parents and guardians in support of students' learning and well being.
M N	Office of the Revisor of Statutes (2009). Minnesota Administrative Rules: Standards of Effective Practice for Teachers. Retrieved from <a href="https://www.revisor.mn.gov/rules/?id=8710.2000">https://www.revisor.mn.gov/rules/?id=8710.2000</a>	The teacher must: establish productive relationships with parents and guardians in support of student learning and well-being.
M O	Missouri Department of Elementary & Secondary Education (2013). Teacher Standards - Missouri's Educator Evaluation System. Retrieved from <a href="http://dese.mo.gov/eq/documents/TeacherStandards.pdf">http://dese.mo.gov/eq/documents/TeacherStandards.pdf</a>	Strand #9 Professional Collaboration: The teacher has effective working relationships with students, parents, school colleagues, and community members.
M S		
M T	Montana Office of Public Instruction (2009). Montana Professional Educator Preparation Program Standards and Procedures Manual. Retrieved from <a href="http://opi.mt.gov/pdf/Accred/09PEPPSManual.pdf">http://opi.mt.gov/pdf/Accred/09PEPPSManual.pdf</a>	The (teacher preparation) program requires that successful candidates: demonstrate the ability to effectively collaborate with families, other educators, related service providers, and personnel from community agencies in culturally responsive ways, and promote and advocate the learning and well-being of individuals with exceptional learning needs.
N C	North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards Commission (n.d.). North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards. Retrieved from <a href="http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/humanresources/district-personnel/evaluation/standardsteacher.pdf">http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/humanresources/district-personnel/evaluation/standardsteacher.pdf</a>	Teachers improve communication and collaboration between the school and the home and community in order to promote trust and understanding and build partnerships with all segments of the school community.



N D	North Dakota Educational Standards and Practices Board (2012). Program Approval Standards. Retrieved from <a href="http://www.nd.gov/espb/progapproval/docs/ProgramApprovalStandards.pdf">http://www.nd.gov/espb/progapproval/docs/ProgramApprovalStandards.pdf</a>	The teacher candidate collaborates with families communities, colleagues and other professionals to promote learner growth and development
N E	Nebraska Department of Education (2011). Teacher Standards. Retrieved from <a href="http://www.education.ne.gov/standardssurvey/Documents/TeacherStandards.pdf">http://www.education.ne.gov/standardssurvey/Documents/TeacherStandards.pdf</a>	The teacher contributes to and promotes the vision of the school and collaborates with students, families colleagues, and the larger community to share responsibility for the growth of student learning, development, and achievement. Example Indicators: The teacher collaborates with students, parents, families, and the community to create meaningful partnerships in the learning process.
N H	Department of Education, State of New Hampshire. (2012). Administrative rules, Chapter 500. Retrieved from <a href="http://www.gencourt.state.nh.us/rules/state_agencies/ed500.html">http://www.gencourt.state.nh.us/rules/state_agencies/ed500.html</a>	Collaborate and plan with others, including, but not limited to, parents, general education teachers, related service providers, school nurses, paraeducators, and appropriate members of the community, to develop IEPs that reflect goals based on the content of the general education curriculum
N J	New Jersey Department of Education (2004). New Jersey Professional Standards for Teachers. Retrieved from <a href="http://www.state.nj.us/education/profdev/profstand/standards.pdf">http://www.state.nj.us/education/profdev/profstand/standards.pdf</a>	Institute parent/family involvement practices that support meaningful communication, parenting skills, enriched student learning, volunteer and decision-making opportunities at school and collaboration to strengthen the teaching and learning environment of the school.
N M	University of New Mexico (2013). NM Teacher Competencies. Retrieved from <a href="http://teachnm.org/experienced-teachers/nm-teacher-competencies.html">http://teachnm.org/experienced-teachers/nm-teacher-competencies.html</a>	The teacher works productively with colleagues, parents and community members (At the Master Teacher Level, works collaboratively and creatively with colleagues, parents, and community members regarding educational matters).

N V	State of Nevada (n.d.). Nevada Revised Statutes, Chapter 391 - Personnel. Establishment of statewide performance evaluation system by State Board (NRS 391-465). Retrieved from <a href="http://www.leg.state.nv.us/NRS/NRS-391.html">http://www.leg.state.nv.us/NRS/NRS-391.html</a>	The statewide performance evaluation system must: include an evaluation of whether the teacher or administrator employs practices and strategies to involve and engage the parents and families of pupils.
N Y	<a href="http://www.highered.nysed.gov/tcert/pdf/teachingstandards9122011.pdf">http://www.highered.nysed.gov/tcert/pdf/teachingstandards9122011.pdf</a>	Teachers communicate and collaborate with families, guardians, and caregivers to enhance student development and success.
O H	Ohio State Board of Education (2007). Standards for Ohio Educators. Retrieved from <a href="http://esb.ode.state.oh.us/PDF/Standards_Ohio_Educators.pdf">http://esb.ode.state.oh.us/PDF/Standards_Ohio_Educators.pdf</a>	Teachers collaborate and communicate with students, parents, other educators, administrators and the community to support student learning; teachers share responsibility with parents and caregivers to support student learning, emotional and physical development and mental health
O K	Oklahoma State Department of Education (2009). Full (Subject Matter) Competencies for Licensure and Certification - November 2009. Retrieved from <a href="http://ok.gov/sde/sites/ok.gov.sde/files/documents/files/Competencies.pdf">http://ok.gov/sde/sites/ok.gov.sde/files/documents/files/Competencies.pdf</a>	The candidate for licensure and certification (in Special Education) collaborates and consults regularly with families, other team members, and agencies to enhance and support children's learning and development; understands and demonstrates knowledge of the IFSP/IEP process by using assessment results, in partnership with the family and other team members, to develop the IFSP/IEP.
O R	Teacher Standards and Practices Commission (n.d.). Standards for competent and ethical performance of Oregon educators. Retrieved from <a href="http://arcweb.sos.state.or.us/pages/rules/oars_500/oar_584/584_020.html">http://arcweb.sos.state.or.us/pages/rules/oars_500/oar_584/584_020.html</a>	The competent educator works effectively with others - students, staff, parents, and patrons.
P A		

R I	Department of Education, State of Rhode Island (2007). The Rhode Island Professional teaching standards. Retrieved from <a href="http://www.ride.ri.gov/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/Teachers-and-Administrators-Excellent-Educators/Educator-Certification/Cert-main-page/RIPTS-with-preamble.pdf">http://www.ride.ri.gov/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/Teachers-and-Administrators-Excellent-Educators/Educator-Certification/Cert-main-page/RIPTS-with-preamble.pdf</a>	Develop relationships with students and their families to support learning.
S C	<a href="http://ed.sc.gov/agency/programs-services/50/documents/InTASCStandardsCrosswalk.pdf">http://ed.sc.gov/agency/programs-services/50/documents/InTASCStandardsCrosswalk.pdf</a>	
S D	South Dakota Department of Education (2011). Teacher Standards and Evaluation Work Group. Retrieved from ( <a href="http://doe.sd.gov/secretary/teacher_standards.aspx">http://doe.sd.gov/secretary/teacher_standards.aspx</a> )	On March 25, 2011 the state adopted Charlotte Danielson's "Framework for Teaching" as the state's standards for teaching: "The teacher seeks appropriate leadership roles and opportunities to take responsibility for student learning, to collaborate with learners, families, colleagues, other school professionals, and community members to ensure learner growth and to advance the profession" (Retrieved from <a href="http://www.danielsongroup.org/ckeditor/ckfinder/userfiles/files/Danielson%20Framework%20correlation%20with%20InTASC.pdf">http://www.danielsongroup.org/ckeditor/ckfinder/userfiles/files/Danielson%20Framework%20correlation%20with%20InTASC.pdf</a> )
T N	Tennessee Department of Education (n.d.). Tennessee Licensure Standards and Induction Guidelines. Retrieved from <a href="http://www.tennessee.gov/education/lic/doc/accttchlicstds.pdf">http://www.tennessee.gov/education/lic/doc/accttchlicstds.pdf</a>	Candidates understand and value the role of parents and other important family members as children's primary teachers. They apply family centered approaches and partnerships with families in children's development and learning.
T X	Texas Education Agency (2011). Texas Examinations of Educator Standards: Preparation Manual. Retrieved from <a href="http://www.texas.ets.org/assets/pdf/testprep_manuals/160_ppr_ec12.pdf">http://www.texas.ets.org/assets/pdf/testprep_manuals/160_ppr_ec12.pdf</a>	The beginning teacher engages families, parents, guardians and other legal caregivers in various aspects of the educational program

U T	Utah State Office of Education (2005). Utah Professional Teacher Standards. Retrieved from <a href="http://www.schools.utah.gov/cert/New-Teacher-Entry-Years-Enhancement/UtahProfTeacherStandards.aspx">http://www.schools.utah.gov/cert/New-Teacher-Entry-Years-Enhancement/UtahProfTeacherStandards.aspx</a>	Engage families as partners in learning.
V A	Virginia Department of Education (2011). Virginia standards for the professional practice of teachers. Retrieved from <a href="http://www.doe.virginia.gov/teaching/regulations/uniform_performance_stds_2011.pdf">http://www.doe.virginia.gov/teaching/regulations/uniform_performance_stds_2011.pdf</a>	Teachers work in partnership with families to promote student learning at home and in the school.
V T	Department of Education, State of Vermont. (2003). Five standards for Vermont educators. Retrieved from <a href="http://education.vermont.gov/documents/five_standards_03.pdf">http://education.vermont.gov/documents/five_standards_03.pdf</a>	The educator engages the family and the community in partnerships to promote student learning.
W A	Washington State Legislature (2013). Washington Administrative Code Chapter 181-79A. Standards for teacher, administrator and educational staff associate certification. Retrieved from <a href="http://apps.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=181-79A&amp;full=true">http://apps.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=181-79A&amp;full=true</a>	A successful candidate for the teacher professional certificate shall demonstrate: informing, involving, and collaborating with families and community members as partners in each student's educational process including using information about student achievement and performance.
W I	Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (n.d.). Teacher Standards. Retrieved from <a href="http://tepd.dpi.wi.gov/resources/teacher-standards">http://tepd.dpi.wi.gov/resources/teacher-standards</a>	The teacher fosters relationships with school colleagues, parents, and agencies in the larger community to support pupil learning and well-being and acts with integrity, fairness and in an ethical manner.
W V	West Virginia Department of Education (n.d.). West Virginia Professional Teaching Standards. Retrieved from <a href="http://wvde.state.wv.us/teachwv/profstandards.html">http://wvde.state.wv.us/teachwv/profstandards.html</a>	The teacher works collaboratively with the principal, colleagues, parents, students and the community to develop and sustain school activities that make meaningful connections among school, families and community.
W Y	State of Wyoming. Administrative Rules - AR 08-086, Chapter 3: Certificate Requirements. Retrieved from <a href="http://legisweb.state.wy.us/ARULES/2008/AR08-086pro%20teaching.htm">http://legisweb.state.wy.us/ARULES/2008/AR08-086pro%20teaching.htm</a>	The teacher candidate is knowledgeable about all students and parental rights within the federal, state and local legal responsibilities and legislation;

		competent in fostering relationships between colleagues, parents and community relationships to promote all students' learning and development.
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APPENDIX C:

CROSSWALK OF CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS

Themes	Mohr & Spekman (1994)	Iyer (2003)	deFur (2012)	Keen (2007)	Clarke et al (2010)	Turnbull et al (2006)	Pires (2008)	Blue-Banning et al (2004)
Effective communication & information sharing	Communication quality & information sharing	Communication systems	Communicate honestly and openly, sharing & seeking information; Share a common language	Open communication and honesty	Effective, bidirectional communication	Communication	Effective communication vehicles	Communication

Themes	Mohr & Spekman (1994)	Iyer (2003)	deFur (2012)	Keen (2007)	Clarke et al (2010)	Turnbull et al (2006)	Pires (2008)	Blue-Banning et al (2004)
Shared objectives	(Note 1)	Shared objectives	Common vision & clear goals	Mutually agreed-upon goals	Share same goals	(Note 2)	Shared vision based on common values; shared outcomes; clear goals, objectives & benchmarks; Clear population focus	(Note 3)
Mutual trust	Trust	(Note 4)	Trust one another in carrying out activities	Mutual trust	Trust	Trust	(Note 5)	Trust
Shared problem solving	Joint problem solving; avoidance; smoothing over or severe resolution tactics.		Solve problems jointly		Resolving conflict	Advocacy	Conflict resolution	(Note 8)

Themes	Mohr & Spekman (1994)	lyer (2003)	deFur (2012)	Keen (2007)	Clarke et al (2010)	Turnbull et al (2006)	Pires (2008)	Blue-Banning et al (2004)
Shared responsibilities	Coordination	Allocation of responsibility	Share responsibilities; support one another's efforts; Share risks; Share successes; Use one another's strengths & compensate for one another's limitations		Share responsibility	(Note 6)	Structure; allocation of responsibilities; accountability	(Note 7)
Shared power			Share power & decision making	Shared planning & decision making	Equality	Equality		Equality
Commitment	Commitment				Commitment	Commitment		Commitment



Themes	Mohr & Spekman (1994)	Iyer (2003)	deFur (2012)	Keen (2007)	Clarke et al (2010)	Turnbull et al (2006)	Pires (2008)	Blue-Banning et al (2004)
Sensitivity				Awareness of individual and family needs	Sensitivity (social, cultural, historical, linguistic)	(Note 9)	Culturally & Linguistically competent processes	
Participation	Participation	Participation	Engage in activities to achieve a common goal					
Time		Time frame			Continuity		Opportunity for reflection; Adequate time.	
Skill sets					Competence	Professional competence		Skills

## Notes

- 1 Coordinated actions are directed at mutual objectives.
- 2 Implied within their discussions on trust and advocacy.
- 3 Implied in their discussion on commitment.
- 4 Included in discussion on participation.
- 5 Discussed under the topic of effective collaboration.
- 6 Caution against sharing more power and responsibility than families have the time, energy or desire to handle.
- 7 Implied under the topic of equality in which professionals contribute responsibilities and partners work on "common ground" (p. 177).
- 8 Implied in their treatment of the indicators of equality in partnership.
- 9 Discussed under the topic of respect.

**APPENDIX D:**

**PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT FLYER**

**Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders**

**Research Participants Needed**

If you are a parent of a child with ASD,  
and that child is in grades 6, 7, or 8

You may be eligible to participate in this  
study.

This study explores parent perspectives of  
belonging when working with their child's  
school.

As a participant, you will be asked to participate in:

- One 60 to 90 minute individual interview  
and
- One 60 to 90 minutes focus group interview

To volunteer for this study, please contact:

**Michael Riley at**

**(813) 205-3807 or [mriley@usf.edu](mailto:mriley@usf.edu)**

Your personal information will be treated in complete  
confidence.

(813) 205-3807  
[mriley@usf.edu](mailto:mriley@usf.edu)

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**APPENDIX E:**  
**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL**



RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE  
Institutional Review Boards, FWA No. 00001669  
12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., MDC035 • Tampa, FL 33612-4799  
(813) 974-5638 • FAX(813)974-7091

12/2/2013

Michael Riley, M.A.  
Special Education  
4202 East Fowler Ave., EDU105  
Tampa, FL 33620

**RE: Expedited Approval for Initial Review**

IRB#: Pro00014929

Title: Parents of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders Perspectives of Belonging in Parent-School Partnerships

**Study Approval Period: 11/27/2013 to 11/27/2014**

Dear Mr. Riley:

On 11/27/2013, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and **APPROVED** the above application and all documents outlined below.

**Approved Item(s):**

**Protocol Document(s):**

[Dissertation Proposal MR\\_11\\_21\\_13](#)

**Consent/Assent Document(s)\*:**

[Adult informed consent minimal risk v1 10\\_21\\_13.pdf](#)

\*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent document(s) are only valid during the approval period indicated at the top of the form(s).

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review categories:

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval by an amendment.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kristen Salomon', followed by a horizontal line.

Kristen Salomon, Ph.D., Vice Chairperson  
USF Institutional Review Board

**APPENDIX F:**  
**RELATIONAL MAPPING TASKS SCRIPT AND TEMPLATES**

“This is a study of parents experiences of belonging in the parent-school relationship. (Display the semantic map of belonging in (Figure 7). “One definition of belonging is: a feeling one has about his or her personal involvement with and acceptance by others that leads to a reciprocal membership status.”

“Do you have any questions about this definition?”

“Here is an example of a relational map.” (Display Figure E-1).

“A relational map can show how close a relationship you have with other people. This relational map shows how closely the relationships are between myself (at the center) and others with whom I work with regarding my child’s education. For example, notice that I work very closely with Ms. Rupert, my child’s teacher, but not very closely with the school librarian.

“I’d like you to complete a relational map that shows the other people who work with you, and how closely each person is in working with you, regarding your child’s education.”

“Here is a blank relational map template.” (Display Figure E-2). “Notice that I have indicate that you are at the center of this map.” (Pause.)

“Now, think about all the people that work with you for your child’s education.” (Pause.)

“In the first circle outside the word ‘me’, you can write the name or job title of anyone who works very closely with you regarding your child’s education. In the next circle, you may write the name or job title of those who may work with, but not closely as those in the circle closest to you. In the third and fourth circles, continue listing persons who work with you regarding your child’s education, but place them in circles that indicate their closeness in a working relationship with you regarding your child’s education.”

“Do you have any questions?” (Pause and respond to any questions)

“You will have approximately 10 minutes to complete the relational map. I will provide you with writing material to complete the relational map.” (Present writing materials.)

“Please feel free to ask for assistance or clarification at any time. If there are no further questions, you may begin.”

---

(Upon completion of relational map, introduce comfort level map, as follows).

“Here is an example of another type of relational map, called a comfort level map.”  
(Display Figure E-3).

“A comfort level map can show how comfortable you feel in working with each person you work with regarding your child’s education from very comfortable to least comfortable. For example, you may work very closely with someone as represented in your first relational map, but not feel very comfortable in working with them. On the other hand, you may not work very closely with someone as represented in your relational map, but feel very comfortable in working with them.

“I’d like you to complete a comfort level map that shows each of the people you identified on your relational map and how comfortable you feel in working with each person from most comfortable to least comfortable.”

“Here is a blank comfort level map template.” (Display Figure E-4). “Notice that I have indicate that you are one end of this map.” (Pause.)

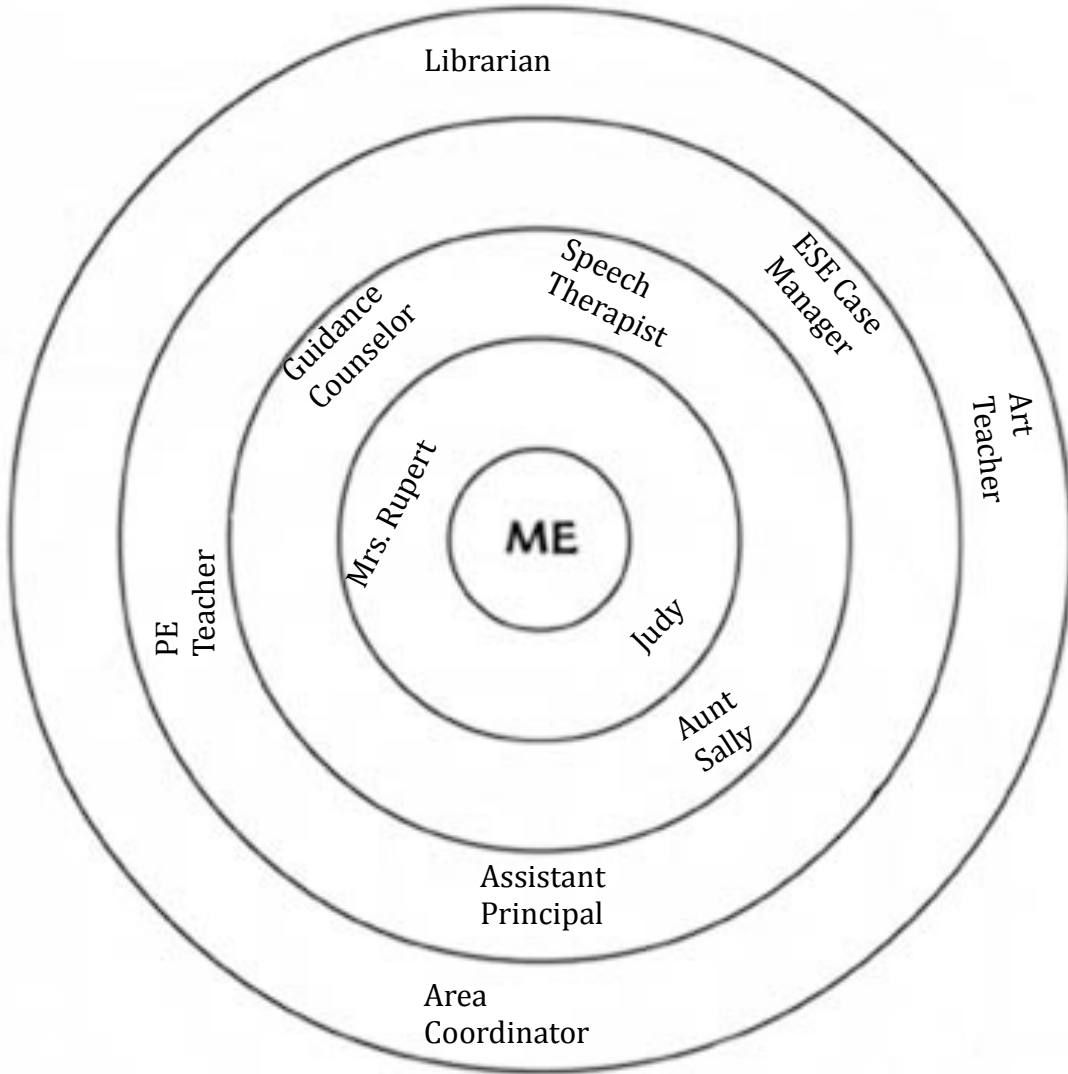
“Now, think about how comfortable you feel in working with each the people you identified in your relational map.” (Pause.) I’d like you to complete this map by writing the name or job title of each person from your relational map in order of how comfortable you feel in working with that person from most comfortable to least comfortable.



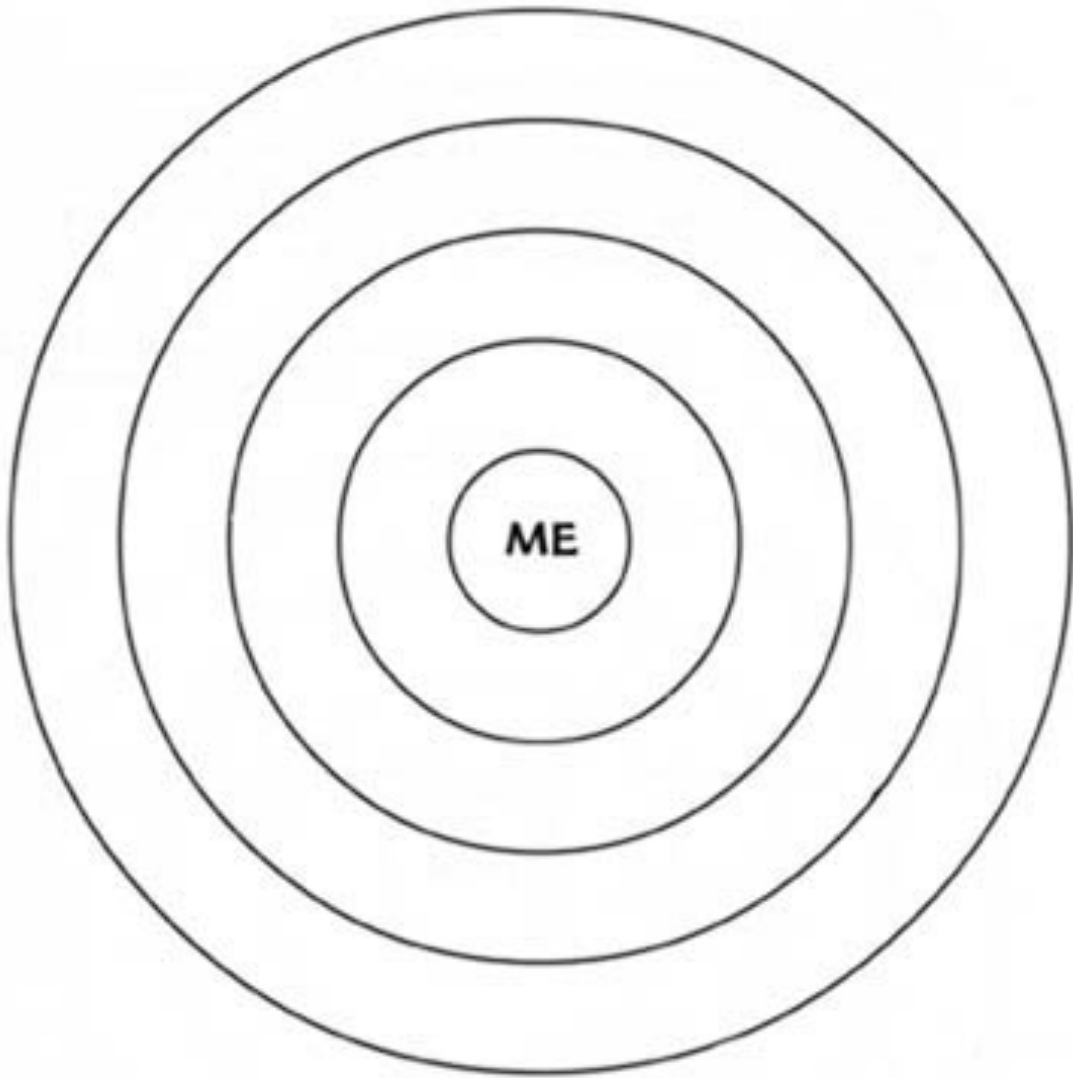
“Do you have any questions?” (Pause and respond to any questions)

“You will have approximately 10 minutes to complete the relational map.

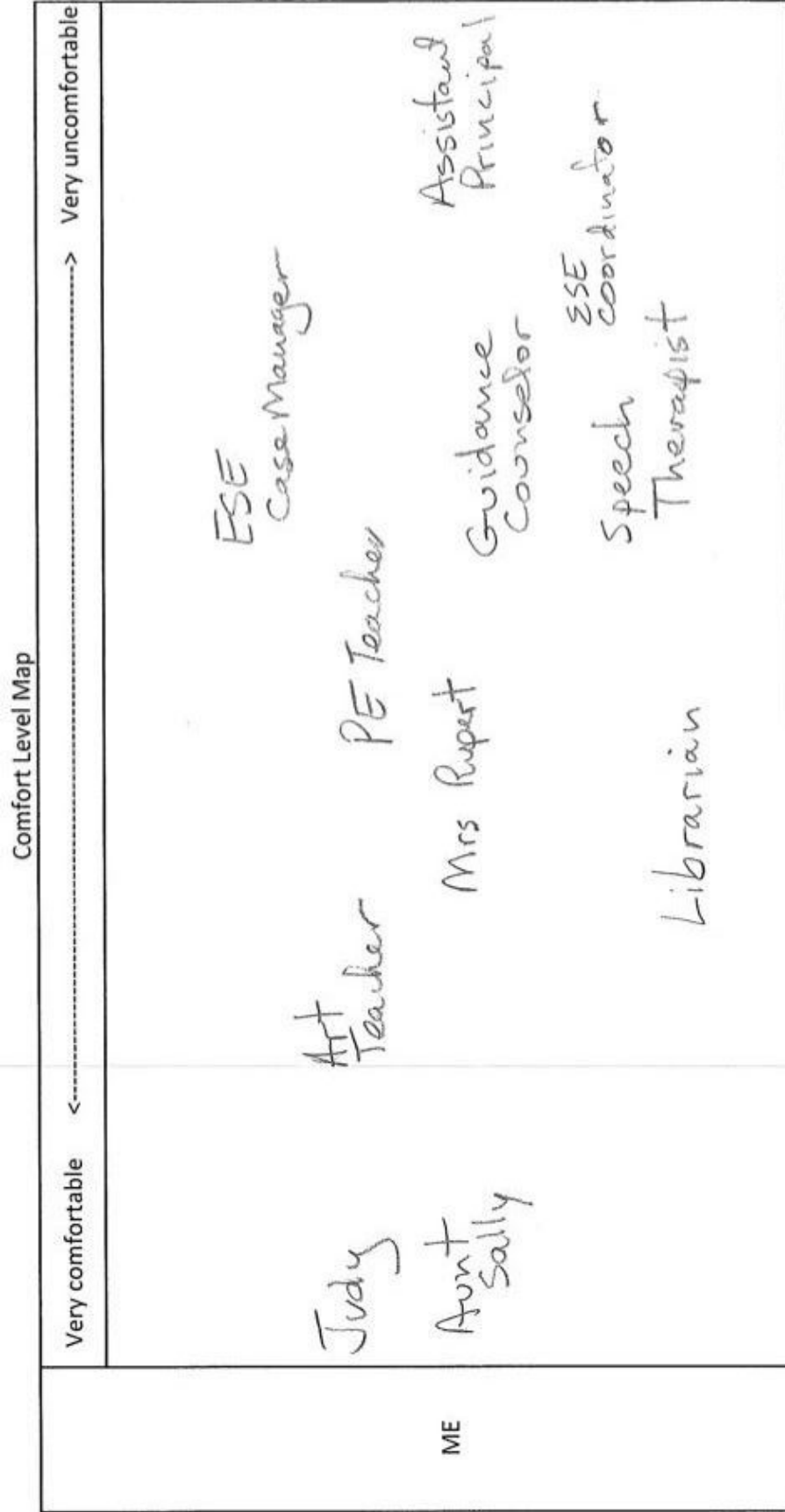
“Please feel free to ask for assistance or clarification at any time. If there are no further questions, you may begin.”



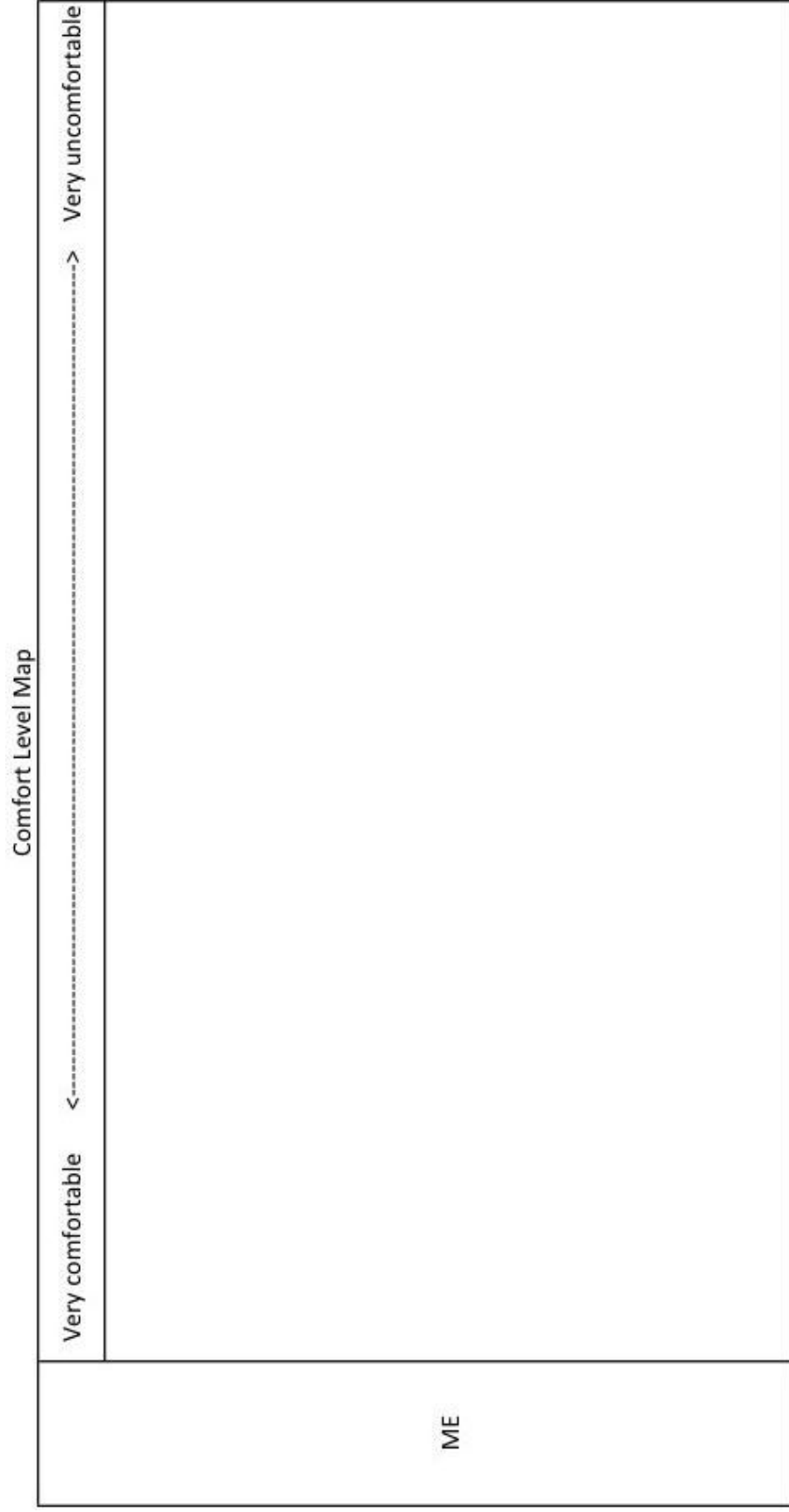
**Figure E-1.** Example of a relational map.



**Figure E-2.** Relational map template.



**Figure E-3.** Example of a comfort level map



**Figure E-4.** Comfort level map template.

## **APPENDIX G:**

### **SEMI-STRUCTURED INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Tell me about the relationships you have with the people you identified in the relational map. Who are they and how to they work with you?
2. Can you tell me why you placed those people on the relational map as you did?
3. Do you consider any of these relationships to be 'partnerships'
  - a. If so, why?
  - b. If not, why not?
4. What do you add to these partnerships?
5. How do you feel when you meet your child's education support team at school?
  - a. Can you tell me how your child's education support team at school shows they value you as a person?
    - i. Values your ideas?
    - ii. Values your concerns?
  - b. How do you feel about speaking up if you do not agree with or do not understand what another member of the team is saying?
  - c. How do you feel when you are meeting with the team?
  - d. What do you think members of the team would say about you outside of your presence?
  - e. What do you find yourself saying others about how you feel when meeting with the team?

6. When I say the word “belonging”, can you describe what that word mean to you?
7. Can you tell me about a time when you felt like you belonged as a partner with your child’s school?
8. Can you tell me about a time when you didn’t feel like you belonged as a partner with your child’s school?
9. Now, I’d like you to tell me a story about yourself in the future. Can you tell me a story about what it would look and feel like to belong in an ideal partnership with your child’s school?

## **APPENDIX H:**

### **SEMI-STRUCTURED FOCUS GROUP AND FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. How important is it for parents to feel a sense of belonging when working with their child's school?
2. Have you experienced a sense of belonging in working with your child's teachers or other school personnel?
3. In your experience, what do parents contribute to parent-school partnerships?
4. In your experience, what do teachers, administrators and other school personnel contribute to parent-school partnerships?
5. In your experience, what has your child's school done to make you feel as though you belong and are a member of your child's educational support team?
6. Thinking back to your experiences in working with your child's school, what could schools do to make you feel a stronger sense of belonging and membership as a member of your child's educational support team?



**APPENDIX I:**

**COMBINED SUMMARY OF PARENT PROXIMITY AND COMFORT LEVEL MAPS**

Parent	Family				School based direct/routine service providers						School based indirect/occasional service providers						School / District Administration					Non-School Based Service providers				
	Spouse	Immediate family	Other family	Close friends	SPED Teacher	GENED Teacher	Paraprofessional	School SLP	School OT	School Behavior Specialist	ESE Case Manager	ESE Specialist	Guidance Counselor	School Psychologist	School Social Worker	SRO	Principal	Assistant Principal	School Admin Staff	District Administrator	Physician / Neurologist	SLP	OT	Tutor	Recreation Therapist	Professional Advocate
1	1: A				1: A		3: A	*			1: A															
2	1: A				1: A		2: A	*			1: A						*	2: A								
3	1: A		3: A	3: A		2: A	*	*			2: A						3: A			1: A	1: A	2: A	3: A		5: C	
4	1: A					2: A				3: B	5: F	4: D	4: B	5: F			5: F								2: A	
5		1: A	2: A		1: B	4: F	4: F	*										4: F		4: F			2: B	3: B		
6	1: A	3: C	2: A		3: C	4: D			1: A	2: B		5: F			5: F	5: F	2: B		2: A	3: B						

Proximity codes:

- 1 Work very closely together
- 2 Work closely together
- 3 Work together
- 4 Work together occasionally
- 5 Work together rarely

Comfort Level Codes

- A Very comfortable
- B Comfortable
- C Neither comfortable/uncomfortable
- D Uncomfortable
- F Very uncomfortable

Note:

- \* Spoken of during interview, but not identified in relational maps.