

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH REPORT

Parental Involvement:

A Qualitative Study

of a Unique Charter School

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Recent educational reforms have highlighted parental involvement as an important part of school improvement. Goal eight of Goals 2000 describes a prevailing viewpoint, "Every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children" (in Nakagawa, 2000). In 1994 the Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act was reauthorized and titled Improving America's Schools Act (IASA); it requires that all schools receiving Title I funds produce family-school compacts, agreements between the school and families, that define parental involvement and educational objectives and responsibilities (Nakagawa). California's Family-School Partnership Act (1994) allows parents, grandparents and guardians to take up to 40 hours off from work each year in order to be involved in their children's schools (Nakagawa).

Research has pointed to a link between parental involvement and student achievement in school, however the "how" of parental involvement continues to be a challenge (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Seefeldt, 1985; Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1996; in Peña, 2000; Gutman & Midgley, 2000). Epstein (1987) and Henderson (1988)

report that schools that favor parental involvement outperform schools with little parental involvement (in Peña, 2000).

Although most of the research I found pointed to a positive correlation between parental involvement and student achievement, Fine (1993) found that parental involvement, in and of itself, is not sufficient to increase student achievement. She points out that schools in low-income neighborhoods need to be restructured for student achievement to occur. She joins Comer, Wheelock, and Epstein (in Fine) in asserting, "it is not enough for families to become more like schools; schools and districts must also become more like families." Another study pointed to the importance of training school staff to work effectively with families (Kessler-Sklar & Baker, 2000). Epstein and Becker's research has shown that, "in the absence of training not all teachers are effective at engaging parents in assisting their children's learning" (Kessler-Sklar & Baker).

In a 1996 survey, teachers were asked to identify the biggest problem facing schools. The number one answer identified by teachers was lack of parental support (Langdon, 1997 in Nakagawa, 2000). However, parental involvement, although often seen as the cure-all for what is wrong in education (Nakagawa) is often unsuccessful. Fine (1993) argues that, despite prevailing opinions regarding the importance of parental involvement, "Parents enter the contested public sphere of public education typically with neither resources nor power. They are usually not

welcomed, by schools, to the critical and serious work of rethinking educational structures and practices." (p. 682). Epstein (1996) argues that the current question facing educators is not, "Are families important for student success in school?" but, "If families are important for children's development and school success, *how* can schools help all families conduct the activities that will benefit their children?" (p. 213).

In a relatively small community in Southern California is the Institute for Increased Achievement (IIA)<sup>1</sup>, a charter school that is based on a home-school model. This k-12 school serves just under 500 students on two campuses. Its ratio of male to female students is approximately 50:50 and the median family income is just under \$40,000 a year. Parental education levels range from those who did not finish high school (less than 1%) to parents with graduate degrees (9%). Most parents attended some college (43%). Most of the families who have children enrolled at the school have 3-6 school-aged children. The school population is 81% white, 9% Hispanic, 5.9% African American, and 4% others.

According to STAR data from 1999, IIA students achieved close to the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile in Total Reading and Total Math; scores which are considerably higher than California State averages and county averages. In an unpublished report on student achievement at IIA, Mitchell, Collom & Gaskill(2000) remark that:

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<sup>1</sup>All names are pseudonyms

Past student achievement research has consistently found that income is the strongest determinant of achievement. The fact that there is no direct causal arrow from income to achievement suggests that the (IIA) experience eradicates income effects. In other words, students who are coming from families with lower incomes have achievement rates which are commensurate with those from the wealthiest families.

Likewise, racial background, often found to be an important factor, does not directly impact on a student's achievement at the (IIA).

The fact that the IIA claims to have a unique perspective on parental involvement and that the students attending IIA achieve scores that are above the average in California makes the school a unique place to study parental involvement. I chose to study the school to determine what about their parental involvement policies is unique and what methods they incorporate to encourage and support parental participation. Specifically, I wanted to know, what does it mean to be a parent of a student at IIA?

To investigate this question I spent seven hours in participant-observation at the school. I began by observing in the school's 'great room' during a computer technology class. I then was a participant-observer during two CTC (Collegial Teaching Certificate) classes for parents, observing interactions between school staff and parents, attempting to, "learn the culture or

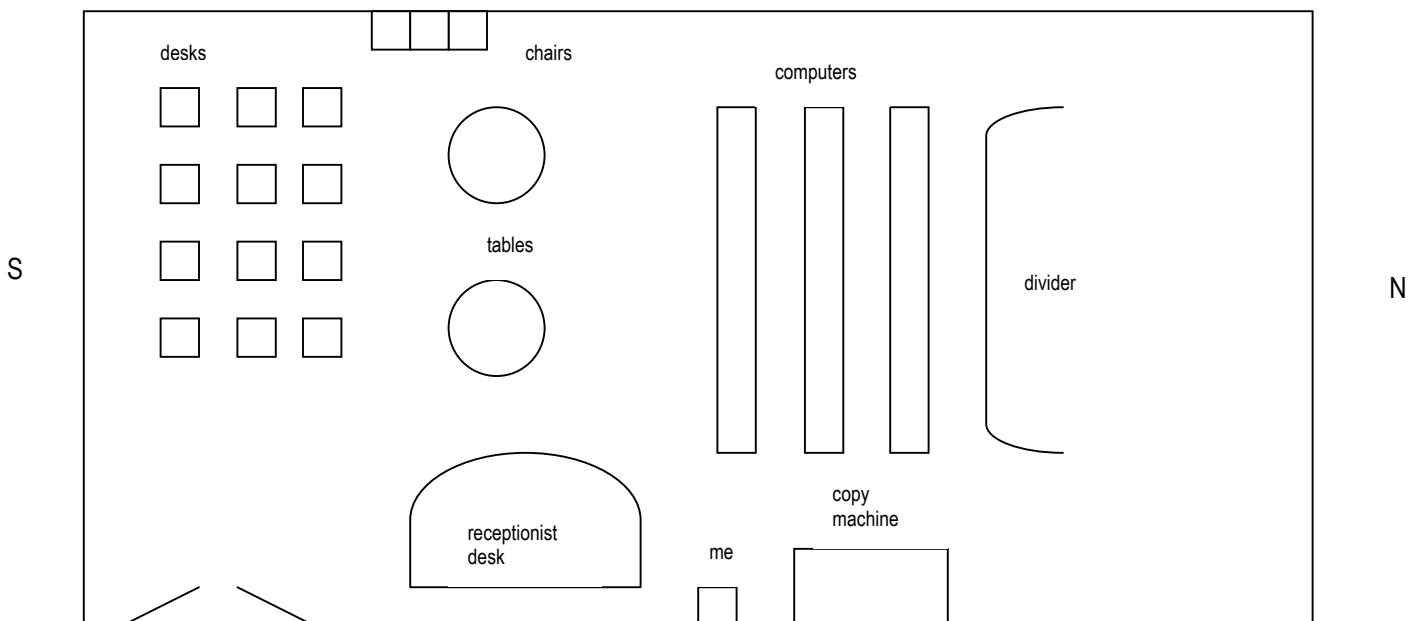
subculture" of the school in respect to parental involvement (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 8). I interviewed the lead high school counselor, the senior coordinator for the Educational Support Center (both of whom teach the CTC classes), the research coordinator, and two parents in order to gain information on their perspectives. I reviewed school documents, from CTC handouts, to letters for parents on the Internet, CTC class evaluations, and documents available at the main desk in the great room.

I entered my first experience of participant-observation with quite a bit of trepidation and very little enthusiasm. Despite the fact that I spend a lot of time in schools and classrooms, I typically spend that time as a Program Specialist or a parent. I am generally there to assist the teacher, or to provide support for a student. The role of 'researcher' is alien to me, and uncomfortable - like wearing a new pair of shoes for the first time.

The charter school is comprised of one medium-sized permanent building composed of a lot of brick and glass. There are two portable buildings to the left of the main building. I enter the main building and am greeted warmly by a professionally dressed receptionist in her mid-to late-thirties. I look around for a visitor sign in list. Most schools I have visited require that all visitors sign in, some going so far as to have each visitor wear a tag. I am informed that there is no sign in list. I tell the receptionist that I am there to do research and that it was

okayed by Sara, the research coordinator. She tells me to make myself at home and shows me some chairs to the right of her desk that I may use.

I am in what is referred to as the 'great room.' It is large, with desks, chairs, round tables, and several computer tables placed in horizontal rows with computers on them. The computers face a large partition at the north end of the room. Behind the partition is a classroom space with windows on the north and west walls. Around the periphery of the room are several glass-enclosed offices and glass-enclosed classrooms. The overall effect is one of openness. I sit in a chair against the east wall, to the right of the receptionist's desk and begin writing.



There are ten students seated at the computers at the north end of the room. They are quietly working at the computer

stations. A few other students are seated in chairs around the periphery of the room. One student sits slouched in his seat, head lolling to the side, apparently sleeping. From time to time, an adult walks past the students at the computers; one adult looks at each student's computer and says something to the student. I can't tell if there is a teacher assigned to the class, as there is no adult hovering close by. At one point, a man in his early twenties sits down at a computer and projects something from the computer to the screen set up on the partition. He gets my vote for teacher of the class, if it is in fact a class. I notice that when there are no adults around the students continue to behave extraordinarily well, only chatting to each other quietly when the receptionist leaves the area and the other adults are not around. As an educator, I am amazed and impressed by their stellar behavior.

As I continue to write down details about the room and the students and adults in it, I marvel over the behavior of the students in the room. I write in my notes, "I have never been in a school that is so QUIET!" Finally, I can stand it no more. As the receptionist walks past me to pick something up from the printer, I beckon to her.

Me: "Are these students in a class?"

Her: "Yes, they're in Computer Technology class."

Me: "They're so quiet."

Her, smiling: "They're taking a test."

I make a note to myself: ask about details before spending time trying to figure out what is going on. Suddenly the whispers while the adults leave the room take on a new dimension. It would appear to me that perhaps students were sharing answers, albeit in a very quiet and well-behaved fashion. I had seen what I expected to see. Responsible students working independently and quietly. Perhaps I misunderstood what was really going on.

I learned from my first participant-observation experience that I am not going to answer my research question in the 'great room' at the school. I had envisioned parents bringing students to the school and dropping them off, meeting with teachers, and picking up students, all in the main 'great room' area of the school. Instead, I learned that students actually take classes at the school. Through speaking with a teacher and the lead high school counselor I discovered that parents are expected to support the education of their student at home, and that they are provided with training in how to do so effectively. I plan to do my next participant-observation during one of the parent training sessions.

Although my first participant-observation didn't give me any answers to my research question, it did provide me with information regarding the operation of the school. I discovered that although the format of the school (weekly classes with follow-up by parents at home) is quite different from a typical public school, the students I observed were pretty typical

students. As the teacher was discussing the assignment for the next day, he gave the students two topics about which they could write. He then said that they could vote on which topic they would rather write about, at which point one student asked, "Are we going to have a break soon?" while three of the ten students voted for the first topic. Other students either wrote in notebooks, sat with their heads down, or sat staring straight ahead. I couldn't tell if they were disinterested or concentrating. They looked like normal high school students to me.

One question that was raised for me through my first participant-observation is how students end up at the school. Why do parents choose to send their students to this charter school instead of a public school? What qualities does the school look for in prospective students and parents? These are questions that I will seek to answer in future participant-observations and interviews with parents and staff.

I pretty much stumbled into my first interview experience. During my first participant-observation at the charter school, one of the people I was introduced to was the lead high school counselor, Phyllis Dougherty. As I met different people at the school and told them what my research topic was I was referred repeatedly to Phyllis and was told that she was the expert on parental participation at the school. When I met Phyllis, I thought she looked familiar to me. I told her so and, upon

investigation, we discovered that we attend the same church. Phyllis told me about the CTC (Collegial Teaching Certificate) classes that are held throughout the year for parents and invited me to participate in the next class that was being offered in mid-December. I planned to make connections with parents at that class and schedule interviews with some of the parents that I met.

Being the pessimist that I am, on the morning of the CTC class I called the school to determine whether the class was still being held. Sure enough, I was informed that the class had been cancelled and was asked if I would like to speak to Phyllis. Phyllis apologized for forgetting that I was planning on attending the class and not informing me of the cancellation. She asked me if there was any other way that she could help me with my research. I told her about the interview component and asked if I could come to interview her sometime. She told me that, seeing as I had planned on coming to the school that morning anyway, I was welcome to come to the school and spend the morning with her and learn about what is covered in the CTC classes, as well as other pertinent details regarding parental participation at the school.

Thus I found myself hurriedly borrowing a tape recorder and micro-cassette and bustling off to the charter school to spend the morning with Phyllis. In retrospect, this was probably a pretty good way to enter into my first interview. Because it happened so suddenly, I didn't have time to get nervous. I also went into the interview with a pretty open mind. I didn't think of questions

beforehand; I figured I would let Phyllis talk about what she does with parents and ask clarifying questions as I needed to.

I entered the school and, as Phyllis had given me directions to her office over the phone, went directly to her office, greeting people I had met during my participant-observation as I went. Phyllis shares her office with another teacher at the school and, although it is somewhat crowded with two desks, three chairs, a bookcase, and a filing cabinet, it is nicely decorated in pastel shades with family pictures and inspirational sayings posted about. I think that Phyllis's office was an ideal location for the interview because she had access to documents that she wanted to share with me and it was a comfortable place for both of us to be.

Phyllis welcomed me warmly, again apologizing about the misunderstanding about the class. I assured her it was ok and that I was thrilled to have the opportunity to interview her. We spoke briefly about the upcoming holidays, our families, and common acquaintances from church. Rapport was established rather quickly because of our similarities in our backgrounds (both of us are in the education field), our families (both of us are the moms of boys only), and our common church attendance. I feel like this rapport was very fortunate, and probably not something that I should come to expect when interviewing other individuals. Once we had had the opportunity to develop rapport we moved on to eliciting information (Spradley, 1979).

Phyllis started the interview by describing for me the CTC classes, sharing with me the handouts of the PowerPoint presentations that are used in the classes and describing the content in some detail. She also talked about the program offered at the school, and the school's view regarding parental participation. As she described the school's policies I asked example questions so that I could gain a greater understanding of the school's policies and procedures:

SW: What happens, ok...what if I was a parent and I, my child's struggling in regular school and so I feel, think, ok here's an option. You know, he won't get kicked out of class every day, and I won't be down at the principal's office every day. So I bring my child here but I really don't want all that. And so I sign up but then I'm not doing my part. What will happen?

Phyllis also shared with me relevant research that the school bases its parental policies on. We discussed Epstein's (1985) six types of parental involvement and the challenges facing schools in promoting parental involvement in the six areas (parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community). About one hour into the interview I asked her if it was ok if I turned on the tape recorder to record a portion of the interview. She didn't object and we continued the interview with the tape recorder sitting on her desk close to us.

During my interview with Phyllis, I learned a great deal about the school's perceptions regarding what it means to be a parent of a student at the school. Phyllis used the term "collegial" and stressed that the relationship between the school and the parents is a collegial one. Instead of being an independent study model, the school is based more on a home school model. Parents are given options regarding how they want their children to receive instruction in various classes. Through an arrangement with the local junior college, parents can either teach their children themselves with support from the school, enroll their students in classes at the college, or enroll their students in classes at the school. In each of these cases parents commit to support their children in completing the home component of instruction. Phyllis spoke at length at the responsibility that parents have for the learning of their children:

PD: They come here and they say, "We want to home school, now you home school." And we say, "We're a school. We can school-school them, but we can't *home* school them. That would be *home* school that would be *your home school*, your job."

In addition, so we have to explain to them and then teach them, first, what home schooling is . . . that it is the parent taking full responsibility for their child's education - academically as well as character training.

In addition, that their responsibility is that we would love to partner with them. We love the collegial (pronounced ku-lee-jee-ul) or collegial (pronounced ku-lee-gee-ul) method. We love that. We love to be their partner, but we can't be their partner unless they are actually partnering with us. They can't just drop their child off here, that's not the kind of program...and we fight that. We fight that a lot.

All parents are required to participate in the first CTC class (CTC 101) where they learn about "Knowledge: Standards/Skills for School Success" (CTC Program handout). Parents may then participate in other CTC classes offered by the school which include, "Acquisition: How Children Learn/Teaching" (CTC 201); Evidence: How do I Know What my Students Know? And other Assessment Questions" (CTC 301); and "Thinking and Reasoning Skills/Life Skills" (CTC 401) (CTC Program handout). Other workshops offer instruction in discipline, effective instruction, and other issues pertinent to parents.

Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) point out that, "Interviewing can be an extremely important source of data: it may allow one to generate information that it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to obtain otherwise - both about events described and about perspectives and discursive strategies." (p. 131). Not only was I able to learn a great deal about the school's perception of what it means to be a parent of a student at the school, but I was

able to realize that an important place for me to conduct a participant-observation would be at a CTC class, where I could see the interaction between parents and school staff.

I also learned a lot about interviewing. First, I learned that a voice-activated tape recorder is NOT the appropriate equipment to use. After the interview, I went to listen to my tape only to realize that it hadn't even activated enough to tape anything. When I had checked the tape and saw that it had stopped, I turned the tape over, not realizing that it had never really started to record because our voices weren't loud enough for the voice activation. I had to return and re-tape portions of the interview in order to have a segment to transcribe. I also learned that it is important to have some way of taking notes, which is natural and doesn't feel intrusive. I was able to jot notes on the PowerPoint presentation handouts as Phyllis was describing the CTC classes, which seemed appropriate and helped me after the interview to remember what had been discussed. Finally, I learned that interviewing can be very valuable in qualitative research. I was able to learn a lot about the way the charter school operates and left with an entirely different understanding of the commitment level that is required of parents of students at the school.

A month later I found myself at CTC 301. Once again I entered the great room of the school and was directed to a glass-enclosed classroom overlooking a wonderful view of trees and

bushes. There were eight parents attending the class. Four white parents (three moms and one dad), three Hispanic parents (all moms), and one African American mom. As I entered they were discussing issues regarding assessment. The environment was open. Phyllis Daugherty and Renae Mickelson (another counselor) were leading the class. Phyllis and Renae referred to parents by first names and often used the names of specific children when giving examples. Parents often spoke up and gave examples or asked questions.

At one point one mom brought up a problem she was experiencing with her daughter at the elementary campus. Her daughter was on campus two days a week for enrichment classes and yet still had four days worth of work to do at home in her other classes. The mom shared that her daughter was getting further and further behind and that it was just too much work for her to do in three days. She shared that, being new to home schooling, she wondered if she was just not using her time wisely. Renae and Phyllis asked her some clarifying questions and shared that some of the newer teachers were still learning the system as well. At that point Sara, the research coordinator, passed through the classroom on her way to her office adjacent to the classroom. Renae and Phyllis shared with her the parent's concerns.

Sara stopped and spent at least 15 minutes discussing concerns, not only with that parent but with other parents who expressed their concerns. In discussing the concern with the

parent new to home schooling she pointed out, "You still can, as the primary facilitator, go in to the teacher and tell them it's too much. That should be your first step." I was struck by several things. First, the concerns voiced by the parents were taken seriously and time was given immediately to exploring possible solutions. Second, the staff spoke to the parents with respect and really listened to what they had to say. Third, the term "primary facilitator" was used to refer to the parent's role. And fourth, the parent's role was not belittled or made to be less than the teacher's role...the partnership was emphasized.

After that participant-observation experience I thought about what I had learned so far in regards to my research question. Although I had learned quite a bit, I still didn't feel I had learned a great deal about what it meant to be a parent of a student at the school. I did, however, feel that I had gathered quite a bit of data regarding how the school interpreted parental involvement. As I thought more about it I became more convinced that the question I really wanted to answer was, how does IIA interpret parental involvement? What does parental involvement mean to the staff of IIA?

Armed with my new research question, I returned to CTC 401 the following week. This week there were six participants: four white, one Hispanic, and one African American. The topic was Thinking and Reasoning: Life Skills. Once again the class was open and friendly. The subject matter was interesting and the

presentation was of a high caliber. Once again Renae and Phyllis used participants' first names and referred to their children by name. They explained to the parents that they were receiving the same content that the teachers would be receiving in a full-day training later in the year. A video tape highlighting ways of increasing critical thinking skills was interspersed with small group practice. At one point, after working in small groups to brainstorm answers to one of the questions on the videotape it was determined that the answers that the parent participants had given were the same as those the teachers on the video had provided. One parent said enthusiastically, "Wow! We could almost be teachers!" Phyllis answered her, "One of the problems with home school moms is that they don't see themselves as teachers. But you are...you are teachers of the highest quality...you are unique and wonderful! Teachers wish they had the same insight about their students that you have instinctively."

Later in the training, a parent expressed her dismay regarding the parental role in public schools. She shared how she was made to feel like a bother. She felt that the teachers wanted to blame her for being responsible whenever her child didn't finish her work or was disruptive, and yet she felt that she wasn't welcome to spend time at the school to help. Phyllis replied by saying that blaming doesn't help, what does help is being willing to be partners for the good of the child. Renae drew a triangle on the board, reminding parents of the three-

pronged emphasis of the school: parent, student, and educational partner. The mom who had spoken up said that it was so helpful to be able to say, "I've tried everything, can you help?" and have someone step in and be willing to do so.

At the end of the class I asked that parent and one other if they would be willing to be interviewed for my research. Both of them agreed and gave me their phone numbers for me to call them the next day. One of the parents I spoke to, Bonnie, had home schooled her children for many years, whereas the other, Marie, was quite new to the process, and had only recently pulled her children from public school to attend at IIA.

I called Marie and interviewed her over the phone for just under an hour. She indicated that she had been involved with IIA for five weeks and was thrilled with the results so far. She listed relational benefits with her children as the first positive outcome she had noticed and then shared some of the frustrations (learning to write lesson plans, learning to balance the amount of work) of being new to home schooling. Marie shared how she had approached the teachers with her frustrations and how they had responded in a helpful and supportive manner. Teachers helped her focus on the big ideas and told her what areas would be most important for her daughter to master. She said that she was told that she is welcome to sit in the classes any time, and is even encouraged to do so. When asked if she feels respected as an educational partner she responded, "Pffffff...YES! They give me way

more respect than I think I deserve. Sometimes I wonder if they're just saying it because they're nice people, but then I think that they *really believe* in what they're doing." As to whether or not the CTC classes are helpful: "Oh, DEFINITELY! ... Without those classes there's no way, NO WAY! First, they help you to understand their program, and second, you come home with lots of ideas and things to do. The public system needs to incorporate the classes for all parents. I didn't know how to help my daughter. Now I do!"

Bonnie, a parent who is in her 10<sup>th</sup> year of home schooling her four children, reiterated some of Marie's comments. When asked if she feels respected by the staff she said, "Definitely... there have been times when I've needed to talk to the teachers and they've made adjustments. They're very open." Having been at the school longer, however, Bonnie has experienced the process of working out some of the kinks. She explained that there were some initial problems, such as parents not receiving copies of teacher's editions so that they could check the responses of their students. She relayed how some parents left because of those frustrations, however she feels that things are going much better this year with the opening of the middle school/high school campus. Although Bonnie is a true believer in the benefits of home schooling, she can also see the benefits of being aligned with the charter school. She chose to enroll her children in the school because of the access to educational materials, the science lab,

excellent teachers and because of the reputation of the staff, Renae and Phyllis in particular, who she respects highly for their experience as home schoolers.

The IIA is a charter school which was started in 1997. According to the information on their website, it is, "a unique school that combines home-based, parent-centered education with the campus facilities ... to offer a compelling and highly individualized alternative to traditional education methods" (2000). The administrator of the school is often quoted as likening the relationship of parent/child/ and educational partner to a three-legged stool. If one of the legs is removed you might be able to stay upright, but it will take a lot more work to do so. He feels that it is the same with education. The partnership between the three entities is essential for success.

During my time at the school I heard the following words used frequently: collegiality, professionalism, partner, educational facilitator. During the CTC class times I was able to see parents treated as partners and with professionalism. Phyllis defined professionalism at IIA as being willing to do whatever it takes to help every child succeed. She pointed out that if that meant stopping in the parking lot to help a parent at 5:00 PM then that's what needed to be done. She says pointedly, "If we are partners, we are partners. We need to stay."

The IIA is an educational organization that views parental involvement as vital to the educational process. Parents are seen

as educational partners who are capable and responsible for the education of their children. On the school's website parents can access information about the school, its corporate partners and supporters (47 are listed), and course requirements. One letter to parents found on the website has as its greeting, "Dear Co-Workers in the home". The teacher goes on to introduce himself and explain the course requirements, closing his letter as, "2000 - 2001 Problem Solving Coach." This attitude of partnership is pervasive throughout the school culture.

When I first entered the school I was struck by the openness of the architecture. Offices were surrounded by glass, as were classrooms. Classroom doors were open, and the entire atmosphere was one of sincerity and ingenuousness. As I got to know the individual staff members at the school I was even more taken aback by the openness and earnestness of the people there. After the second CTC class I attended, Phyllis asked me if I would be interested in reading the participant evaluations they had received from the CTC classes they had taught. I commented on her willingness to be so transparent with me. She replied, "Either what we're doing here is working, in which case we want to let others know that it works. Or else it's not working, in which case we need to know so that we can keep pursuing what does work." Throughout my research project I found the staff to be willing to go above and beyond in helping me. They provided me with mountains of documents and took time to answer any questions I

had. I never once felt like an intruder at the school; adults and students alike were polite and friendly to me.

IIA is a unique school. Their motto, "Doing education one child at a time" portrays their commitment to individual children. They don't just talk about parental involvement and then sit back and hope it happens. They are committed to providing parents with the tools they need to meet the needs of their children. The entire philosophy and culture of the school is built on the concept of partnership between educators and parents. They are interested in pursuing what works for children and families. They close the description of their school on the website this way, "(IIA) is dedicated to the development of new, more effective educational methods that can be replicated whole or in part by traditional schools, charter schools, distance learning facilities and other educational institutions." The following questions regarding the program at IIA remain to be answered: What aspects of the program can be replicated at other schools? What is the link between parent training (CTC classes) and student achievement? And, what role can qualitative research serve in highlighting these practices for the professional community?

Fine (1993) discusses the dilemma facing educational organizations as they seek to improve parental involvement:

In scenes in which power asymmetries are not addressed and hierarchical bureaucracies are not radically transformed, parents end up looking individually "needy," "naïve," or

"hysterical" and appear to be working in opposition to teachers. Rarely do they seem entitled to strong voices and substantial power in a pluralistic public sphere. Rarely do they have the opportunity to work collaboratively with educators inventing what could be a rich, engaging, and democratic system for public education.

IIA is a unique educational organization that has developed a rare relationship with its parents. Through its efforts at providing parents a way to partner with the school in a collegial relationship it has taken some initial steps in answering the question, "...*how* can schools help all families conduct the activities that will benefit their children?" (Epstein, 1996, p. 213).

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