Chapter 3

Methodology

This study explored how high school students described parental involvement and its effect on their academic success. This topic was chosen because this is an issue at the high school level of education (Lloyd-Smith, 2008). High school administrators are striving to increase parental involvement in the school as well as outside of the school to meet students' education needs (Lloyd-Smith, 2008). Research on this topic has seldom focused on the perceptions of high school students (Faber, 2008; Whitfield, 2006).

3.1 Research Design

The study used a basic qualitative research design as described by Merriam (2009). Basic qualitative research examines participants' experiences and interpretations of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). Basic qualitative methodology was best suited for this study as it did not fit under the heading of phenomenology, which looks at the experience and how the person uses this experience to change his or her behavior (Merriam, 2009). High school students are not at an age to be interested in how experiencing parental involvement changes their behavior. The researcher did not become part of the culture of the students' experience, so the study was not appropriate for ethnography (Merriam, 2009). The researcher did not intend to produce a theory, such as that produced in grounded theory, nor were the students' experiences intended to be told in a story format with a beginning, middle, and end (Merriam, 2009). These students discussed experiences that would continue throughout the remainder of their schooling (Merriam, 2009). Finally, the study was not intended to transform and empower the students, as is the case when critical research is used (Merriam, 2009). It was for these reasons that basic qualitative methodology was determined to be the best for this particular study as the students gave their definitions of parental involvement and school success and told the researcher how they described parental involvement and how it affected their school success.

Each student participant described experiences that led to the development of themes (Patton, 2002). Basic qualitative research was used to look at each student's themes individually and collectively to finalize the results of the study (Patton, 2002). Qualitative data were collected by having the students complete a demographic survey and interviews. The students were selected based on characteristics such as academic success, extracurricular involvement, and socioeconomic factors to look for similarities and differences in their experiences.

Using this methodology involved gathering and analyzing the answers to initial interviews, determining what themes developed, and designing additional interview questions if necessary based on the identified themes (Patton, 2002; Appendix B). Each additional interview with the students built on the previous interview as the researcher attempted to understand their perceptions of parental involvement and the importance it had on student success in school from the experiences of the students (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). All data were analyzed using a software program designed for the specific purpose of defining themes in qualitative data.

Much of the research pertaining to parental involvement has been based on quantitative research (Epstein, 2005, 2007; Rogers, 2006; Walker et al., 2010). When a similar methodology, such as quantitative, is used consistently over time, it becomes routine and mundane (Patton, 2002). Using qualitative methodology with this study added an additional dimension to the current body of knowledge that was not as common, but just as relevant. Qualitative methodology allowed themes to emerge as the participants' varying perceptions and these themes guided the study to its conclusions.

Whitfield (2006) used qualitative methodology and the current study used a similar model. The results and conclusions of this study were compared with those of Whitfield to note any similarities and differences that occurred. Whitfield surmised that additional research using a similar methodology, but

using a population with greater diversity, would add to current research regarding high school students' perceptions of parental involvement and its effects on their high school success.

3.1.1 Research Questions

This researcher explored the question: What are high school students' perceptions of the importance of parental involvement on high school success? The following questions were answered during the study.

1. How do high school students describe parental involvement?

2. How do high school students define success in school?

3. How do high school students describe the effects of parental involvement on their high school success?

3.1.2 Population and Sampling Procedure

The population used for the study included junior and senior high school students as they had more experience in the high school setting and with parent involvement within that setting. The students were from one high school located in southeastern North Carolina. The high school serves a rural community and has a population of 1,300 students (Gray's Creek High School [GCHS], 2010).

Letters of informed consent (Appendix A) were sent home with all junior and senior students attending the school. Once the letter of informed consent was returned from parents granting permission for the student to participate in the study, the students completed the survey (Appendix B). The demographics collected from the surveys determined the five students chosen for the interview process (Appendix C). This was a nonrandom selection of participants (Steinberg, 2008). The students were selected to look for similarities and differences in their experiences based on their demographics.

3.1.3 Access Plan

The researcher worked at the school used for the study. Permission for the study was requested from the Principal of the school and the Research Approval Committee at the district office. Once permission was obtained to proceed with the study, invitation letters to participate in the surveys and interviews were sent to parents of the students chosen using the address information provided by the school (Appendix A). Parents returned the invitation to the school with their contact information included if they wished to be contacted to ask questions of the researcher before final consent was given.

Participants were chosen based on demographic characteristics given in the survey (Appendix B).

3.1.4 Sources of Data

The study involved the use of multiple data collection methods to strengthen the results (Patton, 2002; Soy, 1997). Creswell (2009) and Patton (2002) recommended using a variety of methods to collect data from participants to explore an activity in depth. In this study the activity was parental involvement and how students perceived its impact on their academic success. Letters of informed consent were given to 525 students; 147 students returned the letters from their parents giving them permission to participate. From the 147 returned letters, 24 students were randomly selected to complete the survey (Appendix B). This was the first phase of the research. Four of the surveys were used for reliability purposes and the additional 20 were used to collect themes for the study. From the surveys, seven students were chosen for the interview phase of the study. Two of these interviews were also used for reliability purposes and the additional five were used to determine themes for the study. The researcher was seeking the students' perceptions of parental involvement and its effect on their high school success. Each student was asked to describe his or her experiences, which would become a part of the whole, to be analyzed

for themes (Soy, 1997). Data obtained from all surveys and interviews were analyzed using the software program NVivo9 for objectivity and to reduce researcher bias during the analysis process (Creswell, 2009).

Qualitative data were collected through surveys that contained multiple-choice and short answer questions that were administered to students individually in a private setting. The surveys gathered the students' demographic information and specific characteristics related to the study (Stringer, 2007). Personal interviews with students obtained their perceptions of parental involvement in and out of the school setting and its effects on their high school success (Patton, 2002). The interviews were used to analyze the students' feelings and thoughts about parental involvement, rather than as a measurement of how often parents were involved in the school setting (Patton, 2002). Additional interviews were conducted with the students to clarify or confirm the results reported by the researcher.

Information from the student surveys was collected and students were interviewed for approximately 15 to 20 minutes using questions that addressed themes previously identified in the surveys (Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) described this as layering the information to obtain a more in-depth understanding of the cultural concepts as defined by the participants.

The survey used with the students was a combination of two surveys found on SurveyShare.com: "High School Students - Study/Grade" survey and "Home Environment - Child Survey." There was a minimal fee for using material published by the site, but it did allow edits to be made to the surveys and provided the capability of analyzing the data obtained. The questions were both categorical scales and open-ended (Creswell, 2009). As validity and reliability scores were not provided by the author, the instrument needed to be piloted with a small population of students to determine both its validity and reliability (Creswell, 2009).

The preliminary interview questions for the students were designed by the researcher (Appendix C). The interview format was an informal conversation allowing the conversation to go in the direction of emergent ideas as the interview progressed (Patton, 2002). Each interview differed, but themes developed during the process (Patton, 2002).

Pilot study. A combination of two surveys was used for the first phase of the research. Because the surveys had not been used previously in a combined state, a pilot group was necessary to test the validity of the instrument (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002). This was accomplished by having four students who were not chosen for the actual study, but who had similar characteristics to the study participants, complete the survey and measuring the results from these four participants with those of the population chosen for the study.

Validity. Validity of the survey instrument was determined by comparing results from the pilot group with those of the study group and completing a correlation between the two (Creswell, 2009). It was also necessary to examine the survey instrument to determine whether the information collected was meaningful to the study; that is, would it help determine themes that would serve as the basis for the interview questions (Creswell, 2009).

Using interviews in conjunction with the surveys improved the validity of the interview questions, as they were initially based on the themes that were deciphered from the surveys (Patton, 2002). Validity and reliability issues were lessened by using a software program specifically developed to locate themes in interview data (Stringer, 2007). This method of analysis reduced research bias, making the method more valid (Stringer, 2007).

Additional validity of the study data occurred when they were compared to the findings of Faber (2008), Whitfield (2006), and Hayes (2011) to determine similarities and differences and whether these similarities and differences could be explained through the study (Merriam, 2009). The researcher needed to

determine whether the similarities occurred because of similarities in the population characteristics and the differences because of the differences in the population (Merriam, 2009).

Reliability. No reliability scores for the surveys were provided by the company from which they were obtained. The only reliability measures came from first administering the survey to the pilot group and then to the study group to determine whether students were answering the questions in a similar manner (Creswell, 2009).

Reliability with the interview portion of the study was established by comparing answers from two of the participants to answers from the additional five participants for consistency. Merriam (2009) stated that each participant views his or her experience from a different perspective. Reliability was also established by mapping out the study in such a way that it would be able to be repeated by another researcher in the future (Merriam, 2009). When conducting qualitative research, the goal is for the data to be meaningful and thus reliable (Merriam, 2009).

3.2 Assumptions and Delimitations

Assumptions are the values the researcher places on the study before it begins (Bryant, 2004). The assumptions in this study included being able to identify the students' definitions of parental involvement. It was assumed that the students would be able to define academic success. It was also assumed that themes would develop to aid in understanding factors the students' felt encouraged or discouraged their parents' involvement in the school and had a positive or negative effect on their success in school.

Delimitations include generalization factors of the study (Bryant, 2004). This study took place in one high school located in North Carolina. The results of this study are only transferable to other high schools in the same or similar

locality as the facility in which it was conducted. Other factors influencing the transferability of the results include ethnic, economic, and educational levels of the parents of the students who participated in this study, as these may have influenced the answers given by the students during the process. The researcher did not examine test scores as the time frame did not allow for a comparison of test scores from one year to the next to look at any changes that occurred as a result of participation in the study. The researcher did not conduct interviews with parents as the research concerned the students' answers and perceptions.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

Permission for the study was obtained from the Research Committee, Curriculum and Instruction Department of the local school system (Cumberland County Schools, 2003). The Research Committee required a written proposal of the study containing information pertaining to the research methods to be used, type of data to be collected, protection of participants, and copies of consent letters to be sent to the participants (Cumberland County Schools, 2003). The request form requested a copy of the research proposal or prospectus that had been submitted to the Institution Review Board (IRB; Cumberland County Schools, 2003). After permission for the study was granted by the county Research Committee, permission was asked of the building Principal, who received a copy of the proposal submitted to the county for his signature of approval.

Permission forms for student participation were sent home with the students for parents to sign and return by a given deadline date (Appendix A). All permission forms and data will be kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher's office for the minimum of 5 years as specified by the institution.

Qualitative data were collected through surveys administered to students during the homeroom portion of the school day when instruction was not taking

place. The surveys gathered the students' demographic information and specific characteristics related to the study (Stringer, 2007). Personal interviews were then conducted with students to obtain their perceptions of parental involvement in and out of the school setting and its effects on their high school success (Patton, 2002). The interviews were used to analyze the students' feelings and thoughts about parental involvement rather than as a measurement of how often parents were involved in the school setting (Patton, 2002).

3.4 Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis of the surveys and interview transcripts was performed using NVivo9, a data analysis software package specifically designed for this purpose. Themes were coded and then used to develop further interview questions. Once all data were coded, the themes were determined and are reported in the results and conclusion sections. The process of using multiple sources of data collection is referred to as *triangulation* (Merriam, 2009). The multiple sources of data collection included the use of surveys, interviewing students with different perspectives, and conducting multiple interviews with each student. Using triangulation increased the credibility of the study (Merriam, 2009).

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations involved using students who may have been under the age of 18. Letters of consent were submitted to the school system Superintendent's office and Institutional Review Board for approval. Students will not be identified by name in the research study and only those who returned letters of consent with a parent's signature on file were allowed to participate. All survey and interview material with identifying information will be kept in a locked cabinet.

3.6 Summary

The study was conducted using qualitative method, specifically a basic qualitative approach (Merriam, 2009). The population consisted of high school junior and senior students whose parents returned signed consent forms allowing them to participate. A survey was administered to 24 students and seven students were chosen from those 24 to participate in the interview portion of the study.

A pilot study was conducted as the survey was a combination of two existing surveys and no validity or reliability scores currently existed for either survey. Reliability is difficult to defend as this was a qualitative study and no two participants answered survey or interview questions in the same way (Merriam, 2009). Data were analyzed using a computer software package to reduce researcher bias.