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In this qualitative study, I examined the efforts of three North Carolina laboratory school principals to implement culturally responsive parent, family, and community engagement. While there is already a significant body of literature on culturally responsive school leadership and parent and family engagement, there remains a need to examine how school principals attempt to tap into the expertise of nondominant families and communities in non-traditional schools, especially given the complexities of educational systems (Ishimaru, 2020). The principals in this research are experienced educators who currently serve at lab schools created through collaborations between the North Carolina General Assembly and University of North Carolina System as early as 2014.

The idea of a laboratory school is not unique to the now nine schools operating through the UNC System. The concept of a lab school was the brainchild of American philosopher John Dewey, who strived to develop theories of child development and education (Whitman, 2020). Like the lab schools Dewey created as early as 1896, the three schools represented in my study are associated with a university and have a 3-part mission: facilitate research to learn more about how children grow and develop, educate pre-service education professionals, and serve the education profession (Wilcox-Herzog & McLaren, 2012). In addition to Dewey's vision, NC laboratory schools also have the responsibility of celebrating the knowledge, skills, power, and resources of the school community.

In this qualitative study, I captured the efforts of three NC laboratory school principals' attempts to implement culturally responsive parent, family, and community engagement. I worked diligently to answer the following research questions: (1) How do NC lab school

principals describe their attempts to lead for parent, family, and community engagement (PFCE) in their schools? (2) How do participants discuss the current state of PFCE in their school? (3) What is the relationship between a principal's appointment in a NC lab school and their training in and practice of culturally responsive leadership? The theoretical framework for the study was adopted from the 4-tenets of Ann Ishimaru's work in equitable collaboration (Ishimaru, 2020).

For this study, I relied on two individual interviews with each NC lab school principal and one focus group session as primary data collection methods. Due to COVID19 restrictions at the time of my study, all interviews and the focus group took place over Zoom. This study affords readers an opportunity to examine the profiles of each principal participant and explore parent, family, and community engagement at each school. My findings reveal that NC lab school principals work with various partners to engage parents, families, and the community. I also found that NC lab school principals typically rely on single events to engage parents, families and community. In addition, I also discovered that NC lab school principals have both seized and missed opportunities to enhance culturally responsive parent, family, and community engagement, as well as finding that NC lab school principals have limited training in culturally responsive leadership. The principal participants in my study acknowledged that in their respective school, there was commitment to celebrating the knowledge, skills, power, and resources of the school community and they recognized that shifting the paradigm to more equitable collaboration was not an easy task and could not be done by the principal alone.

NC LABORATORY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' EFFORTS TO IMPLEMENT CULTURALLY  
RESPONSIVE PARENT, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

by

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Ecclesiastes 9:11 ~ *The race is not given to the swift or to the strong but to the one who endures to the end!* This biblical verse has been my saving grace throughout my journey as a graduate student. My journey to earn my Doctor of Education degree started back in 2009, however 2009-2016 was not my time and I thank GOD for the spirit of perseverance. Yes, I could have given up, but GOD said, “NO” and HE put me in position to work in meaningful, purposeful research that is very dear to my heart. Not only did HE order my steps in this research, but HE also gave me a personal role model to follow. My brother earned his Doctor of Education degree in the same program at UNCG in 2020 and continues to thrive in his career and community as Dr. Ahmad Rashad Slade. If you only knew our story, you would know how much his life and accomplishments mean to me.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Educators who grow to a place in their career where going to school every day does not feel like work but feels like you are simply headed to your second home are the luckiest people in the world. For some, this school may reflect one with (a) parent attendance at every school-wide function, (b) consistent assistance with academic work at home, (c) two-way communication between school and home, and/or (d) parents volunteering in the classroom and at the school (Hill & Taylor, 2004). As a career K-12 public-school educator and current NC Laboratory School principal, I agree that this is encouraging, however I would also argue that educators who work feverishly in schools serving large populations of students from low-income homes, with social-emotional, academic, and behavior needs are those who achieve the euphoric feeling of school not representing work, but home. There is an overwhelming feeling of community in these schools, even though they are often the most underrepresented demographics on local, state, and national boards of education. I dare not ignore that these communities are most often composed of people of color, which for me personally makes the work that much more rewarding. As with anything in life, the harder you work to create and nourish something, specifically human relationships, the more satisfying the feeling when evidence of positive working relationships grows over time. Notably, there is an emotional component associated with working with students and parents from low-income communities, one that feels like home, one that speaks to the work expended to build personal relationships with others regardless of race, gender, sex, religion, or socio-economic status.

Serving as a lifelong educator working with students and families with extremely high needs has created more than a new home for me. I have had the pleasure of developing a lifetime of unbreakable bonds worth every bit of the blood, sweat, and tears put into supporting students,

families, and the school community with needs beyond student achievement. This is a central goal for culturally responsive educators, more specifically school principals (Khalifa, 2018). Spending time at recreation centers, recitals, ball fields, and church events have been very memorable, cultural experiences in my career. These times far outweigh the days I spent in the classroom tinkering with the Pythagorean Theorem or Newton's Laws of Motion.

In North Carolina there are currently nine University of North Carolina system laboratory schools with goals to reflect all of the above while also reciprocating the school to home relationship by providing culturally responsive social-emotional, health and wellness, and behavior support to families and communities. Principals at NC lab schools identified as Title I schools must also adhere to requirements of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) regarding parent, family, and community engagement (PFCE). As a result of the school's Title I status, principals are charged with leading for PFCE to ensure that not only does the school benefit from parent and community involvement like in traditional schools, but more importantly families and community benefit from the connection to the NC Lab School.

As a current NC laboratory school principal, I much prefer to spend time collaborating with staff and parents in a discussion related to establishing and maintaining a culturally responsive school, as opposed to completing a required Title I finance report. Proof of progress at my school lies in the strengthening of relationships between school and home; federal funding simply relieves some of the financial stress within the school. The bonds I have developed with students and their families are invaluable benefits for the time I have spent, primarily in Title I schools, including the lab school, ensuring that students felt represented and heard in classrooms and hallways, and that parents felt invited, welcomed, and involved in the school and its day-to-day operations (Weiss, Lopez, & Rosenberg, 2010).

Working to establish a culturally responsive school is critical in addressing the failures of public education, which is a critical social justice issue of our time (Warren & Mapp, 2011). Since segregation, Black school principals have utilized the school-to-home relationship to support students, parents, and the community (Khalifa, 2012). There is a significant amount of research related to the relationship between school and community as overlapping spheres and the importance of community leadership as a component of principal leadership. (Horsford, 2009; Epstein, et al., 2019; Khalifa, 2015). While principals are leaders in establishing inclusive relationships between school and home, this journey is not theirs alone.

Great attention has been given to reforming public education in low-income communities, yet significant progress has been slow to come. Yes, test scores have increased in some areas in schools, however test scores do not measure real improvements in learning (Jackson, 2018). If test scores were indeed indicative of improvements in learning, then graduation statistics for Black and Latinx youth would be more aligned with data of their White peers, not significantly lower (NCES, 2019). Failure to graduate from high school increases the probability that Black and Latinx students will live in poverty and face economic hardship as adults, predominately excluded from mainstream participation in American life (Warren & Mapp, 2011). This does not have to be the narrative of these students' stories. Working in collaboration with teachers, families, and communities, school principals can lead the charge to change these statistics and ensure a future where all students are able to find access and opportunity to social and economic benefits equitably.

Early in my career I recognized my "calling" to work with underrepresented communities. I have always worked, and encouraged colleagues as well, to commit to building trusting relationships with students and their families in order to support students' academic,

social-emotional, and behavior achievement goals (Jackson, 2018; Epstein & Sanders, 2006). Building trusting relationships and connecting with others to create change helps create a social capital which helps achieve collective aims (Warren & Mapp, 2011). Social capital is a key source of power for marginalized communities who work together. When organized groups have social capital, they become better equipped to change the dynamic between public institutions and low-income communities (Warren & Mapp, 2011). There is no opportunity to employ social capital if trusting relationships are non-existent. Empowering my school community with social capital is one of my leadership goals.

Like principals across the country serving low-income communities, I look forward to opportunities which allow me to connect with colleagues, students, and families to find new ways to improve the quality of learning while also addressing equity in public education (Riehl, 2009; Warren & Mapp, 2011). Doing this kind of work requires trusting relationships, those not defined by power “over” others, or unilateral power, but power “with” others, that is relational power (Warren & Mapp, 2011). Promoting student achievement requires parity and trust between school and home, a partnership not always existent at initial introductions. Trusting relationships with parents is essential in soliciting their interest in, presence at, and engagement with their children’s school. Anderson and Minke (2007) call on school leaders, like principals, to recognize the guaranteed participation of families when parents perceive that leadership at their child’s school want them involved. Rather than adopt deficit thinking that “marginalized parents are incapable of positively influencing the educational lives of their children” (Watson & Bogotch, 2015, p. 262), schools could benefit from accepting Boutte and Johnson’s (2014) call to shift towards a more positive outlook, one of collaboration and hope. Far too often school principals in impoverished communities, primarily composed of Black and Latinx families, lack

knowledge and respect of the ethnicities and cultures of the students they serve (Watson & Bogotch, 2015). This leads one to question who truly possesses the deficit mindset.

Developing trusting relationships is the first stride towards countering data which suggest that people of color who are also low-income are not interested in their children's education (Auerbach, 2010). Acknowledging parents for providing academic support to their children is an initial step in gaining trust. Over time, trusting relationships enable parents to advocate for their children's education in spite of linguistic, logistic, and cultural constraints (Cooper, 2009; Epstein & Sanders, 2006).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Parent and family engagement in the educational lives of children positively influences student learning and achievement. However, a disconnect between school and home exists in many school communities and those in the role of principal are in position to bridge this gap (Horsford & Holmes-Sutton, 2012; Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009). As the disconnect grows, schools can become exclusionary towards parents and deficit mindsets lead to beliefs that parent engagement is shaped by race, class, gender, culture, and language. Those who exhibit a deficit mindset perceive White parents, specifically those of higher socioeconomic status, to be more likely to be directly involved, while low-income parents, specifically parents of color, are perceived to have little contact with educators and are comfortable with a "generic" education for their children (Auerbach, 2010; Gorski, 2008; Khalifa, 2018). Through deficit lens, schools construct limited roles for parents while rarely acknowledging conflicts with parents' work and/or childcare schedules (Watson & Bogotch, 2015). This is especially common in schools that serve primarily students of color who are also low income (Khalifa, 2018). Riehl (2009) suggests that school principals who seek to respond to diversity in their

schools attend to issues of meaning construction, promote inclusive school cultures and instructional practices, and work to position schools within community, organizational, and service-related networks. Given the importance of these tasks, determining how to accomplish each is an ongoing job for principals.

Within transformative schools there is an urgency to engage families broadly and deeply around their children's education (Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009). Under this mindset, some schools are intentional in their efforts to include *all* parents, specifically those of marginalized groups, as contributors to the success of the school based on their rich cultures and insight, as well as including parents in decision-making rather than viewing them as passive recipients of decisions made by others (Ishimaru, 2020). Principals are in better position than others in the school community to influence what things mean in schools and can lead meaning-making for the organization (Riehl, 2017; Rallis, 1990). Through day-to-day management, mediation of conflict, and resolving contradictions, principals are able to communicate new understandings which may lead to organizational changes that are more inclusive (Riehl, 2017; Anderson, 1990). Ultimately, transformative schools recognize improvements in student achievement when parents, families, and communities are involved in school decision making. In exercising parent inclusion practices, principals help their school become better able to “help students to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to become competent, thoughtful, and effective citizens in a racialized and polarized society” (Ishimaru, p. xi, 2020).

Relentless work is required in gaining an understanding of the ways in which families value education. Principals can lead this work in order to establish the school's culture and climate. They can play a central role in shaping school climate and facilitating parent engagement in child learning through their leadership style, communication, attitudes, and

expectations (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014; Drysdale, Goode, & Gurr, 2009; Giles, 2006, Gordon and Louis, 2009, Mleczko and Kington, 2013). This process requires developing trust with families of color who are skeptical due to generations of damaging inequities, and demolishing barriers between home and school for mainly underserved student populations (Horsford & Holmes-Sutton, 2012). There is no timeline for achieving meaningful parent family engagement, rather it is an ongoing commitment of time and energy. Working to establish positive relationships with minoritized families requires connecting families to networks outside of the school to benefit their children (Khalifa, 2018). Oftentimes, school principals do not know how to establish these types of relationships, therefore they are not prepared to lead others in the work required. Fortunately, developing culturally responsive relationships is not a responsibility which falls on any one individual; rather, it requires a team effort that includes input from all stakeholders within the school community on a non-hierarchical scale.

Each NC laboratory school is, by policy, committed to encouraging and enhancing community-school relationships. At each school, all of which are Title I schools, culturally responsive community engagement is required by law as outlined in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). “In 2016, the NC General Assembly law passed requiring the UNC Board of Governors to establish eight lab schools aimed at improving student performance in low-performing schools” (UNC System, 2020). NC lab schools were introduced to enhance educational programming to students in low-performing schools. In serving students in schools identified as low performing, NC lab schools also qualify for Title I funds based on at least 40% of the school’s students qualifying for free or reduced lunch (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Like traditional Title I schools, NC lab schools must also meet ESSA mandates in order to qualify for federal Title I funds.

Each NC lab school is composed of diverse populations representative of the geographic location in the state-rural, coastal, mountain. The commonality is the law under which each school was established. Examining how principals attempt to help NC lab schools meet ESSA requirements while also exercising culturally responsive inclusion strategies will provide a parent, family, and community engagement (PFCE) model for future NC lab schools, as well as traditional Title I schools that are struggling to escape from under outdated, exclusionary parent-family involvement practices.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of my qualitative study was to explore how NC Lab School principals attempt to lead for culturally responsive parent, family, and community engagement (PFCE) in their schools. ESSA laws allow some flexibility on how local education agencies (LEAs) involve parents, however the requirement that parents be included in school decision making in order to receive Title I federal funds is non-negotiable. I sought to examine how three NC Lab School principals consider characteristics like class, gender, language, ability, and/or sexual orientation in their approach to increase parent involvement in support of student achievement (Cooper, 2009). I explored how principals seek to ensure that NC lab schools employ practices that are intended to discontinue the adoption of the traditional “cultural fabric” of parent and family engagement that is primarily of White and middle-class origins because they are considered the “normal” and “right” thing to do (Gay, 2018). Accordingly, my study offers research potential in understanding how school leaders serving minoritized communities are striving to bridge cultural gaps between school and home. This study examined what strategies, if any, NC lab school principals use to establish and maintain a culturally responsive, inclusive organization, one

which contradicts traditional marginalization and disengagement of students and families of color (Cooper, 2009).

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided my study:

**RQ1:** How do NC lab school principals describe their attempts to lead for parent, family, and community engagement (PFCE) in their schools?

**RQ2:** How do participants discuss the current state of PFCE in their school?

**RQ3:** What is the relationship between a principal's appointment in a NC lab school and their training in and practice of culturally responsive leadership?

### **Background Context**

To provide background context for my study, I discuss the crucial role of school principals in fostering and maintaining relationships between parents, family, community, and schools. Parent-family-community engagement is widely understood to be an important factor in children's school experience and educational outcomes (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014). It is important for readers to understand the role of school principals in fostering PFCE while also acknowledging the demands of principals to manage the complexities of PFCE. Unique to this study was the involvement of NC Lab School principals. It is important to understand that NC lab schools have limited existence, less than 10 years, therefore, limited research has been conducted regarding the experiences of NC lab school principals specifically. I provide additional information about NC lab schools and PFCE in Chapter II.

### **Principals Fostering Parent-Family-Community Engagement**

For many parents, the quality of the school culture is attributed to the principal's attitude towards parent engagement in the school (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014). Given the increasing

diversity in student populations and communities, principals need to be equipped with cultural competence to build relationships with persons of different linguistic, cultural, historical, or socioeconomic backgrounds from their own (Strong & Xu, 2021; Cooper, 2009). Not only does cultural competence help schools build PFCE that focus on improving students' learning, but it also fosters relationships which work to address inequalities within the school and the school community (Cooper, 2009; O'Connor & Daniello, 2019).

School principals who foster culturally responsive parent, family, and community relationships oftentimes demonstrate the following behaviors (Khalifa, et.al., 2016):

- Displays critical consciousness of self and values, beliefs, or dispositions when it comes to serving students of color
- Intentional efforts to provide professional training for teachers so that they can be culturally responsive in their pedagogy and interaction with students
- Creates a welcoming, inclusive, and accepting school environment for all students
- Understands, addresses, and advocates for community-based issues, and creates structures that accommodate the lives of parents

Fostering PFCE relationships requires multidimensional outreach efforts such as working with parent and community volunteers, encouraging academic activities at home, and moving meetings beyond the school building. These efforts are critical for principals striving to foster positive working relationships between parents, family, community, and schools.

### **Managing Complexities**

While Stronge and Xu (2021) determined that “parents’ income, education level, family structure, workload, and attitudes toward schooling and education all play a role in influencing their engagement with their children’s education” (p. 172), principals committed to inclusive

PFCE do not accept the idea of “hard-to-reach” families and commit to finding a way to reach every family. The deficit mindset belief that parental engagement is low in low-income, urban school communities is unacceptable to principals working to establish culturally responsive schools. These principals understand that not all parents had positive learning experiences at school and do not see school engagement in a positive light. They also understand that other cultural barriers exist between school and home that may drive parents away from conversations and/or visits with school staff (Cooper, 2009). These complexities speak to the importance of providing professional development to help all school staff navigate home-to-school relationships.

Navigating the political waters that influence schools is also a daunting complexity. There are ongoing demands from parents, community organizations, school boards, staff, and even students. There are legal requirements on the local, state, and national levels that school principals are responsible to uphold. Oftentimes, legal requirements force the principal into conflict management situations between stakeholders. Addressing political situations equitably and responsively usually result in the best outcomes (Catano & Stronge, 2006; Tan, 2018; Stronge & Xu, 2021). Regardless of political agendas, school principals must remain responsive to their school communities in various situations.

### **Brief Description of Methods**

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) note basic qualitative research as the most common research approach in the fields of education, administration, social work, and counseling. Because my study was motivated by an intellectual interest in NC Lab School Principals efforts to establish culturally responsive PFCE and I have a goal to extend educators knowledge of PFCE, I determined a qualitative study to be the best approach to help me answer the questions that drove

my study. Qualitative study allowed me to ask questions about participants' everyday activities, thus fulfilling the purpose of knowing more about each principals' practices. I was genuinely curious and interested in knowing more about how NC Lab School principals strive to establish culturally responsive parent family and community engagement. Individual interviews with principals and a focus group interview were the specific methods I used in this study.

### **Conceptual Framework**

School leaders are mistaken if they believe parents' interest in their child's education is based on traditional practices of PFCE found in schools and classrooms (Watson & Bogotch, 2015). I used Ishimaru's (2020) conception of PFCE as my conceptual framework. Ishimaru described an approach that included: (1) problematizing well-meaning approaches to marginalized parents, (2) highlighting the expertise of nondominated families, (3) building equitable collaborations with families, and (4) providing guiding principles at multiple levels of educational systems to engage families. My study explored whether principals in NC Lab Schools described PFCE at their institutions as a "process shaped not by school-driven agendas, but by families themselves" (Ishimaru, 2020, p. 33). The study focused on how the principals discussed the importance of recognizing students, their families, and communities for their expertise and prioritizing their collective well-being, self-determination, and dignity. Ishimaru's (2020) framework suggests that simply seeing strengths instead of deficits is not sufficient; rather, shifts in power and/or changes in systems result in real change.

Ultimately, school leaders have a responsibility to initiate communication in the most inclusive and respectful ways imaginable to foster and increase PFCE (Auerbach, 2010; Jeynes, 2012). These efforts begin with recognizing student, family, and community needs and the resources to support those needs. A community-centric approach to education requires

reconsideration of fundamental assumptions of our education beliefs (Cooper, 2009; Ishimaru, 2020). It is past time that principals help education move from conventional partnerships to equitable collaborations wherein parents and families have influence in shaping the agenda and work as true partners, not merely service recipients.

### **Researcher Experience**

As a NC Lab School/Title I principal, I have a personal interest in increasing parental involvement for people of color and low-income families. In working so closely with students from these backgrounds, I remain mindful of the importance of their representation in decision-making in schools. I have experience with normative approaches to engage families such as, recruiting volunteers to conduct the annual holiday gift wrap sale and service as school greeters. However, I do realize that these approaches are also barriers for families as a result of lack of outreach, job obligations, flexible scheduling, and parents' past negative educational experiences (Cooper, 2009; Hands & Hubbard, 2011; Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009). Currently, my school hosts monthly parent, family, and community meetings emphasizing culture and climate to advocate for the importance of hearing all voices and representation of all families in school operations. There is room to grow in our efforts, but the response so far has been well-received.

At the school I lead, monthly meetings begin with the sharing of school demographics in order to stress the importance of knowing the students and families that we serve (Hands & Hubbard, 2011). Each meeting addresses successes, challenges, expectations, ideas, and questions the school community has about daily operations. I have noticed that breaking up into small groups encourages more authentic, engaging discussion, however, using common documents to collect small group conversations is helpful. Monthly meetings conclude with each participant, staff, family member and community member completing a linear scale survey to

provide feedback on how to improve future sessions. All parents are encouraged to attend, and meeting information is advertised through school and social media platforms. Community partners are invited according to meeting content and schedule availability. The interactions among stakeholders at monthly PFCE meetings not only intensify the respect I have for communication, collaboration, and partnerships, but also reveal factors which challenge and support PFC relationships.

I look forward to this study to contributing to the understanding of how principals, as street-level policy actors, make sense of state and federal policy while implementing programs in their local contexts (Hands & Hubbard, 2011; Hill, 2003). This study examined how NC Lab School leaders attempt to navigate the gaps among school, home, and community in their efforts to promote inclusion, culture, and diversity in NC lab school communities.

### **Significance of Study**

This study provided a glimpse into the work of three NC Lab School principals as they strive to establish and sustain culturally responsive PFCE. Discovering how these principals worked to maintain a mutual presence within school walls while also engaging in community-based causes may help other principals in their efforts to increase parent, family, and community engagement. This basic qualitative study will contribute to existing knowledge of PFCE, specifically in predominately Black and Latinx communities, through the in-depth interviews and focus groups I conducted. This leadership study is about NC Lab School principals and what they discuss trying to do to promote culturally responsive PFCE.

Information from the study will contribute to research on culturally responsive school communities and be useful for building-level administrators, school districts, principal preparation programs, and other organizations interested in culturally responsive PFCE.

Auerbach (2009) recognized how principals utilized family and community engagement as tools for making schools more equitable, culturally responsive, and collaborative. Information from the study will provide insight into how NC Lab School principals describe how they attempt to “talk the talk” of exercising equity, culturally responsive leadership, and collaboration, but also “walk the walk.” Principals spoke to me about whether and how they work to honor and center community-based perspectives in their schools, as well as the consequences of remaining committed to school-based perspectives even when they may marginalize children or community (Khalifa, 2018).

### **Overview of Chapters**

In Chapter I, I introduced myself as a NC Lab School principal highly interested in culturally responsive PFCE in marginalized school communities, those primarily consisting of Black and Latinx families. I shared my personal experiences with building trusting relationships, highlighted the importance of principals recognizing members of their school community and community needs, and introduced NC lab schools, specifically lab schools identified as Title I schools obligated to meet federal PFCE requirements. Additionally, I shared the three research questions that will guide this study in order to contribute to future research on culturally responsive PFCE in marginalized school communities.

In Chapter II, I review scholarly work that aligns with my interest in how principals lead for school, family, and community engagement in North Carolina laboratory schools. I include in-depth information on University Partnerships and Laboratory Schools, Culturally Responsive Leadership, and Parent-Family-Community Engagement. In Chapter III, I describe my methodology and methods, including the research setting and participants, data collection and analysis methods, researcher positionality, trustworthiness, and limitations. Findings from my

study are included in Chapter IV, followed by implications of my study for future use in Chapter V.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Across the country, public school districts are becoming more racially and ethnically diverse every year. As more school districts surpass the standard of one race constituting more than seventy-five percent of the system's overall student body, the need to embrace not only diverse students, but their families, cultures and beliefs, is inevitable. My study adds an updated inquiry to public education as I examine K-12 schools, specifically NC Laboratory Schools that are also Title I, which strive to promote equity and celebrate diversity. The study raises issues of social justice and human rights, which represent themes of a transformative paradigm.

Researching scholarly work that aligned with my interest in the development and implementation of comprehensive programs for school, family, and community relationships in North Carolina laboratory schools was a daunting, yet meaningful task. In this chapter, I review research related to university partnerships, principals as culturally responsive school leaders, and parent-family-community engagement.

### **University Partnerships and Laboratory Schools**

In 1896 the first lab school was established at the University of Chicago with the mission to promote studying children in a progressive, child-centered learning environment. This concept was the brainchild of American philosopher John Dewey, who strived to develop theories of child development and education. In due time, Dewey's vision of university-based child development laboratory programs contributed to the establishment of lab schools at other major universities such as the University of Missouri, Columbia Teacher's College, the University of Iowa, and the Ohio State University (Whitman, 2020). Lab schools were considered unique not only because of their association with a university, but also because of their role in fulfilling a 3-part mission: "facilitate research to learn more about how children grow and develop; educate

college students about child development and early childhood education; and serve the early childhood professional community in the form of training, educational presentations, and membership on advisory boards” (Wilcox-Herzog & McLaren, 2012, p. 1). The 3-part mission of lab schools made important contributions to research on delay of gratification, nature of observational learning, and studies of children’s cognitive abilities (Wilcox-Herzog & McLaren, 2012). While the three-part mission addressed Dewey’s progressive beliefs about child development and early childhood education, it is important to note the absence of addressing a broader issue: racism.

### **Instructional Program for Children**

John Dewey opened The University of Chicago Laboratory School in 1896 with sixteen students influenced by the ideas of European scholars. The school was well-known all over the world because of the curriculum the students received, as well as the books, textbooks, and journal articles produced by its faculty (Whitman, 2020). Data collected from the school was not based solely on classroom performance, but also included data from psycho-physical and nutritional assessments for insight into child development (Whitman, 2020). This model of instructional programming was also adopted at Columbia University’s Lincoln School. Students at the Lincoln School engaged in “creative lessons that prepared students for college entrance” (Whitman, 2020, p. 23). Also inspired by Dewey’s progressive Chicago based school was the Alabama State College Laboratory High School which offered students a rich curriculum in liberal arts. Throughout the twentieth century, laboratory schools flourished and succumbed, however their commitment to shaping child development and early childhood education never wavered. The tripartite mission remains prevalent today but with additional considerations which include celebrating one another’s knowledge, skills, power, and resources.

## **Role as Teacher Preparation Sites**

Lab schools were associated with a university and therefore, provided their own location for future teachers to gain first-hand knowledge of best practices and complete student teaching (Whitman, 2020). Because lab schools readily accepted new teaching practices, teachers used the most updated practices to facilitate instruction for their students and student teachers (Whitman, 2020). Unlike traditional students, lab school students were exposed to subject matter derived from both academia and the real-world. Lab schools were intentional in their efforts to include the students' lives outside of school into daily curriculum (Whitman, 2020). This type of commitment to Dewey's philosophy of child-centered learning and best practices established unique pioneer institutions which impacted education not only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century but presently. Contextualizing teacher learning is one component of university partnerships. However, an even greater undertaking lies in establishing collaboration and shared decision making between the university and school personnel (Burton & Greher, 2007). This relationship is extremely critical in the development of a strong association between theory and practice. Whereas university faculty are acknowledged for their understanding of theory, school personnel are recognized as practitioners. Establishing university to school relationships which a) develop a capacity to engage in discussion and reflection, b) contribute to an understanding of curriculum as both academic and practical, and c) focus on students is critical for the success of lab schools.

## **Professional Community**

Lab schools modeling Dewey's progressive model were designed to produce and refine professional practices (Perrillo, 2016). "Research has shown that when early childhood teachers and administrators participate in professional development and training, they are more effective programmatically and with children" (Wilcox-Herzog & McLaren, 2012, p. 2). In promoting

professional learning and making research and best practices accessible to others, lab schools strived to increase and improve early childhood programs on a global scale. The educational texts and materials faculty and staff produced at the schools were not only used to facilitate instruction for students, but the content was also published in scholarly journals worldwide in order to contribute to the field of early childhood education.

### **North Carolina Laboratory Schools**

In 2016, the North Carolina General Assembly required UNC Board of Governors to establish eight lab schools aimed at improving student performance in low-performing schools (UNC System Laboratory Schools). Similar to Dewey's concept of child-centered learning, NC lab schools seek to improve student outcomes by promoting evidence-based teaching and school leadership and offering real-world experience to future teachers and principals. Unlike Dewey's schools which primarily "served an elite and homogeneous population that consisted mainly of the children of university faculty and staff" (Abrahams, 2011, p. 110), NC lab schools derived from schools previously identified as low performing according to NC accountability standards. NC lab schools also require a public service commitment in order to meet the full mission of the UNC System-teaching, research, and public service. A notable difference in the two is that Dewey's schools served predominately white, elite populations, while NC lab schools serve predominately black and brown populations from low-income communities.

Currently, there are six UNC System lab schools operating throughout each region in the state: Lab School 1 is located in the Piedmont, Lab School 2 is located in the Mountains, Lab School 3 is located in the Coastal Plain, Lab School 4 is located in the Coastal Plain, Lab School 5 is located in the Piedmont, and Lab School 6 is located in the Piedmont. Each school is partnered not only with the School of Education as its accredited university partner, but each also

collaborates with the local education agency (LEA) to provide an enhanced education program for students residing in the district. While each lab school is equally committed to supporting students' individual identities, academic achievement, social development, and overall well-being, all campuses are unique and allow for instructional programs catered to the students enrolled. Information about unique programs offered at the six UNC System lab schools can be located on each school's individual web site.

NC lab schools bring extensive resources of the host university to their respective schools. Students at Lab School 2 routinely have visits from students and faculty from its medical, dental, and nursing schools on campus to support the social-emotional learning curriculum. Students at Lab School 5 have annual vision and hearing screening completed by staff, faculty, and students from the campus audiology department and school of nursing. Hands-on opportunities with at-risk students are plentiful at the Lab School 2. It is common for the middle grade students to visit the university campus and explore the campus library, 3D print shop, or other campus learning spaces. Opportunities for demonstration, hands-on, experiential learning and student support are extensive at all six NC lab schools (Rhew, 2019). These opportunities represent the foundation of what each school is all about in addition to serving as an expansion of the teaching and administration experience for university students.

Within the UNC System, lab schools are charged with improving student performance in low-performing schools not only by employing teaching and research, but also by exercising public service with families and the school community to address and eliminate marginalization in these schools (Theoharis, 2007). The work of UNC System lab schools is best described by the African proverb "It takes a village to raise a child" as the work required to support the

children academically, socially, and emotionally cannot be attended to without the involvement of students' families and the school community.

### **Principals as Culturally Responsive School Leaders**

Somewhere between culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy lies the concept of culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL). In thriving CRSL school communities, principals are bridges between the school and the community largely due to broadening understanding and moving beyond the classroom to the larger community (Hollowell, 2019). According to Johnson and Fuller (2014), CRSL involves leadership practices and strategies that develop school environments that are inclusive students and families from diverse backgrounds. CRSL is often misunderstood to be needed solely in settings that primarily serve minoritized students. This is not true for two primary reasons: 1-culturally responsive school leadership is needed in all settings, and 2-not all students of color are minoritized. Culturally responsive school leadership style includes caring, relationship-building and the fostering of cultural responsiveness (Hollowell, 2019). Likewise, CRSL encompasses aspects of anti-oppressive/racist leadership, transformative leadership, and social justice leadership (Khalifa, Goodes, & Davis, 2016).

Given schools' histories in contributing to the marginalization of certain communities, lack of trust in schools by community members is understandable (Khalifa, 2018). CRSL addresses issues related to educational improvements for minoritized students. Principals are in position to improve the lives and educational experiences of students, specifically those of marginalized groups, by identifying, protecting, and celebrating all cultural practices from marginalized students (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016).

Culturally responsive principals also contribute to the development of communities through partnerships with community-based organizations (CBO). Traditionally, principals are most visible in the school building and at some sporting events. Principals who venture deeper into students' communities expand the traditional perception by showing engagement in and advocacy for community-based causes that begin with the community's interest, not test scores, grades, and behavior (Cooper, 2009; Green, 2015; Khalifa, 2018). Performing cultural work requires leaders to learn about the community they serve and situate aspects of their school so they recognize and celebrate the contributions of all cultures.

A thriving CRSL principal is highly visible, active, and a trusted member of the school community, much like members of society including pastors, political figures, or business owners (Khalifa, 2018). Principals can influence student success by having strong relationships with students and families by advocating for community-based interests and by creating schools as spaces of inclusivity (Ishimaru, 2014; Khalifa, 2013, Green, 2015; Cooper, 2009). Using their position to promote education as a sociocultural process is a step in the right direction. Khalifa (2018, p. 174), offers the following suggestions for principals to help improve their credibility, rapport, and trust with local communities:

- Find out what is important to the community
- Use school resources to enable community members to have a constant presence in the school
- Take an active antiracist and anti-oppressive stance, particularly on issues relevant to your students' community
- Be honest with students and families. Ask for their help
- Find ways to have a representative community voice

- Publicly share your vision for how you have listened to student and community perspectives

Ultimately, it is the principal's responsibility as the school leader to clarify the misinterpretations about equity diversity, behavior, and education that exists between students, staff, parents, and community members.

As principals recognize shifts in population demographics, they must be prepared to also shift their leadership practices and school operations. As noted by Madhlangobe and Gordon (2012), "cultural responsiveness should be at the center of efforts to improve performance of underachieving groups in multicultural societies; moreover, it is a powerful, persistent, and vitalizing force for improving education for *all* students" (p. 180).

While culturally responsive practices have primarily focused on classrooms, recent efforts have applied a culturally responsive framework to the principalship (Johnson & Fuller, 2014). Just as principals are charged with developing teachers' instructional practices, they must do the same with cultural responsiveness (Khalifa, et.al., 2016). Ensuring that the school is inclusive and culturally responsive to the needs of all stakeholders requires principals to continually accept, appreciate, and embrace the different cultures within the school and school community (Khalifa et al., 2016). This is essential in establishing and promoting a climate that is inclusive, welcoming, and accepting of all students. In developing an understanding of how epistemology influences how people learn and their beliefs, principals become better prepared to engage themselves and others in the type of anti-bias work designed to build understanding of differences between individuals and groups (Khalifa, 2018). Khalifa (2018) argues that school leaders, including principals, "must lead schools with community perspectives at the center of their leadership behaviors" (p. 11). Principals who keep community as the nucleus of their

organization know the culture, beliefs, and needs of the school community. Therefore, they are able to challenge forms of oppression by influencing contexts and lives of students (Hollowell, 2019).

In order to lead diverse school communities, principals must recognize and understand the impact of historically oppressive structures on marginalized communities and intentionally strive to counter this oppression. The origins of differences extend far beyond race and also impact schooling and community partnerships. Green (2015) refers to cross-boundary leadership (CBL) as “the ability to create direction, alignment, and commitment across boundaries in service of a higher goal or vision”. In schools, principals are often the leaders responsible for strategically permeating diverse organizational boundaries to guide collective actions (Miller, 2008; Green, 2015). While principals do not have to do the work in isolation, they are charged with key concepts of CBL, like operating across multiple levels of leadership: school-based, district-based, and community-based (Green, 2015). In order to work across multiple levels successfully, Khalifa (2018) suggests principals consider the following approaches: (a) be critically self-reflective; (b) develop culturally responsive teachers and curricula; (c) promote inclusive, anti-oppressive school contexts and (d) engage students’ community.

The responsibility to equitably address the structural, cultural, and power discontinuities between schools and families does not fall solely on the principal (Cooper, Riehl, & Hasan, 2010). All educators must reject deficit-based views of diverse families and learn to build relationships where educators commit to forming successful partnerships through valuing families’ knowledge, caring for families, and trusting that families are vested in their children’s education (Cooper, Riehl, & Hasan, 2010). Just as educators are respected for their professional knowledge, so should parents be respected for the expertise they contribute toward educational

equity. Any attempt to exercise culturally responsive school leadership must approach the school as a social space where students, parents, faculty, and the community are equitably understood, respected, and empowered (Auerbach, 2012).

## **Parent-Family-Community Engagement**

### **Parents of Color and Education**

As early as the beginning of formal schooling in this country, deficit thinking about families of color engagement in school has existed (Khalifa 2018; Ishimaru, 2020). Therefore, it is critical to “acknowledge the founding of the United States on stolen Native lands and the ways in which formal schooling has largely operated as a vehicle of colonization and assimilation throughout the history of this country” (Ishimaru, 2020, p. 21). Throughout formal education, children have been separated from their communities, i.e., via boarding schools, zoning, and most currently, charter schools. Education has been done *to* children and families with schools serving as the vehicles of such oppression and colonization (Khalifa et al., 2018).

Early twentieth century research by Coleman et al. (1966) stated that students’ educational attainment could largely be explained by students’ family background. While repeatedly discredited by other studies, the stereotype that a “culture of poverty” described by behaviors, attitudes, and deficient culture of low-income people has persisted and been reinforced in many professional development programs offered to educators (Gorski, 2008). Despite a plethora of research challenging the framing of racial inequities, these types of deficient assumptions remain popular, therefore the tropes live on.

Though there has been desegregation and decades of efforts to improve schools and academic outcomes, educational injustices remain prevalent (Ishimaru, 2018). In many school districts, resource allocations remain tax based-income and/or real estate. America’s legacy of

redlining and racial covenants which prevented people of color from living in particular areas or accessing loans for home buying is well known. Therefore, Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) attributes injustice to people of color to centuries of sociopolitical, historical, economic, and moral exclusion.

As families are marginalized by educational and other systems, a default negative parent engagement paradigm is formed. This deficit-based assumption may reinforce inequities in education, but it can be addressed through culturally responsive parent family and community engagement. In 2022, it is now unacceptable to label African American parents who advocate for their children as “obstacles” or “problem parents” while white parents are considered “involved” when advocating for their child’s education. It is my belief that it is possible to involve parents and community in schools without reinforcing the notion that nondominant families have no place in education.

### **Considering Parent Engagement**

Parent engagement and parent involvement are terms used interchangeably to describe the collaborative working relationships between parents and families and the school communities that serve them (Horsford & Holmes-Sutton, 2012). Exploring the distinction in practice, researchers frequently address the differences between parent involvement, where schools structure parents’ activity, thus assigning parents a passive role, and parental engagement, where parents exercise an active voice and are designated as change agents who can transform schools and communities (Fenton, Ocasio-Stoutenburg, & Harry 2017; Ishimaru 2017). Both parent engagement and involvement are recognized as important factors, yet they remain weak in many communities, especially low-income communities (Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009).

Traditionally, parent engagement has focused on three things: 1) what is best for the school, 2) children's learning in school, and 3) how parents can assist (Cooper, Riehl, & Hasan, 2010). Translated to activities, traditional parent involvement resembled school activities like a) attendance at functions, b) supporting students with homework, c) collaboration with teachers and school officials, d) attendance at face-to-face school meetings, and e) serving as a school volunteer (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Both engagement and involvement rely on collaboration between school and home to support children. However, parent engagement and involvement are useless if perceived by schools and/or parents as intrusive, barriers to learning, or mere functions of public relations (Cooper, Riehl, & Hasan, 2010). As principals become better about advocating for community-based issues, honoring students' native languages, and creating structures that accommodate parents' busy schedules, the negative assumptions shift to more positive outlooks of parent engagement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Cooper, 2009; Khalifa, 2012). Schools must acknowledge the realities that not all parents need encouragement to become involved in their child's education and that over time parent involvement tends to decline, specifically in middle and high school (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

Ironically, parent involvement activities can also erect barriers for undeserved student populations and are not without critique from education scholars. Kim (2009) identified the following barriers to minority parents' participation in their children's school in the United States: (a) teachers' perceptions about their efficacy, (b) teachers' perceptions concerning parents' capacity, (c) teachers' beliefs in the effectiveness of parental involvement, (d) teachers' self-efficacy in teaching effectiveness, (e) school friendliness and positive communication, (f) diversity of parental involvement programs, (g) school policies, and (h) school leadership. Swap (1993) pointed out that social dynamics in schools result in a hierarchical order in which

educators are at the top of schools' social and political hierarchy and parents at the bottom. Warren, Hong, Rubin, and Uy (2009) referred to this hierarchy as the outcome when the imbalance in knowledge and power between school and home is not addressed. Cooper, Riehl, and Hasan (2010) attributed low parent engagement to parents feeling unwelcome or underappreciated at their children's school, as well as parents' lack of trust in educators. The dominant narrative describing students and families of marginalized communities, specifically students of color and low-socioeconomic status, reflects the application of blame and/or deficit mindsets by educators (Flores & Kyere, 2020). An awareness of how systemic inequity privileges some families and marginalizes others is essential if education leaders will build trusting relationships with the school community.

Parent family engagement should not be limited to opportunities which directly affect student outcomes (e.g., parent tutoring, homework assistance, PTA), but should include engagement as it affects the cultural climate schools create (Flores & Kyere, 2020). Exercising an equity-based parent engagement model which focuses on a) how to employ the power of relationships to engage parents, b) understanding what trusting relationships with parents reciprocates, and c) why prioritizing positive relationships with racially and ethnically diverse families, should be a priority for any principal, especially those who serve marginalized school communities (Flores & Kyere, 2020). It is imperative that principals see parents beyond their social context and seek to support parents in areas of empowerment, like advocacy, education, and mental health (Green, 2018).

Aside from 'cookie-cutter' volunteer programs, parent family engagement should also include instances where parents and schools work collaboratively with community-based organizations to engage families in schools (Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009). Collaboration

does not imply agreement; rather, educators and families work as partners with shared responsibility to contribute to, refute, and assert ideas on how to progress the school and community. This consideration may prove extremely beneficial in low-income urban communities where parent engagement remains relatively frail. This shared approach can build critical relational bridges that serve as catalysts for change among members of the school community that otherwise may go unnurtured. The educator-family partnership can represent the foundation required for school change and community development.

### **Purpose of Parent-Family-Community Engagement**

Partnerships contribute to improving school climate, strengthening school and classroom programs, increasing parents' skills, and connecting communities (Epstein, et al., 2019). The history of establishing school communities where teachers and principals want to know how to work with parents and community positively, parents want to know if schools are providing quality education, students want to succeed, and communities want to serve as supporters of schools and families is well documented at the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University (Epstein et al., 2019). These collaborations are extremely important for children in low-income and marginalized communities because they address the belief among educators that without partnerships, children from these communities are least likely to perform and excel in schools (Sanders, 2016).

The connection between parent and family engagement and student achievement may seem obvious, however narrow and traditional conceptions of involvement limit understanding. While research literature shows that active parent involvement positively influences student learning, there remains the perception that Black, Latino, low-income, and/or immigrant families do not value education (Horsford & Holmes-Sutton, 2012). While parent engagement is

meaningful, the experience is maximized when engagement is culturally relevant and responsive to the diversity of the community. Prioritizing positive relationships with racially and ethnically diverse and economically disadvantaged families contributes to effective parent-school engagement in ways that empower parents to help their children (Flores & Kyere, 2020).

### **School-Home Partnerships**

While educators are responsible for producing measurable growth in the areas of academics, behavior, and social-emotional status, there should also be goals of establishing a culture of shared responsibility with parents and communities instead of a culture of implicit blame (Ishimaru, 2020). Schools have more capacity in terms of money allocation, educated staff, and training to reduce barriers between school and home, therefore devoting time to exploring these options may prove effective in improving school-home partnerships (Kim, 2009). School-based educators are charged with working with parents and families to provide suggestions on reducing barriers, conducive learning at home, exercising cultural awareness, establishing programs to assist with health and nutrition services, and facilitating transitions from grade to grade. These actions exemplify schools fully supporting all families. Ultimately, school to home relationships are reflective of the school's commitment to its children.

It is not the student's responsibility to learn how to navigate the relationship between school and home. Rather, collaboration as a dynamic that works on multiple levels can help bridge gaps from broader structures to everyday moments between school and home (Ishimaru, 2020). Closing the communication gap grows even more critical when schools are composed of culturally diverse populations. Kim's study (2009) identified better communication as one of several school barriers. Her work notes that "parents prefer less formal and more personal contact through regular, informal, and timely contact rather than formal letters and

conversations” (Kim, 2009, p. 89). Communication is but one cultural characteristic of a community. School leaders should be mindful that there is no greater way to lose the interest of a community than to not acknowledge the culture(s) of its members.

As schools work to confront inequities regarding race, class, gender, language, ability, and/or sexual orientation, staff should make conferences with parents, weekly or monthly calls or newsletters, clear information about school courses, policies, and programs all available in translated versions to avoid language barriers (Cooper, 2009). It is long past the time to empower families of students of color and low-socioeconomic status by changing the dominant narrative used to describe them by public educators. These groups have consistently been harmed by educators’ deficit mindsets that enforce institutionalized practices of schooling (Flores and Kyere, 2020). Bridging the gap between school and home relies on intentional support and communication.

While schools should earnestly take the lead in establishing parent-family-community partnerships, parents ultimately have to embrace the opportunities presented to sustain a working relationship. Parents and community are needed to lay the groundwork for collaboration in a way that is not only relational, but that also builds trust and eliminates barriers (Warren & Mapp, 2011). Organized parent groups more often than not benefit schools. The services offered by parent groups may not directly relate to reading programs and math curriculum, however they do speak to the importance of parent participation on children’s academic progress.

Parent involvement is an important factor in academic achievement (Colombo, 2006; Flores & Kyere, 2020). Parents are encouraged to take an active interest in their child’s education. Most parents care about their children, want them to succeed, and are eager to have a relationship with their child’s school (Epstein et al., 2019). Research has continuously shown

better outcomes when schools build positive relationships with parents and families (Flores & Kyere, 2020). Recognizing how their commitment to be involved in new ways at school contributes to academic and behavioral growth, decreases in chronic absenteeism, and improves psychoeducational outcomes for their child can be a rewarding experience for parents, but schools must contribute by meeting their expectations for academic achievement and social-emotional growth. In creating caring, cooperative, respectful relationships that involve parents in the development of policies that address barriers, needs, and strategies, schools can increase parent engagement while simultaneously exercising a responsibility in cultural responsiveness (Fenton et al., 2017; Warren et al., 2009). Collaboratively working to create and sustain relationships that reflect the school as accepting and caring of all students and families is critical for parent engagement.

### **School-Home-Community Partnerships**

Fenton et al. (2017) note the common exclusion of urban schools in Joyce Epstein's 1987 model of "overlapping spheres" used to demonstrate the collaboration between schools, families, and communities. Fortunately, Ishimaru (2020) addresses the importance of collaborations between schools and community-based organizations in improving educational outcomes, specifically for communities of color and Indigenous communities. Collaborative efforts like Promise Neighborhoods Initiative, the Harlem Children's Zone, and the Strive Network would not thrive without partnerships among schools, parents, community partners, and policymakers (Ishimaru, 2020). Moving the needle forward on aspirations to coordinate social and support services around education requires schools and community partners to build more equitable relations. Like Ishimaru, Warren (2005) identifies collaboration between public schools and

community-based organizations to reform urban schools. Both researchers link change in education to social change in school communities.

While there are communities where there are disconnections between schools and homes, the relationship between community and homes can be used as a catalyst for school-home partnerships. Local businesses have economic interest in community, including in low-income neighborhoods. By offering community services ranging from health and human services to affordable housing, businesses establish themselves in low-income communities, thus developing relationships with those living in the area (Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009). As a result of the clear correlation between education and economics, specifically in low-income communities, schools can benefit from community-home partnerships as businesses look to foster school change along with community development (Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009).

As in any organization, diversity in race, ethnicity, and culture is prevalent in schools and there is a huge responsibility for educators to navigate cultural differences (Peck & Reitzug, 2018). This requires educational leaders to perform cultural work, including cultivating “cultural workers”- educators who are equipped with the knowledge and resources to make school-home partnerships culturally responsive and to collaborate with parents and community organizations to forge relationships (Cooper, 2009). Cultural workers are intentional in their efforts to reject separatist politics. They disapprove of Black-White, good-bad, haves-have nots dichotomies, therefore showing an understanding that identities are dynamic social constructions within an organization (Cooper, 2009). Cultural workers “do not perceive differences as being negative or deficit based” (Cooper, 2009, p. 701). Cultural workers refuse to allow the flaws of society to steer them from their pursuit of transforming inequities and forging positive relationships. Their commitment to change is commendable and necessary in marginalized school communities.

Improving school-home-community partnerships requires cultural workers, advocates who, despite their differences, share common humanity and are prepared to be cultural change agents committed to recruiting those within the school community to do the work needed effectively (Cooper, 2009).

The manner in which schools, families, and communities work to promote equity and celebrate diversity affects relationships. Oftentimes, principals are more attuned to the need for equitable educational opportunities rather than equitable cultural opportunities. In order to effectively communicate with marginalized and minoritized students and families, principals need to endorse transformative leadership by broadening the school's knowledge of culture and working diligently to build coalitions with diverse groups to impact students' education (Cooper, 2009). In recognizing the diverse cultural backgrounds within a school community, schools avoid a color-blind approach to students and their families (Peck & Reitzug, 2018). Establishing and sustaining trusting relationships is directly connected to recognizing cultural and linguistic differences (Cooper, 2009).

### **Conclusion**

In conducting this literature review, I considered research related to lab schools of the past and present, culturally responsive principal leadership, and how principals engage with parents, families, and communities. As mentioned in my review, traditional practices of parent outreach may exclude the very families that schools are targeting. Working to figure out how to involve parents/families requires knowing their needs and limitations is a key component of cultural responsiveness. There are benefits to simply asking what parents need instead of making uninformed assumptions. This could make a huge difference in engagement.

Families should never feel judged by educators or find their cultural practices, values, and priorities disregarded. When this occurs, not only do schools widen so-called achievement gaps, but they also exacerbate racial and other inequities in education (Ishimaru, 2020). It is important to be concerned about the groups most impacted by oppressive systems, yet at the same not be perceived as exclusionary to dominant groups. The research that regards both parent engagement and school leadership from an equity standpoint is growing but remains underdeveloped (Ishimaru, 2020). Educational leaders can support research by advocating for educational justice and equity for historically marginalized students, families, and communities (Ishimaru, 2020). There is much work to be done to create fair and equitable education for all students. My qualitative case study will add to the existing research regarding parent engagement and school leadership from an equity standpoint by examining how NC lab school principals discuss the efforts of their schools to engage parents and communities.

## CHAPTER III: METHODS

In this qualitative research study, I explored how NC Lab School principals lead for parent, family, and community engagement (PFCE) in their schools. My interest in this research stems from my experience as a public-school educator and current NC Lab School principal serving communities predominately composed of low-income Black and Latinx families.

Through this study, I answered the following questions:

**RQ1:** How do NC lab school principals describe their attempts to lead for parent, family, and community engagement (PFCE) in their schools?

**RQ2:** How do participants discuss the current state of PFCE in their school?

**RQ3:** What is the relationship between a principal's appointment in a NC lab school and their training in and practice of culturally responsive leadership?

Study participants helped me answer the research questions, therefore contributing to the understanding of how NC Lab School principals attempt to establish culturally responsive parent engagement. This study supports bridging the gaps between school, home, and community in order to promote inclusion, culture, and diversity in NC lab school communities.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) identify qualitative researchers as those, "interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 6). Throughout this study, the focus remained on the process, understanding, and meaning of basic qualitative research. As researcher, I served as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. The process was inductive, as the data collected helped to identify themes and developed concepts related to Ishimaru's framework as adopted for the study. As noted by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), words served as data and therefore, they were used to convey what I learned throughout the process. In this study, I

examined how NC Lab School principals strive to implement culturally responsive parent, family, and community engagement. This research will help others make sense of the principals' worlds and the experiences they have in their respective schools (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

This chapter describes the methods I used as part of this basic qualitative research study.

This chapter is organized into five sections:

**Section 1:** Research Design

**Section 2:** Research Setting and Participants

**Section 3:** Data Collection and Analysis

**Section 4:** Trustworthiness

**Section 5:** Limitations

Each section is representative of the steps I took to generate my findings.

### **Research Design**

In this study, I used qualitative research to examine the experiences of NC Lab School principals with culturally responsive PFCE. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), “qualitative research is based on the belief that knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, experience, or phenomenon” (p. 23). This study provided an opportunity for me to develop an understanding of how NC Lab School principals are working to establish and maintain culturally responsive PFCE and their experiences with PFCE at each respective school. Through the qualitative research approach of interviewing, I was able to build an understanding of each principals' uniqueness and the nature of their community, and also developed a depth of understanding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As explained by Lichtman (2012), qualitative research is most appropriate when researchers need answers to questions that cannot be addressed by numerical data. My interest was in how

principals interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences. Therefore, I relied on basic qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Research Setting and Participants**

Principals from three different NC lab schools representing different regions of NC are represented in this study. Each school caters to K-5 or K-8 students and has been in existence for at least two years. Per North Carolina legislation, *Article 29A University of North Carolina Laboratory Schools*, the mission of each lab school is to improve student performance in low-performing schools. Each participating school in the study also represents a Title I school based on at least 40% of the school's students qualifying for free or reduced lunch (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). In compliance with Title I Parent and Family Engagement requirements, each school is obligated to engage with parents in order to improve student achievement and school success. Similarly, each school has an average daily membership (ADM) near 350 and community needs are extremely high.

Due to the national pandemic, COVID-19, research participants were operating under health and safety protocols that did not allow in-person meetings. Therefore, I conducted interviews and focus group sessions via Zoom with follow ups occurring via phone and/or Zoom.

### **Data Collection**

In working to gain a sound understanding of NC Lab School principals' efforts to implement culturally responsive parent, family, and community engagement I conducted two rounds of individual interviews with each of the three NC Lab School principals. I also conducted one focus group interview with all principal participants. In order to maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for all principal participants. The qualitative interviews I

facilitated served as guided conversations where I listened closely to the participants in an effort to uncover the meaning of what each person shared (Gubrium & Holstein, 2005). I used the three NC Lab School principals' responses to answer my three research questions related to PFCE in their schools. At the conclusion of the interview process, I was able to derive interpretations, not facts or laws, from the respondents (Gubrium & Holstein, 2005). My interview and focus group protocols are available in Appendices A-C.

## **Interviews**

The first round of individual interviews consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted and recorded via Zoom. The purpose of the first-round interview was to develop a relationship with the participant, gain knowledge of their background, and develop an initial understanding of their response to RQ 1. I interviewed principals using open-ended questions, much like a conversation, however structured to collect personal background information to learn more about their paths to becoming a NC Lab School principal. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) define the semi-structured interview as mixture of more and less structured questions. This is an ideal approach to learn more about participants' professional backgrounds, as well as their insight and understanding of culturally responsive PFCE. According to Patton (2015), questioning a person about their behaviors, actions, and activities stimulates responses. I relied on participants' varied responses to learn more about each principal and enter into each person's perspective (Patton, 2015).

The second round of interviews were built around research questions II-III and touch on more specifics like evidence of current PFCE in the school, principals' interpretations of PFCE policies, individually and as a collective group, and how the principals strive to meet ESSA guidelines. Second round interview questions were used to gain a better understanding of each

principals' level of preparedness in serving as a culturally responsive school leader. Also in second round interviews, each participant was asked to share examples and evidence of the factors that support and/or challenge culturally responsive PFCE for them in their respective communities.

### **Focus Group**

During the focus group interview involving the three NC Lab School principals, participants talked openly about their lab school experience, identified any common problems, and discussed solutions accordingly. Fortunately, the focus group experience provided an opportunity for the lab school principals to reflect on interventions and their effectiveness in their school community (Mertens, 2009). The two rounds of interviews and the focus group discussion helped me generate findings to answer the research questions and contributed to an understanding of how the principals lead for parent, family, and community engagement (PFCE) in their schools.

### **Data Analysis**

Mertens (2009) describes data analysis in qualitative studies as “an ongoing process” which does not begin once all the data have been collected (p. 292). Instead, data analysis in qualitative studies begins at the onset of the study and includes at least four steps: 1) data preparation, 2) data exploration, 3) data reduction, and 4) interpretation (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Throughout my study, I employed these general steps to transcribe recorded interviews, code the interviews and documents, and identified main themes that represented my study's findings. I used Ishimaru's (2020) study as my conceptual framework.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain coding as “nothing more than assigning some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific

pieces of data” (p. 199). Transcripts from the two rounds of interviews and the focus group were collected and coded. Through the coding process, I successfully identified three to five main themes which represented the findings of my study. The constant comparative method of data analysis has been widely used throughout qualitative research to generate findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

After presenting my findings in Chapter 4, I conducted a second, deeper round of analysis in Chapter 5. Specifically, I used Ishimaru’s framework as a lens to further analyze my findings. I determined whether and how the participating NC lab school principals: (1) problematize well-meaning approaches to marginalized parents, (2) highlight the expertise of nondominated families, (3) build equitable collaborations with families, and (4) provide guiding principles at multiple levels to engage families. I noted any evidence of power shifts and/or changes in systems as related to PFCE. Overall, this study explored whether principal participants’ “best practices” have shifted to become more inclusive and reciprocal. Evidence, or lack of, provided a fuller picture of NC lab school principals’ efforts to establish culturally responsive PFCE. I discuss the results of my analysis in Chapter 5.

### **Trustworthiness**

In order to enhance the trustworthiness, increase the credibility of this study, and conduct ethical research, I followed strategies suggested by Mertens (2009), yet originally developed by Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba.

### **Peer Debriefing**

Following both rounds of interviews and the focus group, I remained in frequent discussion with my participants and revealed aspects of the study that may have remained undiscovered without more discussion. Collecting data through interviews and a focus group

were the most effective ways for me to ensure consistent and dependable results. Sharing this information in a timely manner also complemented the study.

### **Progressive Subjectivity**

As a researcher, I engaged in self-reflection throughout the study and constantly revisited the three research questions. I remained committed to describing in detail how data was collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the process. Recognizing the importance of reflection in capturing observer commentary, my notes were recorded in a reflexivity journal to ensure my reflections, questions, and the decisions made regarding problems, issues, or ideas I encounter in collecting data are accessible (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). All findings were shared with research participants at various times during the study and a final copy was provided upon completion.

### **Member Checks**

Conducting member checks was helpful not only with ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting or misrepresenting interview participants, but also helped me identify my own biases and misunderstandings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Throughout the study, participants were able to confirm or refute the findings as we worked our way through the study. Conducting member checks throughout the study contributed to culturally respectful, reciprocal relationships between the researcher and participants.

### **Limitations**

Working with NC Lab School principals was a unique limitation in itself. With only six NC lab schools in the UNC system at the time I began, including the three represented in the study, represented a limited sample size contributing to PFCE research. Therefore, this study should not be considered comprehensive or generalizable. Even though there was a limited

number of participants in my study, I am confident that the information provided will contribute to future PFCE research. The findings from my study are best considered to be a sampling of NC lab school principals' experiences with PFCE and are not representative of all NC lab schools.

### **Summary**

In Chapter III, I described the methodology of my dissertation study. In this chapter, I included description of the qualitative research design, overview of methodology, site selection, framework, and data collection methods. Additional information in this chapter included data analysis, trustworthiness, and limitations. Chapter IV includes findings from the qualitative research.

## CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present the findings from the qualitative approach I used to gain participants' perspectives. The recordings and transcripts from interviews and a focus group I held via Zoom helped reveal the experiences of three NC lab school principals in their efforts to implement culturally responsive parent, family, and community engagement at their schools.

Each principal participated in two individual interviews and one focus group to help answer the following research questions:

**RQ1:** How do NC lab school principals describe their attempts to lead for parent, family, and community engagement (PFCE) in their schools?

**RQ2:** How do participants discuss the current state of PFCE in their school?

**RQ3:** What is the relationship between a principal's appointment in a NC lab school and their training in and practice of culturally responsive leadership?

Prior to each interview session, the participants received a copy of the interview questions, including the targeted research question. The first interview session targeted RQ1 and the second interview session targeted RQ2 and RQ3. The focus group session targeted all three research questions. As a researcher, I followed my semi-structured interview protocol with each participant and asked clarifying questions. I also prompted interviewees to expand their responses when needed.

To reveal the data from the interviews and focus group, this chapter is organized into two sections. In Section I, I provide a participant profile including personal background information for each principal participant. Within each profile is also an overview of each NC laboratory school in the study. In the profiles, I also highlight each principal's beliefs about and experiences with parent, family, and community engagement at their respective school. In

Section II, I describe the main themes I surfaced from the interviews and focus group. These themes represent my study's findings.

### **Section I: Participant Profiles**

The participants interviewed in my study are current NC Lab School principals and they are also principals of schools identified as Title I, which by law, requires adherence to federal parent and family engagement guidelines. To protect the identity and ensure the confidentiality of each participant, the principals and their respective NC lab schools are identified by the following pseudonyms:

- Laretta-UNC Biltmore School
- Nichole-UNC Raleigh School
- Grace-UNC Cape Cod School

#### **Laretta – UNC Biltmore School**

##### ***The University of NC Biltmore School***

The University of NC Biltmore School is a K-8 year-round public school that opened in July 2018 in partnership with one of six universities in the UNC System. For UNC Biltmore School, the idea of transforming into a laboratory school was yet another transition for the school, having just reopened in 2013 following a 2011 closure due to budget cuts in its traditional school district. Rather than view the proposal in a negative light, Laretta said that district leadership received the proposal as a great opportunity to work with UNC System and extend the vision from when the school re-opened. There was already a strong partnership established between the school and the University. The transition to a laboratory school was deemed as a chance for a reciprocal relationship between the university and the school community. The importance of the university and college of education embracing learning from

the school community was as critical as vice versa; working as collaborative partners was a non-negotiable for both groups in opening the laboratory school. Laretta reported that from conversations with University leadership she developed a better understanding of the goal to have the lab school not only benefit the current middle school, but the university and the school community as well.

Unlike a few of the other NC lab schools, UNC Biltmore School was not an elementary school prior to the NC legislature allowing schools in the UNC system to partner with school districts to form lab schools. As early as spring 2018, parents and community members of UNC Biltmore School participated in forums to discuss the opportunity, as well as the new school model. According to Laretta, parents and community members were on board with the switch from middle school to a K-8 school in order to be a part of “something different, something innovative.” Adopting the motto ‘Where Families Come to School Together,’ UNC Biltmore School recognizes its uniqueness as the only school in its county serving K-8 students. This is extremely convenient for families with children in different grade level because there is no need for multiple school drop-offs and/or visits. For staff at UNC Biltmore School, they consider the K-8 grade span an opportunity to build strong foundations with students and families from the very beginning of students’ formal education.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the school currently serves 212 K-8 students consisting of 186 Black or African American, 11 Hispanic, 7 Multi-Racial, and 8 White. The 31 staff employed at UNC Biltmore are represented as follows: 42% African American, 52% White, and 6% Other (1-Hispanic, 1-Multi-Racial); 81% of the staff are female the other 19% are male. The school principal and assistant principal are African American women. With 31 staff accessible to 212 students, the school operates on a 1:7 ratio (adult to

child). Collectively, staff and students thrive to employ the school's Guiding Framework of literacy, school community resilience, social-emotional learning, and MTSS/PBIS (multitiered systems of support and positive behavioral interventions and supports) while overcoming challenges listed on the school website as low performing part of legislation, ways to articulate complex evidence of current successes, and continuous wrap-around services to support the whole school.

### ***Lauretta's Background***

Lauretta is a 50-year-old, African American female with twenty-seven years of experience as an educator. She worked in the city where she had lived most of her life. Lauretta's formal education, K-12, occurred in the city, as did her teaching and administration experiences prior to the lab school opportunity. Prior to the partnership with the UNC System, Lauretta was already the school's principal. Accepting the principalship at UNC Biltmore School allowed her to continue the longstanding relationships she had with the students, their families, and school community.

As a child, Lauretta loved to play school and was always the teacher when she and her cousins played together, however she just thought it was because she was 'bossy' and not because she had any intentions of becoming an educator. As an undergraduate psychology major, she listened to a childhood mentor from her days as a little girl in Sunday school and changed her major to pursue teaching. As an adult educator, she took heed of the advice of an educational leader in the community and accepted the call to "love students beyond her classroom." She was encouraged to "spread love throughout a building" and think about the impact she could have on an entire school in serving as a school administrator.

Recognizing the personal impact she could make for other people of color, specifically Black girls, Laretta began a journey in education that has resulted in contact with hundreds of students and their families over the last twenty-seven years as both a teacher and school principal. She reports finding joy in serving as a role model, witnessing students discover their learning, the well-deserved accolades teachers receive for their work, community support for UNC Biltmore School, and the opportunities to expand access for students.

I realize that many of my students look like me, female and African American. I take that as an opportunity to be a role model for them. I use my position as a Black female principal to model leadership, education, self-care, and being career oriented. I was born and raised here, but I consider myself successful and want my students to see that same potential in themselves. I want them to know, all of them, that they can do it too and better!

Laretta's hope was that students remember the unique experiences afforded them and that they recognize her commitment to them through her dedication in the collective work of the school community.

I try to be a role model for our school-wide family book club. In talking to parents from the club, I hear them share about reading for information or for fun and how they are in the club to encourage their kids. At school, I carry a book around with me at all times so the students can see Ms. Laretta reading just like their parents. They notice it too. It's to the point now where some students will try to catch me off guard and ask, "Ms. Laretta, where's your book today?"

Laretta stated her philosophy about education accordingly: "I believe ALL children can learn although at different levels, and all should be provided sound, equitable access to schools,

teachers, and instructional practices and courses.” Laretta spoke to the importance of establishing trustworthy, collaborative relationships to ensure differentiated instruction for all students.

As principal, I always feel the need to be ‘at the table’ when conversations are held because principals have invaluable insight into their school’s culture, climate, and needs. We are also instrumental in providing insight for others about school policy, opportunities to know and understand the school’s needs and desires. I see my job as an opportunity to work with the school community to create conversations that help guide planning and utilize school supports to plan, execute, and reflect on feedback from surveys, conversations, and future planning.

### ***PFCE at UNC Biltmore School***

In acknowledging those who support her journey to lead for parent, family, and community engagement at her school, Laretta described a Community Advisory Board that was available to help encourage PFCE as the school re-opened as UNC Biltmore following a period of being closed by the district.

At some point there was a rally to open the school again and with that came the design of an Advisory Board which included the local education agency superintendent, the principal, and community members who had a positive stake and investment in the school. When we transitioned to UNC Biltmore, it was up to us as a lab school to determine whether or not to keep the board, so we kept it. There’s really no hierarchy or control, it’s now included to our pillar of school community resilience. Some of the members of the board were the first students that walked through the door in 1965. A member, who was in the first class of the school when it opened, is now a doctor and has

ties to many civic groups here in the area and continues to foster their need and their interest in the school which helps find others to support our engagement opportunities.

Reopening a school where she previously served as principal, Laretta shared that her tension level at the onset was really high because she and her staff had to reapply for their jobs against a new pool of applicants. According to her, “the process was an experience many, including myself, had never participated in and left many wondering and wavering.” She described her experience as a lab school principal as initially “daunting” due to opening the school and completing the required tasks for not only UNC Biltmore, but also the district partner and University. Laretta expressed gratitude for the ongoing collaboration with staff and faculty from the University to ensure that the school re-opened on its year-round schedule ready for teaching and learning within just a few weeks of closing under the district.

In being present with school stakeholders, Laretta considered herself well-positioned to ensure that aspects of schooling can become culturally responsive. In the interview and focus group sessions, she mentioned the following examples of PFCE at UNC Biltmore.

We hold quarterly student-led conferences at the school. As the School Leadership Team (SLT) discussed schoolwide goals and required indicators within Indistar, the team deeply discussed how the conferences could be impactful if done consistently throughout the year. Teachers plan the quarterly conferences, the school social worker provides data related to attendance, parents are provided “appointments” around their work hours. The Media Specialist and university staff lead a station for families to participate in fun critical-thinking activities. A professor, also a current faculty-in-residence, engages families in conversations about literacy and reading. The school SRO engages students and families as she welcomes them to campus, introduces herself, and provides

directions. In order to engage every student in a student-led conference, we have a city councilwoman who volunteers daily that listens in with students whose parents were unable to attend on conference night.

She continued by sharing the concept of once-a-month on-site PTA meetings as a way to engage families in PFCE.

We are always looking for opportunities to communicate with our families and the community about our school, so we have PTA once a month. As principal, I am there to give a report, but I also leave the end of the meeting open for any questions or comments from those in attendance.

Lauretta also spoke of a beneficial partnership with members of the school's Alumni Association in engaging the community.

The Alumni Association is hosting a Community Fair here at UNC Biltmore School in a couple of weeks. Community groups are coming to set up on the school grounds to showcase the resources available to our students and their families. Information on everything from healthcare to banking will be right here in one place for our families to access and ask questions. This will be the second Community Fair the Alumni Association has hosted on our campus.

Lauretta explained that the UNC Biltmore School Leadership Team is comprised of school staff, parents, community members, and University faculty. She also mentioned that Indistar is a state-approved program used to document leadership meeting minutes for NC Schools, specifically schools identified as low-performing based on state accountability statistics. As a Title I school, UNC Biltmore's approved School Improvement Plan is publicly available through the Indistar program. Guest login credentials are available on the school website.

In addition to working collaboratively around the School Improvement Plan, Laretta also spoke in detail about a collaboration with the University related to community health.

A key member of our Advisory Board is the chief physician of the hospital here in the city. Since we've been in existence, there has been talk around using the relationship with University students and the hospital to use the school as a conduit and get the word out about community health. We have established a relationship with the minority Pre-Health students from the University and together our school, the local hospital, and the minority Pre-Health students are working to promote community health through a support system called 'Melanated in Medicine.' Beginning this fall (2022), physicians will come to our school monthly to allow UNC Biltmore families a chance to see them and know that there are physicians of color in our region, in our area, that they can tap into if they are comfortable.

Laretta highlighted the use of surveys "to determine ideas for engagement opportunities, dates and times for meetings, etc." She consistently referred to the power of relationships between the school and community to ensure that aspects of schooling are culturally responsive and made mention of UNC Biltmore School's Community Liaison as a line of support, as well as the historical relationship with the advisory board.

**RELATIONSHIPS MATTER!** At UNC Biltmore, we use surveys to collect as much information as possible at the beginning of the year and try to get out into the community as much as possible. We have a community liaison on site that makes calls or sends emails to make sure we are in the loop and can participate whenever the city has something going on. I've had to remind teachers that all parents may not have had

positive school experiences and that may hinder their relationship with school initially.

We can change this, but only if we're intentional about how we go about it.

Schools have got to get to know parents as early as the beginning of the year. Be visible, return calls/emails, make small talk, and most importantly, be honest and give them your true self. Principals need to have a positive pulse on the school, with students, teachers, and community groups, to shift engagement. Yes, open the school up for stuff, but also recognize that getting to the school might be the barrier; schedule opportunities for families to engage with the school outside the physical space.

The advisory board here at UNC Biltmore, those community members tied to the initial school's alumni association, are people who can help identify family engagement and community engagement opportunities that sometimes we may not be able to.

From the interview data, I developed an understanding of how Laretta values relationships between UNC Biltmore and the school community. However, when I questioned her about her perception of how she attempts to lead in recognizing and celebrating diversity within the school and community, her response was surprising to me. Laretta stated,

I think sometimes, just personally, people try too hard to celebrate diversity and it is not authentic. It should be done all the time, not just as a planned event or something.

Celebrate students' authentic selves All ... The ... Time!

Our campus is 97% African American. We celebrate just children being who they are on a daily. It's not, "Hey, we're celebrating Black History Month or Women's History Month, or Spanish Heritage Month," but just celebrating children for who they are on a daily. I love the fact that we stand up as a group to ensure all of our students are celebrated.

Based on the interview data, I understood Laretta's perception to be that she relies on the staff to celebrate ethnic and academic differences as the right thing to do, but she has not tapped into university resources to train the UNC Biltmore teaching staff, who are primarily White females, around equity, diversity, and inclusion or culturally responsive instruction. During the focus group, Laretta confirmed that she had not taken advantage of the university's resources to train staff on EDI but agreed that training staff, using resources from the university, was a good idea.

Laretta was a very vocal principal participant in my study. In discussing her feelings about serving K-8 students under the leadership of the University, she spoke about the importance of keeping the Community Advisory Board as a supporting factor for UNC Biltmore even though the relationship was not without its challenges. Laretta explained that balancing the Board's expectations with the expectations and requirements of the University is sometimes difficult, yet extremely important in maintaining ties with civic leaders in the UNC Biltmore community.

One year, the NAACP President's grandson attended school here so she was here every day. She is a Community Advisory Board member who is always 'in the know.' We had a conversation about how to get the community to know about our school. I'm not sure if this sparked from our conversation or if people really saw that there was a need, but there's a community calendar that's now being created that we will have a link to and can send that information out to our parents. When I say the community, I mean for which our parents sit and where they come from, that they may be interested in.

The change in positionality for the Community Advisory Board, from being vetted by the Board of Education to being overseen and ‘allowed’ by the lab school, was an example of the school’s emphasis on striving towards equitable collaboration.

Lauretta also provided insight to challenges with the partner district regarding facility use.

I recently had an opportunity to have some real conversation with one of my members of general counsel. There’s a lease agreement that seems to always get in the way when facility use comes into play. Our county has facility use agreements and our school is still listed on their facility use page, but everything is blocked out. People have to navigate to our page to determine facility use. There were a few times, I’m just going to speak frankly, that he’s like, “I don’t know about that, they’re going to do this, they’re going to do that,” and I’m like, “stop, stop the presses, our children are involved!”

Lauretta explained that her point about the community being allowed to use the facility would gain exposure for the school and get people to know where it is located and potentially lead to good conversations with members leadership, as well as strengthen parent, family, and community engagement. She shared that no one from the University questioned use of the facility to enhance parent, family, and community engagement activities.

### **Nichole – UNC Raleigh School**

#### ***The University of NC Raleigh School***

The University of NC Raleigh School is currently a K-5 public school, however at its opening in fall 2017, the school only served seventy-five students in grades 2<sup>nd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup>. A unique feature of UNC Raleigh School is that it is housed within another elementary school and operates as “a school within a school.” While this arrangement may sound awkward, it works because of

collaborative partnerships between each school's staff, administration, and the University. From the beginning of laboratory school planning, the district, University, and stakeholders worked collectively to ensure smooth operations. The University and school community has a history of working together to improve educational opportunities for K-12 students. According to the local newspaper, the University partner takes pride in its partnerships with the school community. In addition to the formation of UNC Raleigh School, the University and local school district collaborated to open an early college with a community college partner with a fall 2018 inception date. The local paper described the relationship between the University and partner district as "forward-thinking", with emphases on innovation and entrepreneurship.

Like other NC laboratory schools, UNC Raleigh School serves low-performing students from across its district, however exclusive to the school are its roots in the lab school model. The roots of UNC Raleigh date back to 1907 with the establishment of a Teachers' Training School. Back then, the NC General Assembly had an order for the training of young white men and women which offered a free education, predominately to white females, who voiced an interest in teaching and an intent to teach following graduation. Fast-forward to 2016 where NC legislation repeats an interest in the development of lab schools and UNC Raleigh is included, fortunately without the segregated foundations of the previous century.

Aside from lab school roots, UNC Raleigh School is unique amongst the other five NC laboratory schools in its practice of an extended day schedule. With support from school administration and an extended day coordinator, UNC Raleigh School staff provide academic interventions to students until 5pm. As a tradeoff for the longer school day, students are not given homework. In a school where academic challenge are a key criterion for student eligibility for attendance, academic interventions are considered essential tools.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the school currently serves students in grades K-5<sup>th</sup>. Of the 108 students served, 102 identify as Black or African American, 2 Multi-Racial, 2 White, 1 Hispanic, and 1 Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. The 25 staff employed at UNC Raleigh School are represented as follows: 76% African American, 24% White. The school principal is an African American woman. With 25 staff accessible to 108 students, the school operates on a 1:4 ratio (adult to child). The UNC Raleigh School website states that at the school “teaching and learning are designed to build upon students’ strengths and provide real world learning experiences with researched based instruction to include a variety of wrap-around services to maximize each child’s potential.”

### ***Nichole’s Background***

Nichole is a 48-year-old, African American, female with a number of years’ experience as an educator. She joined UNC Raleigh School in its year two; she was not the first principal at the school. Most of Nichole’s teaching, school administration, and district level experience has occurred in the same part of the state and in close proximity to the area where she grew up and attended school as a child. In her secondary education experiences, Nichole was selected to participate in the Teaching Fellows program as an undergraduate and as a Principal Fellows as a graduate student. While Nichole’s teaching experience aligned with her elementary education major, one of her assignments following completion of the Principals’ Fellows program was at the middle school where she completed her internship. Nichole described the assignment to middle school as “one of the best things that could have ever happened to me.”

I taught third grade for four years before being accepted into the North Carolina Principals’ Fellows Program. It was very interesting, completing my internship for the MSA in middle school. I was like, “are you kidding me?” The kids were bigger than me,

a lot of them, and I had no experience with middle school. It was a large middle school that had a lot of things going on, so I had to learn a lot quickly and step outside of my comfort zone. It was a great experience and really prepared me for the assistant principalship I had for the next year and a half, as well as the elementary and middle school principalships thereafter.

After serving as an elementary principal for four years and then a middle school principal for nine consecutive years, at the same school as her Principal Fellows site, Nichole transitioned to the Director of Middle School for one year before accepting a position in human resources.

I worked as the Director of Middle Schools for only one year before they came to me and said, “we have a job for you.” They said, “we think you would be really good in human resources,” so I became the human resource director in the county. I only lasted in that role for one year because after a year the University approached me to help at the lab school. They needed help and the more I learned about it, the more interested I became. I’m now completing year four at the lab school.

Nichole’s philosophy of education was: “I believe education is a pathway for all children, for all people. I believe that as educators, it is our job to expose children to the opportunities that are available to them, to meet them at their point of need, and then help to lead and guide them in a direction that’s going to be best for the child.” She continued by noting, “we cannot do the work of educating children by ourselves, we have to do that with partnerships with parents. Parents are the experts of their children and we need to hear from them about what works well and what are challenges for their child.”

As Nichole shared her philosophy of education, she repeatedly made references to her school consistently working with parents and community stakeholders to grow the children. She

concluded with, “growing children is key, but ultimately we would love for them to be proficient.”

### ***PFCE at UNC Raleigh School***

Since beginning her principalship at UNC Raleigh School, Nichole has experienced the school’s transition from serving only grades 2<sup>nd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup>, to now serving students in grades K-5. She described developing trusting relationships as a primary strategy to engage with parents, families, communities.

I strive to develop trusting relationships with people so that they recognize that I’m really here for their best interest. I make time to listen to people, to hear what they have to say. As I listen to people, I try to jot down a little note to help me remember and then I say, okay, what can we do together to move forward? Not only do I do that with parents, not only do I do that with children, but I do that with faculty and staff members too because I believe it’s important to maintain their dignity. As principal, I play a pivotal role because people are looking to me for leadership and guidance. It is important that I be a model for what it is I expect from others in the school. As the saying goes, so is the principal, so goes the school.

Nichole shared with the focus group how she uses initial conversations with parents and guardians to guide future dialogue with them. At least two times per year, UNC Raleigh School hosts parent/guardian conferences outside of the regular school day to build relationships with school faculty and staff. All staff at UNC Raleigh School participate in the conferences, including the principal.

Holding conferences outside of the regular school day has helped us keep the lines of communication open with our families. From the meetings we have learned a lot about

our families' needs and their desires, especially ways in which we can remove barriers to learning. In talking with families during conferences, we are able to go back and articulate with community partners what each person feels are the needs of our school and work together to help students and their families.

Nichole mentioned various lines of support available to UNC Raleigh School, particularly the support received during the school's transition from serving grades 2<sup>nd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> to grade K-5.

We have support from quite a few community partners at UNC Raleigh School. In my first year, we established Family Health Night sponsored by the Marriage and Family Therapy Department at the University. Folks from the community came in and talked to families and staff about preparing healthy snacks, Medicaid enrollment, and strategies to help reduce stress. We took blood pressures too; the evening was absolutely awesome! We have not held this event in the last two years due to COVID-19 restrictions. Since things are opening back up, we're planning to reintroduce Family Health Night this fall.

She continued by explaining,

One of our most consistent partnerships is with \*Bayer Philanthropy (\*pseudonym for actual name of agency). They do a bi-weekly food distribution to our students. Prior to COVID-19, our teachers and assistants would actually go out and help with the food distribution, along with the school social worker and school counselor. This really helped build relationships between our school and community. We also have support with our annual Science Night from the college of education. Faculty from the science education department come out and set up stations throughout the building to engage our families in science or STEM activities. Our curriculum director works with a group of teachers and

teacher assistants to plan the evening and university folks run the stations so our staff can talk and interact with families.

In addition, Nichole shared support for special education at UNC Raleigh School:

There is a group of special education group in the area who volunteer their time to work with K-5 special education students during the school day. We have licensed special education teachers on our staff, but this group comes in about 3-4 times per month.

Sometimes there's a therapist who helps with sensory issues; one lady has ties to an Autism organization and she'll bring information we can share with our AU families.

They're just another community resource we benefit from at UNC Raleigh School.

The school leadership team, additional campus faculty, and other community agencies were also identified as supporters in helping to incorporate PFCE at UNC Raleigh School. The school collaborates with the university to create positive relationships as early as registration for enrollment. In her discussion, she introduced a school-based support system called the integrated health collaborative team, which consists of various University faculty and UNC Raleigh School staff who work to assist families with health, nutrition, and academic support.

Once families register at UNC Raleigh School, we connect them with the Marriage and Family Therapy Department on campus to complete a bio-psychosocial screener where we find out if food insecurity is a concern, do you have difficulty finding housing, and things like that. We're able to use that information from the Marriage and Family Therapy Department to connect families to resources. Marriage and Family Therapy is housed in the College of Health and Human Performance at the University. They administer, collect, and disaggregate all the data and provide our integrated health collaborative team a profile of the students and the families. Once they share the profiles

with us, the team has a conversation about the results and we use that to determine next steps. Teachers are made aware of some of the results of the screener so they will have a heads up in case they happen to see things within the classroom.

As a follow up, I asked Nichole if there was data to support that the bio-psycho screener and swift contact from staff was working. She responded excitedly:

When we look at our parent events, both those held at school and in the community, we have between 70 and 80 percent of our parents that come out. To me, that shows strong, strong parental participation and really good response to the work we're doing upfront. I also think about the response we have gotten from how the integrated healthcare team has started what's called 'I SEE' chats where they set up times each month to talk about certain topics identified in the screener data. Sometimes the topics are very school related, like homework and stuff but there have also been 'I SEE' topics around grief for families that are experiencing grief, or those who have experienced grief in the past. We've also partnered with the School of Medicine at the University and held several sessions on ACES (Adverse Childhood Experiences) for parents to help them understand any trauma students may have experienced related to COVID19. Whatever we can do at UNC Raleigh to meet them at that point of need.

In concluding the conversation around the bio-psycho screener, Nichole stated that the information gained from the tool "helps staff at UNC Raleigh direct families to various community resources and partners." Based on the data Nichole and her team receive from the annual screener, UNC Raleigh School families have received support with trauma, food insecurity, domestic abuse, homelessness, and securing jobs.

When I questioned her about accessing University resources to support training teachers in equity, diversity, and inclusion and culturally responsive instruction, Nichole avoided the question. Instead, she shared very traditional practices of engaging students in culturally responsive teaching and learning. At no time did she mention specific EDI training for staff.

Nichole did speak of partnerships with the University that resulted in visitors from campus visiting UNC Raleigh School to talk to students.

We partnered with the University's Honor College and they did a fundraiser in which they raised a little over \$5,000 to purchase books that were reflective of our population. We are about 96% African American and 88% of our students live at or below the poverty line. The heroes in the books look like our children and face some similar challenges.

A second thing that we've done to celebrate diversity, is celebrate Chinese New Year. The kindergarten students would have Chinese food, the principal from the local Chinese school would come and have the students practice writing Chinese and they read some books related to Chinese literature. Also, Chinese scholars from the University, from a study abroad cohort, came and spoke to our students. We also had visitors from Japan.

After coding Nichole's interview data, I was a bit confused by the overwhelming mention of introducing Asian culture, especially when the school's demographic is heavily represented by African American students and their families. While Nichole's efforts to expose students to different ethnicities and their cultures and beliefs are notable, there was no mention of sustainable, ongoing professional development for staff related to equity, diversity, and inclusion or culturally responsive instruction specific to the school's population.

Like Laretta at UNC Biltmore School, Nichole discussed leading the charge to ensure nondominant families and communities are a part of ‘fixing’ education. She stated:

It starts with our relationships from the moment the family enrolls at UNC Raleigh School. We always talk about it here; how we like to have a personal touch with our families. We know that some families at UNC Raleigh School have not had positive experiences in other schools they have enrolled in. I have to be mindful of that as I’m talking with them and working with them, as does my staff. Here at UNC Raleigh School we grow together. I’m careful to limit how much educational jargon I use with families, it could be a barrier, so I say things in a manner that families will understand and always reinforce with my staff to do the same. You know, sometimes in meetings the language will just flow and we’re like, wait a minute, hold on, let me say that another way. We’ve got to be mindful of our audience at all times.

During the focus group, Nichole shared her belief that PFCE at UNC Raleigh School is extremely strong. She feels that in establishing working, positive relationships with families from day one is the key to the school’s success with PFCE. Nichole said:

At UNC Raleigh School, we continue to use a PFCE engagement strategy my previous school in the district also used. We partner with an organization to talk about managing finances, home ownership, and job opportunities throughout the community. Members of the Chamber of Commerce host the event and all the schools are invited to participate.

It’s always an informative event and well attended.

Nichole was quick to refer back to the bio-psychosocial screener administered at enrollment. Aside from these specific examples, however, she did not share additional lines of support or support systems during our conversations.

From her interview data, I understood Nichole's role as principal to be very traditional: she acts as a role model for teachers and students. She spoke of strong partnerships with University faculty/staff and community partners, and also stressed the importance of trusting relationships. Nichole did not speak to how or if her position as an African American female working with predominately African American students and staff impacts the work she does at UNC Raleigh School, specifically culturally responsive PFCE. Like Laretta, Nichole's attempts to lead in recognizing and celebrating diversity within the school and community appeared minimal. When I asked if she had considered working with the University for access to resources around equity, diversity, and inclusion, she redirected the conversation to reiterate serving as a role model for staff on how to communicate with families. Nichole's response did not speak to using University, or other, resources to provide EDI training for UNC Raleigh School staff.

I'm all about being very upfront, honest, and intentional in communicating with all of our scholars' parents. Don't say that Little Susie is an 'A' student and she's a rock star, but she is actually completing work below grade level. Be up front. She's working below grade level and at that level, she's doing well, however if we were to place her on the level that she's actually assigned to, she would have some difficulty. Again, very upfront and honest, and modeling how to have those conversations with staff members is key. I wholeheartedly rely on relationships from the moment the family enrolls at UNC Raleigh School.

As the interview transitioned to explaining her role as NC lab school principal to UNC Raleigh School stakeholders, Nichole referenced charter schools and traditional schools as follows:

The NC General Assembly says we are a public-school unit (PSU) with charter-like flexibility, but there are a lot of unknowns with lab schools. Trying to figure out what we do and what we don't do, as well as how it is supposed to look from a K-5 standpoint and a University School of Education lens is challenging. Also, as the principal I wear a lot of hats. I am the principal and central office most days in addition to several other roles.

With mention of the K-5 school's connection to the University, Nichole noted,

While I was hired to be the principal, I quickly found out that as a lab school principal my responsibilities were different. Not only did I work to hire staff, work with curriculum and instruction, and collaborate with others around transportation and different things, I also quickly found myself working with testing, federal programs, and English-language learner programs.

Nichole's response mentioned several activities and requirements that most K-5 principals are not responsible for handling. She followed up with excitement in recognizing her work as necessary to impact the students and staff at UNC Raleigh School.

The vision at UNC Raleigh School is that this is a school with access to different departments and agencies across the University to change the learning trajectory for the students and the community. The jobs I do are part of the responsibility I have as principal and while challenging, I would go back and do it all over again in a heartbeat. I believe in our school and see the growth in our students and staff. It is totally worth it! Explaining what I do is hard. When I tell people some of the things I do, they're like WHAT?!

Nichole was vocal in the focus group about areas of growth for UNC Raleigh School with PFCE. While eager to engage in discussion about parent engagement at the school, she

shared that it still falls behind the level of engagement she experienced at her previous schools. In an effort to enhance engagement, Nichole shared information about her participation in a year-long leadership program targeting PFCE.

I participated in a NC based cohort through another UNC school. It's a certificate program dealing with parent and community engagement and how that looks in an ideal environment. The goal of the program is to improve children's educational experience as early as PK with parent and community input at its core. The information and resources I have from the program are really good and I feel good about how I can use them at UNC Raleigh School to increase PFCE.

### **Grace – UNC Cape Cod School**

#### ***The University of NC Cape Cod School***

University of NC Cape Cod School is a K-5 public school that was established in July 2018. Like the other schools in my study, UNC Cape Cod School was established as a result of a history of collaboration between its university and district partner. Since the early 2000s the University and school district have engaged in dialogue around literacy for teacher professional development. Over the years, teachers in the school district have taken advantage of courses offered nearby for them to earn a master's degree in reading education and/or reading licensure from the University. An existing partnership enabled the idea of a laboratory school to come to fruition with ease. In a local newspaper, both partners referred to the legislative mandate as an opportunity to “create a learning environment that allows for creative strategies to improve student outcomes.”

From the outset, UNC Cape Cod School set their focus on literacy, more specifically, English language arts. As a school with a significant number of English language learners (ELL),

UNC Cape Cod School was quick to identify a common need for developing students' reading, writing, speaking, and listening abilities. To best address students' needs, teachers and staff at UNC Cape Cod School work with a curriculum director who is also an adjunct professor at the university. They developed a curriculum which concentrates on turning new ideas into lesson plans. Using a workshop approach, UNC Cape Cod School staff strive to improve and enrich literacy via immersive reading and writing instruction. Lessons are molded to meet the needs of each student with reading serving as the foundation to science, social studies, math, and other content areas. By integrating reading in every subject, UNC Cape Cod School is intentional in their efforts to improve students' academic abilities.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, UNC Cape Cod School currently serves 271 students consisting of 120 Black or African American, 104 Hispanic, 29 White, 14 Multi-Racial, 2 Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 1 American Indian/Alaska Native, and 1 Asian. The 53 staff employed at UNC Cape Cod School are represented as follows: 25% African American, 8% Hispanic, and 67% White; 83% of the staff are female and the other 17% are male. The school principal is a White female. With 53 staff accessible to 271 students, the school operates on a 1:5 ratio (adult to child). Collectively, members of UNC Cape Cod School strive to promote whole child development through the use of restorative practices, social and emotional learning with literacy connections, and school-wide morning meetings.

### ***Grace's Background***

Grace is a 41-year-old, White female with twenty years of experience as an educator. While serving UNC Cape Cod School since it opened as a Curriculum Director, her role since August 2021 is Interim Principal. Since childhood, Grace described herself as possessing a

passion for literacy and curriculum design. As a young child she was rarely without a book in tow and still seeks out literature for professional growth.

I always had a book with me as a child, even if I couldn't read or comprehend it. I enjoyed the pictures, the words, and the stories in books and honestly, I still do today. I've always looked forward to the day I could share my love of reading with others. I always wanted to teach and once I got into teaching, then I wanted to help teachers be able to dig into the curriculum to make instruction engaging and fun.

I spent this year reading a book for myself, about being an inclusive leader. I've been sharing it with my staff and now we're getting ready to create an inclusive excellence committee to make sure we're using inclusive practices in our day-to-day operations.

When I asked Grace how she transitioned from a traditional school system to UNC Cape Cod School, she shared that her connection to the University did not begin with the elementary school itself. Grace is a two-time graduate of the University. She has a 2006 Masters in Reading Education and a 2014 Doctorate in Educational Leadership. She is one of the many alums who have helped propel the university's College of Education into national recognition for excellence in teacher preparation, as well as alumni who have earned National Board Certification (NBCT). Grace described herself as a life-long learner and shared that she is currently enrolled in the Master of Public Administration program at another school in the UNC system.

Before stepping in as interim principal at UNC Cape Cod School, Grace served as the school's curriculum director. In describing her role as curriculum director, Grace shared the following:

I was hugely responsible for the implementation of a 4-facet curriculum around literacy which included immersive reading and writing, opportunities for students to read a

variety of texts, specifically including culturally diverse, relatable characters, and literacy-based activities like, author visits, field trips, and special programming.

Grace also noted that as curriculum director, she encouraged kids to write about themselves. This strategy was designed to enhance the curriculum and help further students' education across multiple content areas.

My job was to try to make kids love and want to be in books, but also to have kids want to write about themselves; do a lot a self-reflection to get their story out to the word.

What are you interested in? What is your story? What do you want to share with the world because nobody knows your story but you.

Prior to the partnership with the UNC System, Grace served as a K-5 teacher and Title I Reading Specialist. Grace's assignments prior to UNC Cape Cod School were in the partner school district. Her last assignment was an elementary school just down the road from her current school.

Coming from just down the road to UNC Cape Cod School, I see the value of a lab school. I still worry that we haven't taken enough of what we've learned in the lab schools and made it into something other public schools can utilize. Yeah, I can tell them these things we do, but there's a lot of things that we're allowed flexibility with that make it easier for us to implement some things that we just couldn't do down the road. For example, their population was larger than ours and so was their classroom size. The fact that we can stop enrolling kids after the 20<sup>th</sup> day of school is a big deal! You're able to give special attention to things at a lab school.

Grace's philosophy of education "revolves around creating an inclusive space where our students and our staff, our families, feel like they can connect with one another, feel like they are

able to learn and engage with the learning environment in ways that are beneficial for their respective learning styles.” She explained,

It is important to build students’ confidence in themselves, to nurture respect for self, and to help students realize that they are capable of achieving greatness and making the impossible possible. As educators, we’re here to support children, grow them, right alongside their families. That is what makes us really special.

We must work to create spaces that think across race, culture, religion, ability, and gender. What does that look like? How do we have these conversations so that our meetings about children can extend beyond their deficits?

Grace added to her philosophy of education by sharing her passion for outdoor learning and the importance of connecting that to K-5 curriculum to engage students through more innovative, hands-on, student-driven strategies.

Every summer we host Back-to-School night at the local park and we play yard games and stuff like that. It gives UNC Cape Cod School staff a chance to play with the kids and build relationships with our families. We also use this as an opportunity to show families how we use outdoor space for learning. The kids really enjoy it and the families do too.

### ***PFCE at UNC Cape Cod School***

Grace is currently serving as the interim principal at UNC Cape Cod School; however, the title does not deter her from her commitment to the school as evident in her discussion about principal leadership.

My role as principal of a NC lab school requires me to be right ‘in it’ because parents need to know that the person who leads their child’s school, the person responsible for the people that guide their children every day are in it with them 100%. I understand that

I am a White woman who does, 100%, have privilege that has allowed me to get here. Even the things that I have, as a child have faced, I've still had the privilege to have this career to be here. With that said, I am 100% 'in it' with these families to help them in any way they need and I really feel like they know that. They know that if I need something, if my child needs something, Principal Grace, is going to be there. I might not be able to solve all of it, but I sure am going to figure out who can and I really think they believe it.

In order to collect stakeholders' ideas around improving the school, specifically how to use federal dollars to improve teaching and learning, Grace shared specific strategies UNC Cape Cod School utilizes.

We have a school improvement coach who helps us work with families. She makes sure we send out parent and family contracts at the beginning of the year to make sure we're in compliance with Title I guidelines. We also use the contracts to invite families and other stakeholders in to talk about how to use the funds and we chart all the ideas on a jam board. We also sent out Google form surveys after family sessions for families to provide feedback and contribute additional ideas on spending. The coach manages all of that and keeps a paper trail for documentation.

In addition to a school improvement coach, UNC Cape Cod School also uses a Care Team to help students and their families. Grace spoke to how the team was formed and what they contribute to PFCE.

During our first Open House in 2018, we asked parents to jot down things that they wanted at our school. From their ideas came the concept of a Care Team-a group of UNC Cape Cod School staff who meet weekly to help students and families who may be

dealing with more than others. Since 2018, we've been meeting and identifying resources within the community that can support the needs of our school.

During the first interview, Grace spoke of an actionable strategy and event UNC Cape Cod School uses to connect families with the community.

We have some boys who are living in a part of downtown where a lot of Hispanic gangs have been heavily engaged in activity and now more than ever, in our city anyway, we're seeing that the gangs are earlier and earlier trying to bring boys into them. Our boys, the fifth graders, are feeling the pressure, so as soon as our teachers realized that we reached out to a local organization called \*\*No Gangs (\*\*pseudonym for actual name of agency). It's a Hispanic man who's been involved in gangs himself when he was younger and turned his life around. He actually works to do kind of peace treaties between the Hispanic gangs and uses his boxing program to talk to kids. He comes and has lunch with our kids, talks to them, volunteers at our school, and invites families to his boxing gym for no charge.

In the interview, Grace also mentioned an annual event held at UNC Cape Cod School which celebrates ethnicity including guest speakers.

Ever since I've been here at UNC Cape Cod School, we've celebrated Black History Month and Hispanic History Month with guest speakers from the community. I enjoy seeing the smiles on our kids' faces when they see people who look like them, but I look forward to the day that we celebrate ethnicity beyond Black History and Hispanic History Months.

During the focus group session, Grace spoke of UNC Cape Cod School's desire to replicate the equity, diversity, and inclusion team on the University campus. She explained that

the school leadership team felt strongly about ensuring proper training for school staff regarding EDI.

The University has an inclusive excellence team and we wanted that at our school too, so we reached out to campus to have members of their team teach us about what we could do as school leadership to work at always being mindful of others' belief systems, lifestyles, living circumstances, and all kinds of differences. Due to COVID, we've only had virtual meetings, but I feel like the collaboration has helped us think about what things we need to put in place to make sure our families and children feel honored throughout the year, valued throughout the year, and seen every day.

Being an inclusive leader, you know from being unaware to aware, to being an active leader, to being an advocate, I question if we are using our language appropriately, are we considering the language that we use. Is it inclusive? This is the type of mindfulness we talk about and practice in our collaboration sessions with the equity, diversity, and inclusion folks from the University.

Grace repeatedly made mention of being intentional in her efforts to be a culturally responsive school leader. From the very first interview until the last second of the focus group, her message was about inclusivity.

When we had to have Open House on Zoom, I was really worried about the families that would be left out because of connectivity issues. Even though we issued everyone a computer and gave out hotspots too, I know not everyone had what they needed to join us. I know because there were some who just didn't pick up computers or hotspots. If they weren't in the sessions, then they weren't able to provide feedback to us through the surveys and stuff we had in the Open House sessions.

Grace also spoke about the importance of training teachers in culturally responsive instruction.

I'm reading a book for a class I'm taking about how to be an inclusive leader. Within the book is a survey I took and actually shared the results with my staff. In some areas, I performed well, I guess since it's a scoring survey, but then there's some places where I need to grow. I shared all of that with my staff and now a lot of them want to read the book and take the survey too just to see where their strengths and weaknesses are.

As a staff we know there are some things we need to change to help our kids be successful, not only at school, but in life. We understand that there are some things we all know and agree on, but that there are also things we don't. That's why we created our inclusive excellence team here at UNC Cape Cod School. The team will challenge us a bit to make sure we create and sustain an inclusive school.

Notably, Grace, the White female participant, was the only NC lab school principal I interviewed who mentioned a collaboration with the University to train staff on equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). I questioned the African American participants, Laretta and Nichole, on whether or not either had taken advantage of their universities' resources to train staff on EDI. Both replied that they had not, but agreed that training staff, including significant numbers of White female teachers, was a good idea. All three participants agreed that utilizing university resources to support the school community has implications for the current state of PFCE in the school. All agreed that using university resources could help move the school beyond traditional practices of PFCE which oftentimes result in a heavy reliance on single events rather than sustainable procedures.

Also during the focus group session, Grace spoke about concerns she has about the transition to middle school for UNC Cape Cod School fifth graders. Fifth graders transition back

to the partner district for middle school. According to Grace, there is a negative connotation about UNC Cape Cod School within the partner district and she feels this negatively profiles the school's fifth graders as they enter middle school.

Our fifth graders are getting ready to leave us in a few months and go to middle school and my biggest fear is that someone is going to judge them and not give them the opportunity to show their potential. This morning we took them on a trip to the middle school. I went and their teachers went because we want them to know that this is important. We went to show our support and to make sure that they know that we want them to be successful and that we will always be here for them. We talk a lot about how to build your reputation from the first day. I said, I want you to go in at Open House and say, "I need to find the principal," I want you to introduce yourself to them and let them know that you are here to learn, to get an education and ask the principal what they can do to help you do that. Make that reputation that says this child is someone who matters and who cares about who they are. We talk about reputation constantly because that's my biggest fear right now, that someone will judge them.

Grace followed up by sharing that it is both sad and unfortunate that she feels like she has to be such an advocate for her fifth-grade students as they transition to middle school. However, she strongly believes that stereotypes and deficit thinking about her students and their families create challenges during the transition from UNC Cape Cod School to middle school. Grace spoke about the school's strategy to curb negative undertones.

We strive to connect the families with the community, not just do the work within our school walls. We want everybody in the school community to understand the school's

mission and understand the school's values so they want to work collaboratively to support the children.

When both sides see the value of providing the resources, not just things, but time and energy need to grow our children, then we can make sure our children are ready for what comes next. We open the lines of communication and support each other.

The transition to sixth grade was not the only time Grace spoke about serving as an advocate for UNC Cape Cod School students and families. In the initial interview, she spoke about being an advocate for children facing inequities, specifically inequities outside of school. Grace was transparent in saying that while she has always been aware of inequities in the school community, advocacy was not something she had done as a classroom teacher or Reading Specialist because she “was not always aware of the various needs of the school, nor did I feel educated enough about inequities in education to be an advocate.” However, as the interim principal at UNC Cape Cod School, Grace feels she has more insight into the challenges and inequities students and their families face. She also feels more educated in EDI and spoke about support from the University to be a change agent.

I feel like there are still places where I need to be a better advocate for our children, not just necessarily during the school day, but when I'm in meetings with other leaders or the University, or community. I need to be better at saying, “there are things happening in our community that are not okay.”

Grace continued her discussion to share specifics about the county lines in her city:

The way the lines are drawn in the county, those children on the west side seem to have lots of additional support because of the way the county is divided by the have and the have nots. It is very obvious. I've gone to meetings the Urban League has offered, where

you can go and talk with like-minded people about that. In those sessions, we'd all be like, "yeah, that's not right, it's absolutely not right, we need to change what we're doing." It was really good, but then I'm like, but what am I doing with those people who don't think that way? Am I stepping out as a leader for our children? I don't think I'm doing that enough.

Grace repeatedly talked about pushing herself to be an inclusive leader who cares about culturally responsive education and doing things at her school that a culturally responsive leader would do, including speaking out to community leaders about inequities in education.

## **Section II: Themes**

Conducting two individual interviews and a focus group session with the three NC lab school principals helped me gather data about each principal's efforts to lead for culturally responsive parent, family, and community engagement in their schools. In speaking with participants via Zoom, I was able to examine how each principal attempts to lead for parent, family, and community engagement (PFCE) in their schools, identify the current state of PFCE in their school, and identify factors which support and/or challenge their efforts to engage in culturally responsive PFCE. After coding the collected data, the following four themes emerged:

**Theme 1:** NC Lab School Principals Work with Various Partners to Engage Parents, Families, and the Community

**Theme 2:** NC Lab School Principals Typically Rely on Single Events to Engage Parents, Families and Community

**Theme 3:** NC Lab School Principals Have Both Seized and Missed Opportunities to Enhance Parent, Family, and Community Engagement

**Theme 4:** NC Lab School Principals Have Limited Training in Culturally Responsive School Leadership and Do Not Always Engage in the Practice.

**Theme 1: NC Lab School Principals Work with Various Partners to Engage Parents, Families, and the Community**

Aside from the support of their respective university, the lab school principals in my study spoke of various partnerships accessible to engage PFCE. Community groups, civil organizations, public and private companies have all contributed to support PFCE at each school. Local boxing organizations, medical professionals, and volunteer special educators are a few of the community partners who support the NC lab schools in my study. According to my study participants, these relationships are proving beneficial in bridging gaps between the school and community. The principals expressed feelings of ‘meaningful engagement’ and not just ‘forced engagement’ between school, families, and community partners.

Lauretta, principal of UNC Biltmore School was excited as she spoke of the partnership with the Alumni Association and the annual Community Fair on the school campus. Being able to offer the parents and families information focused on adults, not just K-8 students, is a big deal and not taken for granted by the UNC Biltmore families.

Not many schools can boast about volunteers supporting special education students during the school day; however, that is exactly what occurs at UNC Raleigh School. While it may be common to have books, guest speakers, and even computer programs that target special education populations in public schools, it is rather uncommon to have consistent volunteers report to campuses just to support special education programs. UNC Raleigh School has this community partnership and uses it to support students’ academic and social-emotional growth.

Parent and community relationships begin by meeting people where they are most comfortable and this is not always at the school. Grace, principal at UNC Cape Cod School, and her staff recognize these barriers and through a partnership with the local parks and recreation department host back to school events in local parks.

## **Theme 2: NC Lab School Principals Typically Rely on Single Events to Engage Parents, Families and Community**

All of the NC lab school principals in my study joined the UNC System with experience in school leadership. Laretta and Nichole were both previously school principals; Grace was a Curriculum Director. All agreed that there were practices from their previous school that they regularly used at their current site. Most activities were single 'Family Night' events related to specific content areas like math, literacy, and science. A few events included Parent Teacher Association (PTA) or similar parent organization group meetings.

In her interviews and focus group, Laretta spoke of multiple one- or two-time events: parent nights, student-led conferences, and school improvement meetings as ways to engage parents, families, and community. She was not alone.

Nichole from UNC Raleigh School provided her share of single events as well. Administering the initial back to school survey, making the introductory phone calls, and conducting the annual parent conferences, while important, all tied into single events to engage parents, families, and community.

Grace also shared a number of single events to engage parents, families, and communities. At UNC Cape Cod School, it is the norm to meet at the local park for back to school, yet there was no mention of meetings in the community in other time. The school also is mindful to have guest speakers visit campus for Black History and Hispanic History Month

events. While Grace expressed interest in having cultural differences celebrated all year, right now the school celebrates annually.

In coding my interview and focus group data, it was evident that a reliance on single events to engage parents, family, and community was prevalent in the NC lab schools in my study.

### **Theme 3: NC Lab School Principals Have Both Seized and Missed Opportunities to Establish Culturally Responsive Parent, Family, and Community Engagement**

Each NC Lab School principal in my study shared school and community happenings at their respective site with an intent to enhance culturally responsive PFCE. Each school's principal stressed the importance of developing trusting relationships with all stakeholders in order to enhance children's learning experiences. Since each school's inception, there remains a focus on collecting data from parents, families, and community stakeholders in order to identify immediate needs and desires of the school community. I noticed that while each NC lab school principal collects the data differently (for example, through surveys, home visits, or automated calls) there are similar strategies employed after data collection. Some of these practices are very forward thinking, but others could be identified as missed opportunities in establishing culturally responsive PFCE.

Each NC lab school in my study holds parent conferences throughout the school year to accommodate families' schedules. However, only UNC Cape Cod School seemed intentionally mindful to schedule interpreters to attend their meetings. Grace, principal at Cape Cod, was quick to highlight the school's large Hispanic population and how data collected from parents and families as early as Open House indicated the need to have support with face-to-face

communication. The other two principals did not mention proactive measures to enhance communication for families whose primary language is not English.

Additionally, UNC Raleigh School was the only school that takes advantage of university resources as early as Open House to connect families to health and academic resources. Nichole, UNC Raleigh School principal, repeatedly referred to the bio-psychosocial screener administered by the Marriage and Family Therapy Department at the University. However, beyond the support of the Marriage and Family Therapy department, UNC Raleigh School did not appear to employ University resources for much else in regard to culturally responsive PFCE. As noted in the interview, Nichole mentioned several interactions with staff and students from the University with connections to Asia. However, I questioned the relevancy of the events because there was no direct connection to academic curriculum or the UNC Raleigh School community.

From interviewing Laretta, principal at UNC Biltmore School, I concluded that many of the PFCE initiatives employed at the school, both in collaboration with the University and community supporters, could be considered missed opportunities in establishing culturally responsive PFCE.

#### **Theme 4: NC Lab School Principals Have Limited Training in Culturally Responsive School Leadership and Do Not Always Engage in the Practice**

When the North Carolina General Assembly made the decision to have Colleges of Education in the UNC System partner with local education agencies to identify and work with schools identified as low-performing, many of the schools identified served a significant number of students and families of color. While there is no written requirement related to culturally responsive leadership or instruction, there is an ethical responsibility in education to celebrate

and recognize individuals for their unique differences including race, gender, ethnicity, religion, and ability.

As school leaders who serve populations consisting mainly of minorities, exercising culturally responsive leadership (CRL) is necessary for NC lab school principals. CRL can help promote a school environment that embraces cultural aspects associated with minoritized student identity. Before NC lab school principals can model inclusiveness or redirect teachers into learning student identity and cultural capital, they must be effectively trained in culturally responsive leadership and knowledgeable of CRL strategies to implement in the school community.

What I discovered while interviewing the principals was the limited training they have in culturally responsive school leadership and how they do not always engage in the practice. In their interviews or the focus group session, Laretta and Nichole's ideologies around culturally responsive school leadership did not equate to Grace's efforts. Laretta and Nichole's discussions did not speak to sustainable strategies within the school and/or community. Neither made mention of training staff in culturally responsive instruction or culturally responsive PFCE. None of the principals in my study mentioned being required to participate in training specific to culturally responsive school leadership as a strategy to embrace the culture of their school community.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I presented profiles of the principals based on the qualitative approach I used to gain participants' perspectives in addressing my research questions. Using the responses from the individual interview sessions and the three-participant focus group, I was able to identify four total themes. These themes represent my study's findings.

From the interviews and focus group, I successfully collected evidence for each theme and included direct quotes from the NC lab school principal participants. Member checks following each interview proved helpful in ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting or misrepresenting interview participants.

In Chapter V, I answer my research questions and analyze my findings by connecting them to existing research. I concluded Chapter V with a discussion of implications and a reflection on what I learned by completing this dissertation project.

## CHAPTER V: ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The reason I conducted this study was to explore NC lab school principals' efforts to establish culturally responsive parent, family, and community engagement. Using qualitative research as my methodology, I completed individual interviews and a focus group with three current NC lab school principals. All three participants had at least three or more years' experience at their current school. I met with the principal participants via Zoom throughout the process to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1:** How do NC lab school principals describe their attempts to lead for parent, family, and community engagement (PFCE) in their schools?
- RQ2:** How do participants discuss the current state of PFCE in their school?
- RQ3:** What is the relationship between a principal's appointment in a NC lab school and their training in and practice of culturally responsive leadership?

In this chapter, I will answer the research questions using my findings and connect the findings to the literature I reviewed in Chapter II. Also, I will revisit the four-point theoretical framework I adopted from Ishimaru (2020) as an interpretive lens in order to better understand the deeper meanings of my findings. I then transition to sharing implications of my study and making recommendations for practitioners and researchers. Ultimately, my purpose in conducting this research project was to provide insights that may serve as considerations and guidance for other NC lab school principals, Title I school principals, and other school principals working to establish culturally responsive parent, family, and community engagement in their school community. I conclude the chapter with personal thoughts on my study.

## Analysis

In this section, I answer my research questions with my findings and also connect my findings to literature reviewed in Chapter II. I begin with my first research question: *How do NC lab school principals describe their attempts to lead for parent, family, and community engagement (PFCE) in their schools?* Participants' responses represented my first finding, that **NC Lab School Principals Work with Various Partners to Engage Parents, Families, and the Community**. Principals can influence student success by having strong relationships with students and families by advocating for community-based interests and by creating schools as spaces of inclusivity (Ishimaru, 2014; Khalifa, 2013, Green, 2015; Cooper, 2009). The principals in this study talked repeatedly about the importance of community presence in their schools and even though each participant works with a different university and local education agency partner, each mentioned a variety of agencies they collaborate with to recognize students, their families, and communities. Khalifa (2018), spoke of principals leading with community perspectives as the center of their leadership behavior. In that vein, Grace shared,

It is important to build students' confidence in themselves, to nurture respect for self, and to help students realize that they are capable of achieving greatness and making the impossible possible. As educators, we're here to support children, grow them, right alongside their families. That is what makes us really special.

She added,

Every summer we host Back-to-School night at the local park and we play yard games and stuff like that. It gives UNC Cape Cod School staff a chance to play with the kids and

build relationships with our families. We also use this as an opportunity to show families how we use outdoor space for learning. The kids really enjoy it and the families do too.

Similarly, Nichole spoke to the well-being of families as a central concern of her school:

Once families register at UNC Raleigh School, we connect them with the Marriage and Family Therapy Department on campus to complete a bio-psychosocial screener where we find out if food insecurity is a concern, do you have difficulty finding housing, and things like that. We're able to use that information from the Marriage and Family Therapy Department to connect families to resources.

Lauretta added,

RELATIONSHIPS MATTER! At UNC Biltmore, we use surveys to collect as much information as possible at the beginning of the year and try to get out into the community as much as possible. We have a community liaison on site that makes calls or sends emails to make sure we are in the loop and can participate whenever the city has something going on. I've had to remind teachers that all parents may not have had positive school experiences and that may hinder their relationship with school initially. We can change this, but only if we're intentional about how we go about it.

The NC lab school principals in my study were parent, family, and community engagement focused and explained with examples the work that they do to ensure a positive learning environment for students and their families. Time spent interviewing the lab school principals also exposed a significant amount of talk around cultural responsiveness without evidence to support it. In the interviews and focus group sessions, there was a lot of instances of 'talking the talk, but not walking the walk.' As mentioned by Khalifa (2020), school leaders are in position to navigate a shift in power between educators and community in equitable ways by

embracing, validating, and promoting family and community ideas. Unfortunately, many of the examples shared by the participants in my study resembled common malpractices of the school taking the lead while families and community partners were treated as guests, not equitable partners.

I shift my focus now to research question 2: *How do participants discuss the current state of PFCE in their school?* In addressing question 2, I discovered two main findings. First, I found that **NC Lab School Principals Typically Rely on Single Events to Engage Parents, Families, and Community**. In my study, each principal participant willingly shared the current state of PFCE in their respective school. Miller (2008) and Green (2015) both referenced principals' roles in permeating diverse organizational boundaries to guide collective actions. In the interviews and focus group sessions, each principal made mention of the importance of PFCE in supporting students' overall well-being, however, many of the strategies shared were single events. Laretta shared the school's monthly PTA meeting and annual Community Fair,

We are always looking for opportunities to communicate with our families and the community about our school, so we have PTA once a month. As principal, I am there to give a report, but I also leave the end of the meeting open for any questions or comments from those in attendance.

The Alumni Association is hosting a Community Fair here at UNC Biltmore School in a couple of weeks. Community groups are coming to set up on the school grounds to showcase the resources available to our students and their families. Information on everything from healthcare to banking will be right here in one place for our families to access and ask questions. This will be the second Community Fair the Alumni Association has hosted on our campus.

In the interviews with Nichole, she mentioned more single events than both Laretta and Grace. Throughout the interview and focus group sessions, Nichole reiterated that parent and family participation UNC Raleigh School events was around 70-80% of the school.

When we look at our parent events, both those held at school and in the community, we have between 70 and 80 percent of our parents that come out. To me, that shows strong, strong parental participation and really good response to the work we're doing upfront. More specifically, Nichole shared,

We have support from quite a few community partners at UNC Raleigh School. In my first year, we established Family Health Night sponsored by the Marriage and Family Therapy Department at the University. Folks from the community came in and talked to families and staff about preparing healthy snacks, Medicaid enrollment, and strategies to help reduce stress. We took blood pressures too; the evening was absolutely awesome!

An additional single event Nichole mentioned included conferencing:

Holding conferences outside of the regular school day has helped us keep the lines of communication open with our families. From the meetings we have learned a lot about our families' needs and their desires, especially ways in which we can remove barriers to learning.

By offering mostly single events to parents and families, the schools in my study are primarily exercising parent *involvement* as opposed to parent *engagement*. Parent involvement in schools is a basic interaction like volunteering and attending school events. This type of interaction rarely sees parents and families as change agents in the school (Fenton, Ocasio-Stoutenburg, & Harry 2017; Ishimaru 2017). According to Povey et al. (2016), parent engagement promotes academic development, social, and emotional development in children.

When parents feel valued in the school, engagement increases resulting in positive outcomes for students.

Also in regard to research question 2, I found that **NC Lab School Principals Have Both Seized and Missed Opportunities to Enhance Culturally Responsive Parent, Family, and Community Engagement**. While the responsibility to equitably address the structural, cultural, and power discontinuities between schools and families does not fall solely on the principal, principals do have a critical role in enhancing PFCE (Cooper, Riehl, & Hasan, 2010). Noticeably in the data were instances where the principals' strategies did not align with the literature I reviewed for this study. While Laretta's intentions with hosting monthly PTA meetings were to build relationships and foster cultural responsiveness at UNC Biltmore School, these types of events may result in incidents of inadvertent exclusion. Hollowell (2019) and Khalifa (2018) addressed how schools may inadvertently exclude their target audience and contribute to the marginalization of certain communities. The challenges of transportation, childcare, language barriers, and even negative school experiences may keep families away from monthly meetings, even those that are meant to be platforms for everyone to have a voice.

Nichole, principal at UNC Raleigh School, appeared to have had an ongoing interest in the study of Asian culture even though the school does not report any Asian staff, students, or families. While relevant in terms of introducing diverse cultures and experiences to the students at UNC Raleigh School, I found it odd that Nichole felt strongly that the repeated study of Asian culture aligned with culturally responsive PFCE. In her interview sessions, she shared,

A second thing that we've done to celebrate diversity, is celebrate Chinese New Year.

The kindergarten students would have Chinese food, the principal from the local Chinese school would come and have the students practice writing Chinese and they read some

books related to Chinese literature. Also, Chinese scholars from the University, from a study abroad cohort, came and spoke to our students. We also had visitors from Japan. Again, while it is important to introduce different cultures and experiences to elementary school students, culturally responsive PFCE focuses on recognizing students, their families, and communities for their expertise and prioritizing their collective well-being, self-determination, and dignity (Ishimaru, 2020). These single event learning experiences demonstrated missed opportunities to engage in culturally responsive PFCE.

Grace, principal at UNC Cape Cod School, spoke often about the importance of shared ownership, voice, and vision in the school community and provided examples of actionable strategies to engage parents, families, and the community in culturally responsive opportunities at UNC Cape Cod School. As early as her first interview, she shared her philosophy of education as follows:

It is important to build students' confidence in themselves, to nurture respect for self, and to help students realize that they are capable of achieving greatness and making the impossible possible. As educators, we're here to support children, grow them, right alongside their families. We must work to create spaces that think across race, culture, religion, ability, and gender. That is what makes us really special.

Grace's philosophy of education correlated with research such as Riehl (2009), whose work suggests that school principals who seek to respond to diversity in their schools attend to issues of meaning construction, promote inclusive school cultures and instructional practices, and work to position schools with community organizational, and service-related networks. At UNC Cape Cod School, there was intentionality around including all parents, specifically those of marginalized groups, as contributors to the success of the school.

Grace provided a specific example of seizing the opportunity to enhance culturally responsive PFCE at UNC Cape Cod School:

We have a school improvement coach who helps us work with families. She makes sure we send out parent and family contracts at the beginning of the year to make sure we're in compliance with Title I guidelines. We also use the contracts to invite families and other stakeholders in to talk about how to use the funds and we chart all the ideas on a jam board. We also sent out Google form surveys after family sessions for families to provide feedback and contribute additional ideas on spending. The coach manages all of that and keeps a paper trail for documentation.

As noted by Khalifa (2018), children benefit when schools work to connect families to networks outside of the school. This begins with the formation of a team devoted to establishing positive, trusting relationships with stakeholders within the school community. According to Grace, the school improvement coach and the school are intentional in their efforts to connect to UNC Cape Cod families. Even though this actionable strategy implemented by Grace and the UNC Cape Cod School exemplifies an opportunity their school seized to enhance culturally responsive PFCE, it also resembles surface level parent involvement more than an equitable collaboration between UNC Cape Cod families and the school.

My final research question asked, *What is the relationship between a principal's appointment in a NC lab school and their training in and practice of culturally responsive leadership?* In completing my study, I found that **NC Lab School Principals Have Limited Training in Culturally Responsive School Leadership and Do Not Always Engage in the Practice.** While each principal shared examples of culturally responsive leadership in the interview and focus group sessions, there was also evidence that did not align with the literature I

reviewed in Chapter II. Data collected from the interview and focus group sessions oftentimes aligned with Cooper, Riehl, and Hasan's (2010) observations of parent involvement as mere functions of school leader public relations that prove not very effective in establishing culturally responsive PFCE.

In the second interview with Laretta, I asked her for specific examples of how she leads UNC Biltmore School in honoring and celebrating diversity on campus. Her response was as follows:

I think sometimes, just personally, people try too hard to celebrate diversity and it is not authentic. It should be done all the time, not just as a planned event or something.

Celebrate students' authentic selves All ... The ... Time!

Our campus is 97% African American. We celebrate just children being who they are on a daily. It's not, "Hey, we're celebrating Black History Month or Women's History Month, or Spanish Heritage Month," but just celebrating children for who they are on a daily. I love the fact that we stand up as a group to ensure all of our students are celebrated.

While Laretta's response did not speak to specific examples, in interpretation it slightly aligns with research from Khalifa et al. (2016) related to displaying critical consciousness of beliefs when it comes to serving students of color. Laretta mentioned little things that matter to her students, who are predominately African American, such as "When they see us outside in the morning, we're cheering them on, we're celebrating their outfits of the day, their hair styles, celebrating their authentic selves all the time." Her perception of celebrating students did not relate to an event, activity, or professional learning for staff, it simply existed because of who they are.

Asking the same question of Nichole and Grace, the responses were different. Nichole mentioned UNC Raleigh School's intentionality around equipping bookshelves with texts reflective of the school's demographics.

We partnered with the University's Honor College and they did a fundraiser in which they raised a little over \$5,000 to purchase books that were reflective of our population.

We are about 96% African American and 88% of our students live at or below the poverty line. The heroes in the books look like our children and face some similar challenges.

Khalifa et al. (2016) highlight the integration of culturally responsive books in classrooms; however they also speak to the importance of training staff on how to be intentional with the integration process. There was no mention on training staff on how to be intentional with integrating culturally responsive books into their day-to-day lessons at UNC Raleigh School.

When Grace was asked about how UNC Cape Cod School honor and celebrate diversity on their campus, she gave examples of single events, but also explained how she felt that was not enough and the school was discussing how to shift into more authentic practices. Grace shared,

Ever since I've been here at UNC Cape Cod School, we've celebrated Black History Month and Hispanic History Month with guest speakers from the community. I enjoy seeing the smiles on our kids' faces when they see people who look like them, but I look forward to the day that we celebrate ethnicity beyond Black History and Hispanic History Months.

According to Khalifa et al. (2016), school principals who foster culturally responsive PFCE exercise intentional efforts to provide professional training for teachers so that they can be culturally responsive in their pedagogy and interaction with students, they strive to create a

welcoming, inclusive, and accepting school environment for all students, and create structures that accommodate the lives of parents. There was some evidence of these characteristics in the responses from my study participants, however more prevalent was evidence that these lab school principals had limited training in culturally responsive school leadership and that they did not always engage in the practice.

### **Revisiting the Conceptual Framework**

In Chapter I, I introduced my conceptual framework as Ishimaru's (2020) 4-tenet model for PFCE. It includes: (1) problematizing well-meaning, but deficit-based approaches to marginalized parents, (2) highlighting the expertise of nondominated families, (3) building equitable collaborations with families, and (4) providing guiding principles at multiple levels of educational systems to engage families. This framework helps identify whether or not PFCE is a process shaped by families or by school-driven agendas. Ishimaru notes the importance of schools being intentional about including all parents, specifically, those of marginalized groups, as contributors to the success of the school. Ishimaru's framework suggests that simply seeing strengths instead of deficits is not sufficient, however shifts in power and/or changes in systems result in real change.

In this section, I examine how my findings relate to Ishimaru's 4 tenets. Equitable collaborations are defined by Ishimaru (2020) as interactions between families and schools that call for movement beyond the current paradigm in which schools are the central actors who reach out to engage families around the visions of others. The implication that families are involved after the vision is created is problematic and contributes to the first tenet of Ishimaru's framework: problematizing well-meaning, but deficit-based approaches to marginalized parents. In my study, Laretta and Nichole shared examples that could be perceived as deficit-based

approaches even though the school meant no harm to families. Laretta, principal at UNC Biltmore School, repeatedly mentioned monthly PTA meetings held at the school. She explained her role as facilitator of the meeting, offering a report and also leaving the meeting open for parents' questions. While this monthly event is intended to engage families, it could also unintentionally marginalize them because of a number of limitations such as lack of transportation, need for translation, or parents' hesitation to speak in front of others. Laretta, however, did not mention any of these limitations in her interviews or during the focus group session.

As another example, Nichole, principal at UNC Raleigh School, was extremely pleased with the 70-80% family participation rate in her school's events. She emphasized the importance of building relationships throughout the school community and using those relationships to support students' learning. In her first interview, Nichole shared how staff at UNC Raleigh School limit the amount of educational jargon they use in communicating with parents and families. According to Nichole, "parents come to our school and tell us about negative experiences they have had at other schools during enrollment. They say our process is a lot better to understand." Recognizing how previous experiences affect parent interactions at school is important. In addition to monitoring verbal communication, exercising a paradigm shift to create more collaborative conversations with families may prove helpful at UNC Raleigh School. Ishimaru's first tenet charges school leaders to be mindful of how even inclusive versions of conventional models of parent engagement can still exacerbate inequities. Nichole's practice of communicating with families using limited educational jargon may help decrease inequities for UNC Raleigh School families.

The second tenant of Ishimaru's framework is highlighting the expertise, knowledge, and cultural practices of nondominant families in order to obtain the goal of building more equitable educational systems. As I mentioned in a previous section, Grace, principal at UNC Cape Cod School, shared how the school employs a coach to ensure families are viewed as stakeholders. Being intentional in efforts to see parents as stakeholders is a practice that will lead to equitable shifts in educational systems. As children's first teachers, parents and families must have a voice in their child's school.

The third tenet of Ishimaru's framework relates to building equitable collaborations with families. At UNC Raleigh School, Nichole and her staff have created a partnership with University colleagues to help the school community. Partnerships which provide a plethora of resources to families in support of health and wellness is one example of building equitable collaborations with families. These collaborations make strides in building trusting relationships with families, therefore increasing opportunities to leverage the expertise of nondominant families.

Ishimaru's fourth tenet, providing guiding principles at multiple levels of educational systems to engage families, was the least noted in my study. While this tenet is applicable to NC laboratory schools, the short time period that the schools have been in existence must be taken into consideration. Right now, the number of educational systems in the organization is limited. Multiple levels are still in development, including partnerships across the university campus and with the local district partner. Each principal described the relationships between the school and the University, as well as the school and the partner school district. However, the primary focus of each appeared to be on building school culture which included events involving their university and LEA partners.

Based on the interviews and focus group sessions, there was evidence that my study participants are working to initiate communication in inclusive and respectful ways. They appear to recognize the needs of the school community and have made some attempts to navigate resources to support those needs. However, there is room to improve in regard to a shift from conventional partnerships to the level of equitable collaboration that Ishimaru (2020) describes. From the time I spent with the participants, I recall them describing little to no evidence of parents working as true partners in the schools. There was evidence of equitable forms of collaboration, like beginning some initiatives with families and communities. However, transforming power, building reciprocity, and undertaking change as collective inquiry were generally absent from what my participants described (Ishimaru, 2020). Instead, most prevalent in my study was the traditional concept of parent involvement, in which parents and families act as recipients in the school-to-home relationship.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

My research afforded me the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of NC lab school principals' efforts to establish culturally responsive parent, family, and community engagement. The study was principal-focused and I was interested in whether or not the principals could describe actionable strategies they employed at their respective UNC System lab school. Based on my study and findings, I share some recommendations for NC lab school principals, parents and families, and community partners.

#### **NC Lab School Principals**

NC Lab School principals have a powerful voice in culturally responsive education and must understand the difference they make not only in their respective schools, but for other public-school principals. Lab school principals who participated in my study used the

demographics of their students and families as their primary motivation for their efforts to establish culturally responsive PFCE. They consistently mentioned the demographics of the communities that they serve, including barriers within the school community. Throughout the study, the principals spoke about the importance of supporting their families with academic and community resources. The participants in my study were focused on their goals to serve as providers for their families, but they need to also be mindful to create equitable collaboration with parents, families, and the school community.

Thanks to their status as university entities, NC lab schools have colleagues on their campuses whose research in culturally responsive education may be helpful in providing professional learning to principals and teachers, resources to parents and families, and partnerships with community stakeholders. This select group of principals must also connect and find support from one another. Establishing culturally responsive PFCE is not a simple task, even for University lab school principals.

While the idea of lab schools is based on collaboration with university and local community partners, there is no written requirement to possess and/or employ culturally responsive practices. Practicing culturally responsive leadership as a NC lab school principal is simply the right thing to do. However, more training in culturally responsive leadership is needed. NC lab school legislation requires the University to work with local schools identified as low performing; primarily schools consisting predominately of marginalized populations. These communities are most affected by inequitable policies/practices in education and in society. Not all NC lab school principals will begin their principalship as culturally responsive school leaders but in sharing their efforts to serve marginalized communities with other school principals, some will emerge with intentions to better connect schools to the communities they serve.

## **Parents and Families**

The participating principals shared multiple efforts to connect parents and families with community and university resources. Because lab schools in North Carolina are also identified as Title I schools, at least 40% of the school's students qualify for free or reduced lunch (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Therefore, there is a direct correlation between the school and the socio-economic status of its community. Many of the resources the participating schools mentioned targeted not only the K-5 or K-8 students, but their parents and families as well.

While most of what the principals shared with me could easily be defined as conventional partnerships, in due time there may be opportunity to build equitable collaborations with nondominant parents and families as educational leaders who contribute and help shape the school's agenda (Ishimaru, 2020). Rather than parents predominately serving on the receiving end of services, they can and should work with schools to identify and reshape structures and policies that reinforce racial and other hierarchies (Cooper, Riehl, & Hasan, 2010; Ishimaru, 2020). Working with school principals to construct new ways of interacting and collectively targeting systems that enable injustices is one way that lab schools can form powerful partnerships with parents and families, specifically those in marginalized school communities.

## **Community Partners**

Changes in education are directly linked to social change in school communities and schools are not organizations that work in isolation (Warren, 2005; Ishimaru 2020). Undoubtedly, local businesses have economic interest in the communities that they serve. In low-income neighborhoods, the school is oftentimes the hub for community resources. As Warren, Hong, Rubin, and Uy (2009) noted in their research, by offering community services ranging from health and human services to affordable housing, businesses establish themselves

in these communities, thus developing relationships with those living in the area. In my study, the participating lab schools all mentioned a community partner they work with to improve the area. My study included examples of physical and mental health partnerships, food security, gang prevention strategies, and special education support to benefit the school community. The findings from this study help demonstrate how community partners can gain a deeper understanding of how their position as change agents in the school community are supportive of students' academic, social, and overall well-being – and not just students, but their parents and families as well.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The results of this basic qualitative research study add to existing scholarship and studies calling for public school principals, specifically those serving marginalized communities, to establish culturally responsive parent, family, and community engagement. Like the work of Fenton et al. (2017), Warren et al. (2009), and Flores and Keyere (2020), my study speaks to the responsibility principals have to create inclusive schools where parents and families feel connected. As noted by Anderson and Minke (2007), feeling connected to their child's school encourages parents to share their knowledge and expertise, therefore creating opportunity to transform schools. In my study, I strived to contribute to existing research by increasing my understanding of NC lab school principals' efforts to establish culturally responsive PFCE.

For future research, it would be beneficial to investigate public school principals at non-Lab schools that are identified as Title I as well as those who serve marginalized communities, to provide a more comprehensive study and expand to more participants. An added study would allow more public-school principals the opportunity to share their experiences with the paradigm shift from conventional partnerships to equitable collaborations between schools, home and

community in order to create systemic changes. Also, a future study could include principals who do not serve marginalized groups in order to compare the approach to culturally responsive PFCE between public school principals in both circumstances. Regardless of student demographics, schools require relationships with parents and families and community partners to support students' learning. Efforts to intentionally establish culturally responsive PFCE help create the capacity for systemic change as needed within the school community. The recommendations that emerged from the research can add to the vast amount of research on establishing culturally responsive parent, family, and community engagement.

Lastly, as the number of NC laboratory schools has increased from six to nine as of August 2022, examining case studies of how the UNC lab schools actually operate with regard to PFCE may be helpful. According to Article 29A, laboratory schools are required to provide an opportunity for research, demonstration, student support, and expansion of the teaching experience and evaluation regarding management, teaching, and learning. In preparing the next generation of educators, it may prove beneficial to have NC lab schools work closely with the UNC System office and/or their university partner to model the EDI model of the institution. Sadly, diversity training is not a requirement in all K-12 public school districts but is an intentional and expected practice on public university campuses. Access to university resources by NC lab school principals could result in differences on how lab school principals attempt to lead for culturally responsive PFCE compared to the attempts to do so by traditional public-school principals.

Parents, families, and community partners must see themselves as contributing partners in the school community. In striving to establish culturally responsive PFCE, principals must be intentional to not only accommodate, but also incorporate and celebrate aspects of the

community. It is important that principals recognize how their practices may be oppressive and counter-productive to marginalized students. The work cannot be accomplished by the principal alone, parents and families, along with community partners must also be open to change.

### **Personal Thoughts**

As an African American female NC lab school administrator, this study has been transformative for me. While I have spent the past four years working with the participants in my study as their colleague, my perceptions of them as culturally responsive school leaders were underdeveloped. After spending time with them individually and collectively on Zoom for interviews and the focus group, I see them and the work that they do from a different lens. In full transparency, I was deeply concerned by the lack of culturally responsive leadership in some areas, but thankful that my colleagues were vulnerable, honest, and willing to share their ideas and strategies around more intentional efforts to establish culturally responsive PFCE at their schools. The interviews and focus group were critical in helping me answer the three research questions. I was able to learn a lot about how my colleagues attempt to lead for PFCE. I am right there with them in too often hosting single events and working with community partners to give resources, always with parents and families as beneficiaries. I too have room to grow in establishing culturally responsive PFCE at my school. Like my NC lab school principal study participants, I celebrate the current state of PFCE in my school. Participation data is usually satisfactory, but this study has encouraged me to strive for parent engagement and raise the bar beyond parent involvement. Also, nothing in life is guaranteed, including culturally responsive leadership because of one's job title. Thank goodness there is professional learning, vast amounts of research, and unlimited access to resources to support principals' efforts to prosper as culturally responsive school leaders. As long as principals and other school leaders remain

committed to working alongside parents, families, and the community to support students, then systemic change is attainable. We can create the systemic changes we need in public education, especially to support our schools that serve marginalized families.

As a result of this study, I have gained a deeper understanding of culturally responsive school leadership, equitable collaboration, parent engagement vs parent involvement, and the importance of building positive, trusting relationships with parents, families, and community partners. I look forward to using findings from this study to avoid deficit-based approaches, even with well-intentions. Now that I know better, I must do better with avoiding practices that exacerbate educational inequity. For example, it is not acceptable to not have translators on site when hosting events at school. Non-English-speaking families should not have to request translation services in order to communicate with their school. Reviewing the data from my study also has inspired me to contribute to identify ways to leverage the expertise of the families at my school. Like my colleagues, my school population consists predominately of people of color, 66% African American, 14% Hispanic, 98% on or below the poverty line. When I see the demographics of the students my school, I see opportunities to highlight expertise, knowledge, and cultural practices, not test scores and proficiency data. Like my colleagues and other principals, I cannot shoulder the responsibility of creating change in my school alone. Parents and families are children's first teachers and must feel invited, welcomed, and included in their child's education, more specifically, in their school. Undoubtedly, local businesses have economic interest in community, specifically low-income neighborhoods. The people most in financial need are most reliant on public services, yet they can contribute to fostering school change when invited to help shape the agenda.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW 1 PROTOCOL AND QUESTIONS

<b>Purpose of the study:</b>	<i>To explore how NC Lab School principals lead for parent, family, and community engagement (PFCE) in their schools</i>
<b>Interviewee Requirements:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NC Laboratory School Principal</li> <li>• Title I School-required to provide PFCE</li> <li>• IRB approved study participant</li> </ul>
<b>Research Question:</b>	How do NC Lab School principals lead for parent, family, and community engagement (PFCE) in their schools?
<b>Interview Questions:</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Tell me a little about yourself as an educator, your philosophy</li> <li>2. What has been your experience as a NC Lab School principal over the years?</li> <li>3. Describe your NC Lab School.</li> <li>4. How would you describe PFCE?</li> <li>5. Give me an example of PFCE at your school.</li> <li>6. What leadership behaviors do you exhibit that reflects your being culturally responsive?</li> <li>7. What role should principals play in PFCE at the school?</li> <li>8. What should be the overall objective/strategic plan be to develop PFCE at your school?</li> <li>9. What do principals need to consider when building relationships to increase parent engagement?</li> <li>10. How can principals build relationships to increase parent engagement?</li> <li>11. What information and training do parents/guardians need?</li> <li>12. How can principals provide information and training to parents?</li> <li>13. What role do you play in PFCE at your school?</li> <li>14. Describe any past experiences with PFCE and how they affect your current work</li> </ol>

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW 2 PROTOCOL AND QUESTIONS

<p><b>Purpose of the study:</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>To explore how NC Lab School principals lead for parent, family, and community engagement (PFCE) in their schools</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Research Question:</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the current state of PFCE in the school?</li> <li>• What is the relationship between a principal’s appointment in a NC lab school and their training in and practice of culturally responsive leadership?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Interview Questions:</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How do you involve teachers in PFCE at your school?</li> <li>2. What do you think teachers at your school feel about PFCE?</li> <li>3. What PFCE practices do you think teachers are currently implementing in their classrooms? Examples?</li> <li>4. How do you develop positive relationships with parents and families? community?</li> <li>5. How often do parents or community members weigh in on issues of diversity, inclusion, and responsiveness?</li> <li>6. What tool is used to collect information from parents, families, and community related to PFCE?</li> <li>7. How is this data analyzed and by whom?</li> <li>8. Can you tell me about a developed network with parents and the community?</li> <li>9. What types of PFCE opportunities are held at your school?</li> <li>10. Who is involved in PFCE at the school and to what extent?</li> <li>11. What specific role do parents play in increasing PFCE at your school?</li> <li>12. What types of PFCE are held in the community?</li> <li>13. Who is involved in PFCE in the community and to what extent?</li> <li>14. What specific role do community members play in increasing PFCE at your school?</li> <li>15. When have you had an opportunity to be engaged in the community as a means to understand students and families?</li> <li>16. Are there ways that you honor and celebrate diversity on your campus?</li> <li>17. What are some of your successes at your NC Lab School? Challenges?</li> <li>18. Where do you think you are currently in terms of PFCE?</li> <li>19. What additional support do you think is needed for PFCE at your school?</li> </ol>

## APPENDIX C: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Data from interviews will be discussed as needed before the focus group interview. Results of the data analysis from individual interviews may require additional questions to be added to the focus group.

***Researcher: Our discussion today will focus on culturally responsive PFCE in NC Lab***

***Schools.***

These questions will guide the discussion.

**How do NC Lab School principals attempt to lead for parent, family, and community engagement (PFCE) in their schools?**

1. How do you interpret and enact PFCE policies required by Title I guidelines?
2. How do you feel about ESSA guidelines? Do you think they improve PFCE at your school? Why/why not?
3. What type(s) of professional learning have you attended to help you better understand PFCE policies?
4. How do policies determined at higher levels get implemented at your school?

**What is the current state of PFCE in their school?**

5. Who are the members of your organization responsible for setting goals?
6. What leadership practices and/or strategies do you use to engage members of diverse cultures and economic backgrounds? How can you make them better?
7. How do you avoid deficit thinking of staff, students, families, community?
8. How will your school maintain culturally responsive PFCE in the next few years?

**What is the relationship between a principal's appointment in a NC lab school and their training in and practice of culturally responsive leadership?**

9. What factors support and/or challenge culturally responsive PFCE for NC Lab school principals?

10. Describe a time when you felt supported in your efforts to implement culturally responsive PFCE. Who were the stakeholders and what was the outcome?
11. Describe a time when you had to see a challenge as an opportunity. Who were the stakeholders and what was the outcome?
12. What external conflicts have you encountered when engaging in culturally responsive PFCE practices?
13. What has been a personal challenge for you in your work towards culturally responsive PFCE at your school?
14. What type of training, if any, have you received related to culturally responsive school leadership?
15. What type of training, if any, have you sought on your own related to culturally responsive school leadership?
16. How do you celebrate *your* contribution to culturally responsive PFCE at your school?

Researcher will ask if anyone has additional comments to add to the discussion. The focus group discussion will conclude and participants will be dismissed.