THE MOTHERS' CIRCLE:
THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF CULTURE, COMMUNITY, AND
CARE OF LOWER-INCOME WOMEN IN A PARENTING
EDUCATION AND FAMILY SUPPORT PROGRAM

A Thesis in
Adult Education

by
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ABSTRACT

What motivates lower-income parents to participate in a particularly successful voluntary parenting education and family support program was the focus of this qualitative, phenomenological study. Sixteen mothers who were involved in a program for at least one year designed for parents/caregivers and their infants and young children were interviewed. The study’s theoretical perspective was both psychological, in which parents’ individual perspectives and motivations were considered, as well as sociocultural, in which the influences of family, neighborhood/community, and the program and staff were explored. The sociocultural standpoint also took into consideration gender, class, culture, and ability and how these positions within society influenced parents’ participation in the program.

The results of this study suggest that parents’ wider social contextual environments that encompass family and neighborhood/community did influence their participation decisions. Variations in family support, and concerns and problems within the neighborhood/community were motivating forces. Positive program and staff attributes contributed to parents’ desires to participate as well.

This research further revealed that the program and staff addressed the needs of participants’ by being attentive to issues involving gender, class, culture and ability through an environment that created community within the larger community. The program and staff also went way beyond just parenting education, by assisting and supporting mothers in identifying and confronting gender related issues, addressing lower-income families’ needs for food, clothing, and shelter, being accepting of cultural beliefs and differences, and providing support and encouragement for those with special needs.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Problem

Adult education is primarily a voluntary activity (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). In order to improve both theory and practice, who participates, and what motivates or deters adults from participating has prompted many researchers and writers to examine this topic extensively within the field (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). Consequently, the research on this topic has focused on three major areas: the characteristics of participants and non-participants, barriers or deterrents to participation, and motivation for participation (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

In parenting education, program planners are concerned with participation information as well. Dolan and Haxby (1995) state that even the most well executed parent programs have low rates of participation and high rates of dropout. Furthermore, since a large number of programs are designed for the benefit of lower income parents, an analysis of their reasons for participation would seem necessary, appropriate, and beneficial in order to more successfully assess the effectiveness of these programs.

The research literature indicates that characteristics of parents who often do not participate in voluntary parenting educational programs include those who are generally from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Rowland & Wampler, 1983; Smrekar, 1992; Aronson, 1996; Charlesworth, 2000; Keller & McDade, 2000); are low-income parents of Color, or are single parents (Gross, 2001). Teenage parents tend to also participate less often than adult parents do (Coleman, 1991). Furthermore, “parents living in disorganized
neighborhoods with high crime rates and rapid residential turnover, will be less likely to participate” in formal parenting programs (McCurdy & Daro, 2001, p.119). Additionally, research has repeatedly shown that lower income and minority parents are “often geographically, culturally, and psychologically distant” from educational institutions (Fruchter, Galetta, & White, 1993, p.36).

Much of the focus in the participation research of lower income parents in educational and family support programs has been on barriers or deterrents. Difficulties concerning child care, transportation, and work schedule conflicts are a few of the situational barriers that have been identified. Psychological deterrents include lack of self-confidence, feelings of inadequacy, and fear of failure, to name a few. In addition, language barriers and fears of not being accepted due to social class and cultural differences are some of the sociological barriers that are noted.

With a high focus on barriers or deterrents to participation in parenting education, there is much less theory and research on the motivational factors that positively influence participation of lower income parents. Gross (2001) found in a study of lower income parents of Color, who do participate, that they were motivated to do so because they wanted to become better parents and to learn more about young children. Participants further stated that they desired to share experiences with other parents, acquire assistance with how to discipline their children, and how to develop better relationships with their children.

Additionally, McCurdy and Daro (2001) developed an integrated, ecologically based theory for why parents (which included but was not limited to lower income parents) might voluntarily choose to be involved in family support programs with their
children. This conceptual theory links four basic premises "presumed to impact parent involvement in family support programs" (p.114): 1) individual needs, beliefs, and attitudes about participating in the program, 2) attributes of the providers/staff, 3) program characteristics, and 4) family and neighborhood/community influences.

However, there are a limited number of motivational factors that have been proposed or identified concerning lower income parents' decisions to voluntarily participate in parenting programs. This research fills that gap, by examining the motivational reasons that influence voluntary participation in programs for lower income parents instead of focusing mainly on the barriers or deterrents. Parenting education program planners may want to highlight the positive and look more carefully at what draws parents into programs and not just primarily at what is keeping them away so that they can attempt to promote and encourage what is deemed by parents to be most beneficial. This changed focal perspective might also shed a whole new light on the exploration of parents’ voluntary participation.

In an effort to examine this phenomenon of parents' motivations for participating in a parenting educational and support program more extensively, 16 lower-income parents who attended a voluntary program of this nature were selected to participate in this qualitative study. Since the parent perspective was being sought for this research, other caregivers attending the program were not involved. Parents who participated must have been involved in the program for at least one-year.

The program operates under the auspices of the PreK-12 public school system within one of the 23 counties in Maryland, in an area that has the highest percentage of lower-income persons than any other sector in that particular county (Kingeter, 2000). The area
experienced high rates of unemployment within the last few decades when thousands of people lost their jobs due to the downsizing of at least two major corporations (steel industry and transportation manufacturers) located in this vicinity. Prior to this, the area was primarily a middle-class and working class community. However, after suffering the affects of severe unemployment, this locale became predominantly lower-income, and consequently problems involving crime escalated.

The population of the area is primarily European-American (approximately seventy-five percent). The race/ethnicity of participants in this program, as well as of those who participated in this study, mirror the demographics of the area. Approximately seventy-five percent of the parents/caregivers are European-American, 20% are African-American or Black, and 5% are Asian-American or Hispanic-American, or persons of two races, or other races.

The program is also located in a Title I school district. At least 50% of families must be of lower-income in a district, in order for the school to qualify for Title I funding. Additionally, it should be noted that the program has been deemed highly successful. Due to space and staffing limitations, it has an extensive waiting list and has expanded the number of weekly group sessions that it operates from 4 to 8 sessions since it began at its current location in 1996. In the year 2002-2003 the program served 95 children and 74 parents/caregivers in the eight group sessions, and has requested additional funding to expand.

At the time of this study, the program's total population consisted of approximately 96% women (mostly mothers and a few grandmothers, aunts, or other caregivers), and 4% men (fathers or grandfathers). The program is not just primarily for
mothers to attend with their children; all parents or caregivers are encouraged to participate. However, since most families who are involved in this program come from two-parent households, and many mothers are not employed full time during the day, it is the mothers who most often participate. All of the parents/caregivers attended the program with their infants and/or pre-school aged children. Some of the parents, approximately one-third, had children with developmental delays or special needs.

If one were to consider the parents who choose to participate in a parenting educational and family support program such as this, one might wonder: What is happening in their individual lives right now that motivates them to participate? What family experiences influenced their decisions to participate? How have neighborhood/community experiences influenced their participation? What does the staff or program itself offer and provide to parents that motivates them to attend? And what sociocultural influences, such as participants' positionality in society relative to gender, class, culture and ability, affect parents' participation?

To effectively examine this phenomenon, the parents' individualistic, psychological considerations (such as needs, attitudes and beliefs) as well as the sociocultural influences of the family, neighborhood, and the program and staff itself were explored. For it is the integration of these factors that are presumed to affect parents' participation in parenting and family support programs (McCurdy & Daro, 2001). It is also essential that the participants' positionality within society be acknowledged as well (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). By taking into consideration a sociocultural approach to motivation, it cannot be seen as something that is "solely within the individual without reference to the social and cultural contexts within, which individual actions take place"
(Rueda & Moll, 1994, p. 120). Thus examining parents' motivation to participate while keeping this holistic perspective in mind is essential.

It was my intent in this study to seek the perspectives of parents of lower income with regard to how they make meaning of their experiences that have influenced their participation in a voluntary parenting educational and support program. Therefore, in order to capture multiple realities, in which individual and collective perspectives are emphasized as important for understanding a social situation, a qualitative research study seemed most appropriate (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). As Merriam (1988) notes the key philosophical underpinnings of qualitative research are twofold. First, "that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds;" and second, that "qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world, and the experiences they have in their world" (p.6).

Since essence or meaning was being sought from the perspective of the participants, a phenomenological study was utilized. Phenomenological inquiry seeks to answer the question, "What is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of people?" (Patton, 2002, p.104). In-depth interviewing is utilized in phenomenological studies to assist the researcher in coming as close as possible to the phenomenon that is being examined.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to examine the meaning that a group of lower-income parents gave to their experiences that have contributed to their voluntary participation in a federally funded Title I parenting
educational and family support program. Parents' individual, psychological motivations, as well as the sociocultural influences of family, neighborhood/community and the program and staff itself relating to their reasons for participating were explored. Parents' positionality within society with regard to gender, class, culture, and ability was also examined.

Theoretical Perspective

This study employed both a psychological and sociocultural perspective involving motivation for participation. The psychological lens focused on the individual and personal perspectives that parents gave for their participation concerning what they believed was important to their participation experiences. The sociocultural stance took into consideration the influences of family relationships, the impact of neighborhood/community environments, as well as the program and staff itself relative to parents' reasons for participating in the program. The influence of parents' gender, class, culture, and ability was also considered, since these factors are deeply embedded within the sociocultural context.

In examining motivation, many theorists however, have only emphasized the individual, psychological orientation in that "motivation is almost always conceptualized uniquely as a product of the intrapsychological functioning of the individual" (Rueda & Moll, 1994, p.120). More recently however, there has been a departure from this psychological emphasis to examining motivation from a more sociocultural perspective. For it should be understood that human activities do not occur in isolation, but are deeply embedded within the sociocultural environment (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Furthermore, an even more integrative approach in which both the psychological and
sociocultural are emphasized has been suggested within the adult education field (Caffarella & Merriam, 2000).

Examining the integration of the individual within the social and cultural context has been deemed essential for understanding the complexities of human interactions relative to children, parents, and families as well (Vygotsky, 1978; Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Rogoff, 2003). The theoretical underpinnings of sociocultural theory were originally drawn from the work of Lev Vygotsky, the Soviet psychologist, who examined the development of children from a social contextual perspective and emphasized that learning occurs within the social world and is not just an individualistic endeavor (Vygotsky, 1978). Urie Bronfenbrenner, psychologist and founder of Head Start, further described a sociocultural view of development through an ecological theory in which he constructed a model for examining the family, the school, the community and other social agents within the broader cultural context as being influential on individual development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). In addition, Rogoff (2003), a psychologist and follower of Vygotsky further contributed extensively to this perspective in her examination of human development from a cultural standpoint, and further assesses the dynamics of family interactions within this framework. These theorists have developed appropriate models for examining the connections between the individual and the family, and the sociocultural environment. To highlight the interplay of both the individual and sociocultural perspectives of the participatory motivation of parents within the constructs of a parenting education and family support program, was thus consistent with what has been recently posited as an essential consideration within current theory and practice.
Furthermore, McCurdy and Daro (2001) have developed a conceptual theory for what contributes to the participation decisions of parents in parenting and family support programs that takes into consideration both individual and sociocultural influences. They assert that the choice to participate is affected by not only individual considerations, but also by social contextual factors such as program and staff attributes, and the impact of parents' family and neighborhood/community environments.

Additionally, within the field of adult education Merriam & Caffarella (1999) suggest that a sociocultural perspective must also examine "how the world about us defines who and what we ought to be" (p. 118). Therefore, how one's positionality in society relative to one's gender, class, culture, and ability affects participation decisions must also be considered. For example, with regard to gender, researchers who take a psychological stance may see the social environment as being influential on development, but do not perceive this to be a primary determinant, although the importance of women's need to give "voice" to their experiences may be highlighted (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999); whereas, a sociocultural perspective would further view "gender as embedded in our cultural discourses and systems of social organization" (p.122). Research that takes both these psychological and sociocultural standpoints into consideration would strive to examine both of these entities.

It is these important concepts posited by McCurdy and Daro (2001) and Merriam and Caffarella (1999) that formed the basis for the theoretical perspective that guided this study. This lens was appropriate because it took into consideration the integrated aspects of the participants' lives (both psychologically and socioculturally) in order to attempt to
acquire a more holistic understanding of what motivated parents to participate in this program.

Guiding Research Questions

The questions that provided focus for this study were:

1) What individualistic perspectives did parents possess that influenced their participation in the program?

2) How did their immediate and extended family relationships as well as their attendance with their children in the program contribute to their decisions to participate?

3) How did their experiences in their neighborhood/community affect their participation?

4) How did the staff or the program itself influence their motivations to participate?

5) How did positionality in society with regard to participants’ gender, class, culture, and ability influence their participation?

Research Design

A qualitative research design can effectively "permit one to understand the world as seen by the respondents" (Patton, 2002, p.21). Its purpose is to capture the perspectives of the participants who are a part of a social situation being studied (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). In an attempt to discover the meanings that a group of lower-income parents gave to their voluntary participation in a parenting education and family support program, this research design was highly appropriate.

The essence of the experiences of participants was being sought in this investigation, therefore, a phenomenological study was chosen as the type of qualitative
research that was utilized. Patton (2002) defines phenomenology as "a focus on exploring how human beings make sense of an experience, and transform experiences into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning" (p. 104). Furthermore, phenomenology can be described as a study of the lived experiences of participants (Van Manen, 1990; Giorgi, 1997; Rossman & Rallis, 1998). Its purpose, as stated by Marshall & Rossman (1999), "is to describe the meaning of a concept or phenomenon that several individuals share" (p. 112). Phenomenology asks the question, "what is it like to have a certain experience?" (Van Manen, 1990, pp. 44+). In a phenomenological study the concept of "shared experience" is essential (Patton, 2002).

The primary method that was utilized in collecting data for this study was through in-depth, face-to-face individual interviews. Interviewing allows "us to enter into the other person's perspective. Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit" (Patton, 2002, p. 341). Open-ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The use of an interview guide offered consistency in providing questions for key areas, however flexibility was also present so that questions were reworded if necessary, or additional probes were added according to needs established during the interview process.

A purposeful sample of participants was selected for this study. Criterion-based selection of participants was established. Parents who were participants of this parenting education and family support program that is located in a Title I school district for lower-income families were asked to participate in the study. Each of eight different parenting groups within the program met in different locations and on different days. Due to my own scheduling concerns, I was only available during four of the program times, so
parents from these four sessions, who had been in the program for at least one-year, were selected to participate.

Second, the interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the participants. However, the identities of all interviewees were also protected. Pseudonyms were used for each participant. Tapes were then transcribed prior to engaging in the process of inductive analysis, which involved the discovery and identification of themes, the categorization of data, the refinement of patterns, and the writing of a synthesis of themes and/or concepts generated (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). Comparing and contrasting data was essential in this process.

Third, in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the program, observation was conducted at least one time in each of the four sites, for approximately 1-2 hours in each. These observations were done on an informal basis so that I, as the researcher, could acquire a better understanding of the program and its contextual composition.

Fourth, peer debriefing, member checking, and triangulation, of methods, were utilized in contributing to the credibility of the study. The interviews and observations, as well as documents in the form of optional journals that were kept by the parents were compared.

Lastly, to insure the dependability of the study, the employment of overlapping methods for collecting data (i.e. through interviews and observation) were included. Furthermore, an audit trail "that provides documentation (through critical incidents, documents, and interview notes) and a running account of the process (such as the
Significance of the Study

There is a minimal amount of theoretical and conceptual literature as well as quantitative or qualitative research on motivational reasons for participation of parents in parenting educational and family support programs that serve lower-income populations. Those who are involved in parenting educational program planning would most certainly benefit from accessing increased information in this area in order to more effectively design programs that meet parents’ needs. Furthermore, as Long (1983) suggests, "failure of a large number of participants to regularly take part in the group learning activity has implications for the use of resources and the productivity of the group learning experience" (p.141). For purposes of effectively planning adult learning opportunities and experiences, and for appropriately utilizing educational resources, adult educators and administrators need to be more aware of the motivational participation of program clientele. In addition, "knowledge about participation is useful to policy makers in terms of funding, and to those who plan and implement programs" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p.46) so that programs may operate more efficiently and effectively. This study also contributed to research with regard to the sociocultural motivational factors that influence participation of lower-income parents in parenting educational and family support programs. Presently, there is a continually growing body of research on the situational, psychological, and sociological barriers and deterrents that contribute to the study of participation. However, with regard to sociocultural motivational influences in the parenting educational field, research is severely lacking at this point in time.
Furthermore, this study assisted a group of lower-income parents in giving voice to their stories of what motivated them to be involved in a parenting educational and family support program. This is crucial since many parenting programs in American society tend to reflect the dominant culture by emphasizing middle-class European-American values (Rowland & Wampler, 1983; Keller & McDade, 2000). More emphasis needs to be placed on understanding what is valuable to those who have been marginalized in our society.

In addition, those who plan and implement programs for this population of parents would most likely find it helpful to learn more about the needs and concerns of those whose voices have not been frequently heard. Therefore, it is anticipated that this study was beneficial for parenting educators in deepening their understanding of some of the individual and social-contextual experiences of lower-income parents in relation to their participation in parenting programs.

Continued research is also needed with regard to issues affecting parent participation in school-based parent education and family support programs (Wood & Baker, 1999). By exploring parents' motives for participating in a program that operates under the auspices of a public school system, an additional contribution will be made to this research knowledge base as well.

Additionally, a majority of the research on parent participation in educational programs involves parents who have school-age children. The focus of this study was on parents of infants, toddlers and preschoolers who are involved in a parenting education and family support program.
Lastly, this study is of utmost importance to me as someone whose life has been dedicated to parenting both personally and professionally. Making meaning of my own experiences as a parent, as well as a parenting educator, has truly been a joy as well as a challenge in my own life. To be able to engage in the process of uncovering how other parents give meaning to an aspect of their journeys through the parenting process was an exciting prospect, and will certainly benefit my future practice.

Assumptions of the Study

I entered this study with the following assumptions:

1) Parents learn "how to parent" from role models within their families or communities of origin. Parenting behaviors that have been modeled for them from these influential sources are deeply embedded in their own current belief and value systems.

2) Most parents want to be "good" parents. If they are unable to meet this goal, it is usually because of difficulties experienced in their own developmental processes.

3) Parents from all walks of life usually need some type of support whether it may be informally from family, friends, acquaintances or community, or from formalized programs.

4) Not only professionals share expertise about parenting but parents are experts as well.

5) Cultural beliefs and practices influence parents' decisions on how to parent their children, as well as how and where they seek support.
6) Isolation from family, friends, and community support mechanisms can contribute to parents' needs to seek educational resources, support in their roles as parents, or social connections with others from formal programs and/or groups.

7) Challenges faced by parents that are difficult to manage alone (for example, having

8) a child with special needs, raising a child alone, or having a child with behavior problems) can contribute to parents' decisions to seek assistance from formal education and support programs.

9) Parents who are less financially stable are often limited in their abilities to obtain parenting information from resources that are literature based or from technological venues, and may also experience difficulty in acquiring needed learning materials for their children.

10) The majority of parent education and support programs are constructed based on the dominant culture's European-American, middle-class values.

11) Parents who receive strong support are empowered in their roles as parents, and are strengthened in managing their own lives, as well as their families' lives.

Limitations of the Study

The participants in this study were limited to parents (as opposed to other caregivers) who participated in one parenting educational and support program with their infants and young children. This program operates in one of the 23 counties in the state of Maryland. Therefore, findings from this study should not be generalized beyond this population. This study is also not representative of all parenting educational and support programs in this one county in Maryland, or throughout the United States. However, the
intent of the study was to provide a framework for understanding the individualistic and sociocultural motivational factors that influenced the voluntary participation of a group of lower-income parents in a parenting educational and family support program in this one particular school.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were also used for this study; therefore due to the utilization of a small sample size, and limited geographic area, the findings from this study should not be generalized. However, when utilizing the phenomenological method in qualitative research making these generalizations is not expected.

It was the purpose of this study to examine the meaning that a group of lower-income parents gave to their individual and sociocultural experiences that have contributed to their voluntary participation in a federally funded Title I parenting educational and family support program. Although a qualitative research approach may limit the generalizability of the findings, rich descriptions that portray the essence of the parents' experiences with regard to their motivation for participation could not be acquired through any other research method. In order to be able to thoroughly explore the research questions designed for this study, obtaining rich descriptions was essential.

Lastly, it should also be noted that in qualitative research the researcher is the primary instrument. I therefore needed to assess my own abilities and traits such as tolerance for ambiguity, sensitivity to context and data, and good communication skills (Merriam, 2001). Thus, my own ability to be sensitive to participants during the interviewing process as well as my own interviewing skills, were influential. Furthermore, since I am a white, European-American, middle-class female, my
positionality with regard to race, class, and gender were considered in my ability to effectively relate to and interact with the participants in this study.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions of terms used in this study are important to identify:

*Family* is the "basic social and human unit instrumental for individual and social survival" (de Melendez & Ostertag, 2000). Nuclear families with children may consist of, but are not limited to: two-parent households that include both a female and male, homosexual parents, single-parent households, families with step-parents, grandparents or other extended family members as caregivers, families headed by siblings, or foster families (Charlesworth, 2000). Adoptive families are also included, as well as families who have guardians as head of households, which have been appointed by the court. Extended family members who live with, or who are not living with the nuclear family are also considered as family. Furthermore, persons may wish to create their own families through forming a unit of support with others outside of the biologically based family.

*Family support programs* are established to serve not only the parent (or guardian) but also the child by attending to the needs of the family as a unit. Some programs for young children combine an educational component for the parents, while at the same time, offer a play group for the children. These programs are designed to be a collaborative venture among parents and professionals and exist within the families' own communities. Parent participants in this study belong to this type of program.

*Individual/psychological perspective* refers to the personal attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, and needs of persons that influence the motivation to participate (Courtney, 1992).
Infants and young children are referred to here as children who are 6 months to 4 years of age. Parent participants for this study attend a parenting educational and support program with their children who are within this age range.

Lower-income parents/families are classified by federal guidelines that have been established to measure what is considered for a family to be living at poverty level. In 2001, the yearly earnings at poverty level for one adult and one child was $12,207; two adults and one child were $14,255. For each additional child in the two above situations, an increase of roughly $3,400 should be added (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). "Low-income families typically include those making 150% of the poverty threshold" (Macphee, 1999, p.331).

Parenting can be defined as the fostering of all areas "of a child's growth - nourishing, protecting, guiding new life through the course of development" (Brooks, 1998, p. 1). Those who parent do not necessarily have to be the biological parents whose provision of the sperm and egg contributed to the procreation of the child.

Parenting education "consists of programs, services, and resources offered to parents and caregivers that are designed to support and empower them or increase their capacity and confidence in raising healthy children" (Carter, 1999, p.149). The parent participants in this study belong to a program that aspires to meet these goals. The program offers a discussion group for parents while their children are involved in a play group. Program professionals facilitate discussions and provide materials for parents based on various topics that correspond to the developmental needs of infants and young children. Parent issues, questions, and concerns are given priority and addressed.

Parenting education, as opposed to parent education, is the preferred term since this
definition is more inclusive in encompassing others who are not necessarily the biological parents.

_Sociocultural perspective_ refers to "the role of social interactions and the influence of culturally based knowledge and practices" (O'Neil & Drillings, 1994, p. 127) in examining parents' motivation. In this study, the motivation of parents is being considered as to why they participate in a voluntary parenting education and family support program. What is being considered in this study, beneath the umbrella of this definition, are the social interactions and relationships of parents with their families, neighborhood/community environments, and the program and staff. Positionality within society with regard to gender, class, culture, and ability, are also crucial entities to consider and are being examined within this socially and culturally focused lens.

_Title I_ of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is the largest educational program that is funded by the federal government. At least 50% of the students in a school district must be considered low-income in order for the school to qualify for Title I money. The home base school where this parenting education and support program is housed is located in an area within one county in Maryland that qualifies for Title I funding. All of the program's satellite centers are in the Title I school district as well. Schools that have been designated as Title I schools "may utilize their funds to operate school wide programs if they meet certain eligibility criteria and devise a comprehensive plan to ensure implementation" (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Family-oriented programs are a typical example of school wide implementation programs (Wong & Meyer, 2001; NCES, 2002). Schools have many choices in which they can designate their Title I funding as they see fit. Other common uses of funds, in addition to operating
school wide programs, include taking children from classrooms that need one-on-one assistance, providing additional learning activities in schools, and offering extended time opportunities, such as full-day Kindergarten programs. Principals who were from the schools with the greatest level of poverty most often reported using funds for school wide programs (NCES, 2002).

Summary

In this first chapter a background for this study has been given. The purpose of the study, its theoretical perspective and guiding questions were also provided. The design of this research study was described as well, in addition to the definitions of terms. Furthermore, the significance of the study, assumptions and limitations were also discussed.

A review of related literature encompasses Chapter 2. In Chapter 3 the research methodology and procedures will be described. Chapter 4 will focus on introducing the participants and the program. In Chapter 5, the findings of the study will be addressed. Lastly, Chapter 6 involves the summary, discussion, and implications of the study.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

The theoretical perspective of this study employed both a psychological and a sociocultural lens for examining the motivation of lower-income parents' participation in a voluntary parenting education and family support program. The psychological stance focused on the individual, personal perspective that parents gave for their participation concerning what they believed was important to their experiences of being involved in the program. The sociocultural standpoint took into consideration the influences of family relationships, the impact of neighborhood/community environments, as well as the program and staff itself relative to parents' reasons for participating in the program. The influence also of parents' gender, class, culture, and ability was also considered, since these factors are deeply embedded within the sociocultural environment.

In examining motivation, many theorists however, have only emphasized an individual, psychological orientation (Courtney, 1992; Rueda & Moll, 1994). More recently however, there has been a departure from this psychological emphasis to examining motivation from a more sociocultural perspective (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Furthermore, an even more integrative approach in which both the psychological and sociocultural are emphasized has been suggested within the adult education field (Caffarella & Merriam, 2000).

Additionally, McCurdy & Daro (2001) developed a conceptual theory for what contributes to the participation decisions of parents in parenting and family support
programs that takes into consideration both individual and sociocultural influences. They assert that the choice to participate is affected by not only individual, psychological considerations, but also by social contextual factors such as program and staff attributes, and the influence of parents' family and neighborhood/community environments.

Lastly, within the field of adult education Merriam & Caffarella (1999) suggest that a sociocultural perspective must also examine how one's positionality in society affects experiences in adult education. Therefore, the influences of gender, class, culture and ability must also be considered relative to participation decisions. Research that takes both these individual and sociocultural standpoints into consideration would strive to examine both of these entities.

It is these important concepts posited by McCurdy & Daro (2001) and Merriam & Caffarella (1999) that formed the basis for the theoretical perspective that guided this study. This lens was appropriate because it took into consideration the integrated aspects of the participants' lives (both psychologically and socioculturally) in order to attempt to acquire a more holistic understanding of what motivated parents to participate in this program.

Hence, the purpose of this literature review was to examine and critique the existing research and theories that have assisted educators in developing a more comprehensive understanding of adult education participation, low-income persons' participation, and the voluntary participation of low-income parents in parenting programs. In addition, it was necessary to specifically discuss the severe lack of research concerning lower-income parents' motivation for participating in programs, particularly from a more holistic perspective, which considers both the psychological, individual
needs of the participants as well as the sociocultural influences that prevail. For it has been widely noted that participation must be examined more thoroughly as both a contextual as well as an individual phenomenon (Quigley, 1990; Valentine & Darkenwald, 1990; Courtney, 1992; Yang, 1995; Sissel, 1997; Rubenson, 1998; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Participation Research and Theories in Adult Education

In the adult education participation literature, characteristics of participants, barriers and deterrents to participation, and the motivation to participate have been studied. Furthermore, various theories and models of participation have been developed. Each of these areas will now be specifically addressed.

Characteristics of Participants

According to the landmark study completed by Johnstone & Rivera (1965) the typical characteristics of participants in adult education included: being White; having an above average income; being adults who are younger to middle-age; working full time in white-collar occupations; and being married with children. Furthermore, participants were likely to be a woman as often as a man; have a high school education or more; and live in a suburb or urbanized area.

Studies conducted since Johnstone's & Rivera's (1965), indicate that this profile has not changed much over the past three decades (Carp, Peterson, & Roelfs, 1974; Anderson & Darkenwald, 1979; Penland, 1979; Aslanian & Brickell, 1980; U.S. Department of Education, 1986; Valentine, 1997; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Data collected in 1991 and 1995 from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) confirms the consistency of this information as well (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). What
appears to be evident is that adult education serves primarily the white, middle-class culture. Those who are from more diverse backgrounds are not as well represented; therefore, less information is known about why they choose to participate in adult programs.

**Barriers and Deterrents to Participation**

Although motivation to participate in adult education has been studied to some extent, what prevents adults from participating in educational programs has been addressed in the participation literature as well. Understanding why people choose not to participate is also important in obtaining a comprehensive understanding of participation trends in the field. The terms - "barriers" and "deterrents" are often used interchangeably to mean the same thing with regard to participation obstacles. However, there is a slight discrepancy between the two:

- **Barrier** connotes an absolute blockage, a static and insurmountable obstacle that prevents an otherwise willing adult in participating in adult education - an attractive but simplistic notion. Deterrent, on the other hand, suggests a more dynamic and less conclusive force, one that works largely in combination with other forces, both positive and negative, in affecting the participation decision (Valentine & Darkenwald, 1990).

Recently, "deterrents", however, has been the more preferred term, due to a general feeling among researchers that it is more precise, and that more data has been acquired in support of this interpretation (Valentine & Darkenwald, 1990). However, usage of the terms: "deterrents" and "barriers" will be utilized throughout this literature review, in
Clusters have been created by various researchers, which designate types of barriers to participation (Merriam & Cafarella, 1999). Initially, two distinct categories were identified through an empirically based study, which used a survey instrument developed by Johnstone and Rivera (1965); these were external (or situational) barriers and internal (or dispositional) barriers. An example of an external barrier would be the influence of cost; an example of an internal barrier would be lack of confidence. Cross (1981) further contributed a third category - institutional barriers. These would include barriers to participation such as "inconvenient schedules or locations, full-time fees for part-time study, inappropriate courses of study, and so forth" (p. 98) that may be desired by adult participants from an institution. The category of "internal (dispositional)" barriers was further divided by Darkenwald and Merriam (1982). This division included either "psychosocial obstacles" (beliefs, values, attitudes, and perceptions about education or about oneself as a learner) and informational barriers, which reflects the lack of awareness as to what educational opportunities are available" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 57). Therefore, obstacles to participation were "classified into four general categories: situational, institutional, informational, and psychosocial" (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982, p. 136). Many variables that fall into these clusters, which attempt to explain barriers and deterrents to participation, have been identified by a number of researchers.

Situational barriers, such as time constraints, cost, and personal or family problems have been found in a number of studies to be deterrents to participation.
(Scanlan & Darkenwald, 1984; Darkenwald & Valentine, 1985; Hayes & Darkenwald, 1988; Blais, Duquette, & Painchaud, 1989; Martindale & Drake, 1989; Beder, 1990; King, 2002). For example, Darkenwald and Valentine (1985) discovered six factors that were determined as deterrents to participation in adult education. Of these six factors, three were identified as situational barriers. These included: time constraints, cost, and personal problems. Their data was analyzed from a random sample of 215 respondents from the general population, in which surveys were mailed to participants' homes. In addition, Beder (1990) conducted an investigation through a survey that was mailed to 9000 adults. From this sample, 129 adults who had not completed high school, and had never attended an adult basic education program were represented in the study. Interviews were conducted through a telephone survey. Findings from this study suggested that there were several major factors that contributed to non-participation. From these factors, three situational barriers were identified: time constraints, family obligations, and work conflicts. Beder (1990) further states that these situational deterrents were related to the mid-life years, where the influences of marriage, family, and full time employment may have existed. It should also be noted that the situational barriers of time and cost, in particular, continue to be identified by many non-participants in adult education as the most significant deterrents to their participation (Darkenwald, Kim & Stowe, 1998; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Institutional obstacles such as course scheduling conflicts, institutional costs, and program time constraints have also been identified as deterrents to participation (Carp, Peterson & Roelfs, 1974; Hayes, 1988; Blais, Duquette, & Painchaud, 1989; Valentine & Darkenwald, 1990). Cross (1981) conducted an analysis of data that was obtained by
Carp, Peterson, and Roelfs (1974) from a national survey in which respondents were asked to circle items from a list of 24 possibilities that may be preventing them from participating. Although situational barriers were cited as the most prevalent, institutional barriers "ranked second in importance" (Cross, 1981, p. 104). Responses such as not wanting to attend full time, too much time required to complete the program, and course scheduling conflicts were some of the most frequently cited obstacles. Cross (1981) further grouped these institutional barriers into five general areas "scheduling problems; problems with location or transportation; lack of courses that are interesting, practical or relevant; procedural problems and time requirements; and lack of information about programs or procedures" (p. 104). Additionally, Valentine and Darkenwald (1990) found that high educational costs charged by institutions were a deterrent.

Although informational barriers have been identified as a category of the barriers to participation they are not addressed in the literature as frequently as the other deterrents. In an early national survey conducted in 1962 "Johnstone and Rivera found that one-third of all adults had no knowledge whatever of educational resources for adults in their communities" (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982, p. 137). Cross (1981) also posited that about 25% of adults in the general population did not know who to ask about adult educational opportunities, or where to go to find them. Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) further stated that informational barriers are more problematic for adults who are "disadvantaged" (p. 138) due to the probability that they may be less likely to be interested in adult education programs or to seek out information about what is available.

A more recent study was also employed by Lee, Williams, Barwick-Snell, Hayes, and Nolan (1995) in which in-person surveys were conducted with 180 women who lived
below the poverty line in rural Oklahoma. Findings from this study revealed that more than half of the women said that it was true or somewhat true that they did not know there were programs being offered in their area. This barrier may be perceived as ignorance by adult educators; however, it is crucial to acknowledge that in fact these opportunities for education may not be of primary importance or interest to lower income persons who may have other more pressing issues and challenges to deal with in life. Therefore, they may choose not to seek out this information.

Psychosocial deterrents, such as lack of confidence, negative feelings about school, and disengagement from school have been frequently found to be obstacles to participation in adult education as well (Scanlan & Darkenwald, 1984; Hayes, 1988; Hayes & Darkenwald, 1988; Valentine & Darkenwald, 1990; Beder, 1990; Lee et al, 1995). For example, Scanlan and Darkenwald (1984) discovered, in addition to other categories of deterrents, that disengagement was an influential psychosocial factor in a study with a group of allied health professionals. However, Beder's (1990) study of 129 adults who had never completed high school found that there were several psychosocial barriers to participation in addition to the situational barriers that were identified. These psychosocial factors included low perception of need (e.g. being too old to return to school), perceived effort (e.g. school is too hard), and dislike for school. It should be noted however, that for those who may have left school before high school graduation, the school setting that basically perpetuates the values and beliefs of the dominant middle-class culture might not have been comfortable or compatible to their life styles. This may have further contributed to their negative perceptions of the environment, which in turn may have influenced their future decisions of not wanting to participate as
adults. Lee et al (1995) study with rural low-income women from Oklahoma further revealed that the response "I don't want to go by myself" was prevalent. Lee et al (1995) stated that this "may be related to self-concept, since more than 50% felt that going to a program where they did not know other people was an intimidating prospect deterring them from participation" (p. 369).

In addition to discussing the above findings related to each of the categories of deterrents, it is also important to note that scales have been developed to classify deterrents to participation (Scanlan & Darkenwald, 1984; Hayes & Darkenwald, 1988). These scales portrayed deterrents that were from more than just one of the categories. Scanlan and Darkenwald (1984) determined that there were six factors that were deterrents: disengagement, lack of quality, family constraints, cost, lack of benefits, and work constraints. This scale, the *Deterrent to Participation Scale (DPS)* was created from their interviews with 21 allied health professionals. They then administered this scale “to a large random sample of health professionals” (p.155). In addition, Hayes and Darkenwald (1988) described five major factors that were found to be deterrents to participation in their study and created a new form of the *Deterrents to Participation Scale (the DPS-LL)*. Low self-confidence, social disapproval by others, situational barriers (such as cost, transportation, and family problems), negative attitude towards classes (such as dislike of other students in the class, going into a school building, and classes themselves), and low personal priority were all found to be of significance. These factors were developed from interviews with 160 low-literate adults who were participants in an adult basic education program. These scales, the DPS and the DPS-LL, which were developed through the use of qualitative interviewing techniques have been
further used by other researchers in an attempt to examine deterents (Darkenwald & Valentine, 1985; Blais, Duquette, & Painchaud, 1989; Martindale & Drake, 1989; Valentine & Darkenwald, 1990; King, 2002).

Typologies for classifying deterrents to participation have also been developed based on findings from previous studies (Hayes, 1988; Valentine & Darkenwald, 1990). Six types of low-literate adults in relation to participation deterents were identified in Hayes' (1988) typology. Characteristics included low-self confidence, social disapproval, situational barriers, negative attitudes towards classes, and low personal priority. Hayes (1988) study also was unique, in that it demonstrated that connections between barriers to participation and sociodemographic characteristics of participants was low, whereas previous studies suggested that this correlation was high (Scanlan & Darkenwald, 1984; Darkenwald & Valentine, 1985; Hayes & Darkenwald, 1988). Valentine and Darkenwald, (1990) also developed a typology for classifying those who did not participate. They concluded that there were five groups of adults who were deterred from participating due to personal problems, lack of confidence, lack of interest in organized education, lack of interest in available courses, and educational costs. This study examined responses from a previous study conducted by Darkenwald and Valentine (1985). Data were analyzed from 215 individuals who had responded to a survey distributed in a suburban area of New Jersey to create this typology.

It is important to note that a number of these studies were conducted with mainly middle-class populations and/or more highly educated groups (Scanlan & Darkenwald, 1984; Blais, Duquette, & Painchaud, 1989; Martindale & Drake, 1989; Valentine &
Darkenwald, 1990). They therefore excluded persons of other backgrounds, and focused primarily on the dominant culture and those who were of a higher socioeconomic status.

What most of these studies and typologies also have in common is that they do not move beyond individuals' personal, psychological, perspectives of their perceived barriers or deterrents to participation. Even though the interaction between the individual and his or her environment is addressed, "the focus and conceptual apparatus is clearly psychologically oriented" (Rubenson & Xu, 1997, p. 80). Contextual implications such as societal forces, cultural mores and belief systems, social relationships, and nuclear and/or extended family involvement and relationship issues are rarely explored. In addition, interconnections among the deterrents to participation are not examined. Although these methods serve a useful purpose in developing a basis for examining deterrents to participation, they do not extensively explore the complexities that might further explain non-participation of adults in educational programs.

Furthermore, although some of the studies employ qualitative interviewing techniques they do not seek to uncover through in-depth interviews adults' deepest, underlying reasons for non-participation in adult education programs. More qualitative studies are needed in an attempt to capture the realities of participants’ experiences.

What is also important to note is that those studies that examined populations of low-literate or low-income adults (Hayes, 1988; Hayes & Darkenwald, 1988; Beder, 1990; Lee et. al, 1995) discovered a number of deterrents that could be related to social-contextual issues. For example, some of the findings were related to situational deterrents that may have been a part of their daily struggles to survive (e.g. family problems and transportation difficulties), as well as many psychosocial issues that were connected to
negative feelings in relation to school. Because of the control of formal educational institutions by the middle-class dominant culture, persons who are not members of the mainstream may feel less comfortable within these settings. Therefore, these deterrents should be considered more of society's problem, and not the problem of individuals.

Other qualitative and quantitative studies conducted primarily within the last decade, however, have examined some of the possible social-contextual deterrents to participation in isolation, or in conjunction with individual, psychological perspectives (Quigley, 1989, 1990; Sheared, 1995; Hall & Donaldson, 1997; Sissel, 1997). For example, Quigley (1989) found that resistance to the school culture was prevalent. His interviewees discussed their non-supportive, negative, and abusive experiences with schools, the lack of sensitivity of the schools to their culture, and their feelings about it being too late in life for them to go back to school. An additional study conducted by Sheared (1995) in which individual and focus group interviews were conducted with 153 African-American students, administrators, and educators involved in Adult Basic Education (ABE) in California revealed various barriers. Sheared (1995) stated that, "Self-perception, economic pressures, peer pressure, racism, and internal and external environmental factors are barriers to African-Americans participating in adult education programs" (p. 308). Furthermore, Hall and Donaldson (1997) conducted a study of why women who did not complete high school opted not to participate in adult education. Factors such as: economic status, pregnancy at a young age, and the educational level of their parents all played roles. Lack of time and support systems, the absence of child care, and feeling unable to express oneself were also found to be significant reasons. Lastly, Sissel (1997) found in an ethnographic study in which she conducted interviews
with 50 parents and 40 staff members in two Head Start programs, that issues of power and control exerted by staff towards parents was a deterrent toward parent participation in the programs.

These studies are noteworthy due to their attempt to uncover the broader contextual meanings (with some studies also including psychological analyses) that may be influential deterrents to participation. Continued research combining both individualistic as well as social and contextual perspectives regarding participation is needed (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999), in order to develop a more holistic view of what prevents adults from becoming involved in educational programs and experiences.

*Motivations for Participation*

Although barriers and deterrents have been examined as factors that limit participation, why people actually participate in adult education has also been investigated. Motivation in education can be defined as "the basic reasons which lead learners to participate" (Beder & Valentine, 1990, p. 79). As far as motivation for participating in adult education is concerned, research in this area has been extensive and began primarily with the work of Cyril Houle (1961). Conducting in-depth interviews with 22 adults who were participants in continuing learning, Houle (1961) created a typology from the data he gathered. Three adult learning orientations were developed from his findings: goal-oriented learners, activity-oriented learners, and learning-oriented learners.

This preliminary study triggered further investigation in the area of motivation to an even greater extent by Sheffield (1964), Burgess (1971), and Boshier (1971) and those who have utilized Boshier's Educational Participation Scale (EPS), (Boshier, 1971;
Morstain & Smart, 1974; Boshier, 1976; Boshier, 1977; Boshier & Collins, 1985; Fujita-Starck, 1996). Generally, reasons found for participation included "expectations of others, educational preparation, professional advancement, social stimulation, and cognitive interest" (Caffarella & Merriam, 2000, p.57). These studies however, primarily examined the motivations of white middle class populations, with many participants being involved in continuing education and/or professional development programs. They also focused on primarily psychological perspectives.

It should be further noted that Boshier’s (1971) Educational Participation Scale has been widely employed internationally, with many of the above named studies being conducted outside of the United States. Morstain and Smart’s (1974) study that used the EPS however, was conducted in the United States with a group of 611 students, who were taking evening courses in a college in New Jersey. Results from this study extended Houle’s typology. Findings through factor analysis revealed that there were six factors, rather than three that motivated participation: social relationships, external expectations, social welfare, professional advancement, escape/stimulation, and cognitive interest.

In addition, empirical studies concerning motivation and that did not utilize Boshier's EPS were conducted by Henry and Basile (1994) and Livneh and Livneh (1999). For example, Henry and Basile (1984) discovered through a survey of 138 students, enrolled in a formal adult education program in an urban university, "that interest in formal adult education is most commonly motivated by vocational reasons" (p. 80). Although they existed as reasons for participation, two weaker motivational factors were also determined: wanting to meet new people, and the desire to acquire knowledge for its own sake. Livneh and Livneh (1999) also determined that the desire to pursue
learning on one's own (self-motivated learning) and external motivational factors (such as the desire for a social outlet) were the most frequent responses given by respondents for participating in adult education. This study employed a survey instrument that was distributed by mail to certified teachers and administrators to examine their motives in continuing education. Two hundred and fifty-six persons responded.

A major criticism of all of these empirically-based studies, however, is that they employed surveys resulting in descriptive data, and involved the use of either factor or cluster analysis in analyzing the motivation to participate in adult education. Although these studies provide a useful foundation for examining motivation, they do not offer in-depth analyses of this phenomenon.

Criticisms of studies that utilize specific scale items have been made as well in the adult education field (Long, 1983; Courtney, 1984, 1991). For example, Courtney (1984) criticized the development and utilization of scales that minimize participants’ motivational orientations. He stated that, “an orientation is not simply a set of attitudes, values and beliefs. It stands as an integration of thoughts and action” (Courtney, 1984, p.181). This notion posits that the underpinnings of motivation to participate are far more complex, and cannot be just pinpointed to items that have been reduced to a scale.

These investigations also focus primarily on the motivational forces of individuals, as opposed to examining the role of social, contextual implications on the motivation to participate. However, a few empirically based studies have examined the impact of life transitions on participation (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980; Cross, 1981) For example, Aslanian and Brickell, (1980) found that life changes and experiences (such as marriage or the birth of a child) ignited interest in participation in adult education.
Getting fired from a job or promoted, for example, might also trigger the desire to seek out opportunities for learning. Therefore, they concluded from their study that career and family were the most significant factors that influenced participation.

Furthermore, even though there has been substantial quantitative research on motivation, qualitative studies have not been widely employed. A recent ethnographic qualitative study, however, conducted by Skilton-Sylvester (2002) discovered through interviews with four Cambodian women living in Philadelphia, that their multiple roles as spouses, mothers, sisters and/or daughters, and workers were central to their motivation to participate in an (ESL) English as Second Language program. Through this investigation it was found that the women's shifting identities as mothers, workers, and wives influenced their reasons for participating. Depending on how they perceived these roles, or how their families perceived them, affected their decisions to be involved in the ESL program. Not only does this particular study contribute to qualitative research on motivational participation through the process of in-depth interviewing (which seeks to portray the realities of the participants in the study) it further demonstrates the crucial influence of sociocultural factors on the motivation to participate.

Although many studies in the adult education field have examined motivation, much of the research has focused primarily on white, middle-class populations, and has placed a strong emphasis on psychologically based motivating forces. In addition, little investigation has been employed in examining sociocultural motivational influences that might be particularly important for understanding the reasons for participation of adults outside of the mainstream culture.
Examining psychological, social, and cultural implications of the motivational reasons for participation is important in obtaining a comprehensive understanding of this area of interest in adult education. “For it is the interconnections among ‘the individual, the culture, and persons in the culture’ that influences one's motives for participating,” (Bergin & LaFave, 1998, p. 328 as cited in Skilton-Sylvester, 2002). It is therefore crucial that sociocultural considerations also be brought to the forefront in research in examining reasons for participation in the field (Jarvis, 1985; Bagnall, 1989; Luttrell, 1989; Quigley, 1990; Courtney, 1992; Yang, 1995; Sissel, 1997; Rubenson, 1998).

Adult Education Participation Theory Development

Participation is a complex phenomenon. It is therefore "not surprising that there is as yet no single theory or model to explain participation in adult education" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 60). Consequently, several models and theories have been developed within the field. Specifically, various models have been devised to depict "visual representations of how concepts related to participation interact to explain who participates and perhaps even predict who will participate in the future" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p.60).

Miller's Force Field Analysis, Boshier's Congruency Model, Rubenson's Expectancy-Valence Model, Cookson's ISSTAL Model, Darkenwald and Merriam's Psychosocial Interaction Model, Henry and Basile's Decision Model, and Cross's Chain-of-Response Model have each been designed to illustrate an understanding of participation in adult education. Each model emphasizes differing factors in attempting to understand the participation phenomenon.
Miller's Force Field Analysis (1967) attempts to explain both positive and negative environmental forces that have an impact on the individual that would influence motivation to participate in adult education. For example, hostility towards the primarily middle-class educational system would be a negative force influencing the motivation of low-income adults, whereas their needs to advance themselves educationally and economically to survive would be a positive force (Miller, 1967).

Boshier's Congruency Model (1973) also seeks to explain participation by examining the correlation between individual factors and social factors. He posits that there are two categories of people: those who are deficiency motivated and those who are growth motivated. Those who are deficiency motivated are less likely to experience congruence with the instructor, or themselves, as being students, and are therefore more likely to dropout of adult education programs. Those, however, who are growth motivated experience congruency with the teacher, as well as with their roles as students and are more likely to persist (Boshier, 1977). This model definitely presents a deficit perspective that negatively portrays persons who may not be comfortable with formal educational institutions and authority figures.

Rubenson's Expectancy Valence Model (1977) puts the individual at the center of the model. The importance that the individual places on being involved in adult education, and the individual's perception of the environment are primary in determining the motivation to participate. Furthermore, the adult's individual needs are primary. The concept of expectancy relates to how successful the individual thinks she may be in an educational setting. The idea of valence refers to the positive, negative, or indifferent
feelings that one has towards being successful in educational endeavors. Individual perspectives are therefore at the core.

Another model developed by Peter Cookson, called the Cookson ISSTAL Model, considers the social aspect of participation. ISSTAL stands for interdisciplinary, sequential specificity, time allocation, and life span (Cookson, 1986). Yang (1995) states that this model "is perhaps the most comprehensive and complex framework for the PAE (participation in adult education). In this framework, the interactions among individual variables such as personality traits and attitudinal dispositions mediate external contexts, social background and situational variables" (p. 358). This model takes into consideration individual traits, external factors such as culture and topography, and sociodemographic factors such as level of education and age with regard to participation. Cookson (1986) further posits that adult education participation is just one aspect of a person's overall social participation.

The remaining three models have other varied theoretical focal points as well in determining the likelihood of participation. Darkenwald and Merriam's Psychosocial Model (1982) considers "social and environmental forces, particularly socioeconomic status" (p. 142) as correlates to participation. However, in this model individual attitudes and traits are ignored, giving a less comprehensive understanding of participation. Henry and Basile's Decision Model (1994) is the only one of the models that considers both deterrents and motivational reasons for participation. This model encompasses characteristics of the individual such as age and race, reasons for participants' enrolling, as well as course characteristics, institutional factors, and possible deterrents. However, the characteristics and perspective of the individual in relation to these factors is what is
emphasized. Lastly, Cross's Chain of Response Model (1981) synthesizes some of the common elements of Miller's (1967), Boshier's (1973), and Rubenson's (1977) models and further considers the individual's life transitions and events as influential factors in determining participation (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Even though all of these models do address, to some extent, the "interaction between the individual and his or her environment" (Cross, 1981, p.123), with the exception of Cookson's ISSTAL Model, relatively no attention is given to sociocultural dynamics as factors to be considered in participation. Many of the models place a high emphasis on individual, psychological factors in relation to participation, by putting the individual learner at the center of each theory, with environmental forces impacting that individual in relation to participation motivations. Furthermore, these models appear to depict the power of individuals in having total control over their decisions to participate, without consideration for other strong societal and cultural forces that may also be involved. Lastly, some models posit a "deficit" perspective relative to those who are outside of the mainstream culture, which strongly portrays these persons in a negative light.

Sissel's Participation-Learning Dynamics Model, a more recent model that was developed by Peggy Sissel (1997) in conjunction with her study on parents' participation in Head Start is notably different, however. Through this model Sissel (1997) depicts the sociopolitics of the relationship dynamics which occurred between parents and staff that participated in her study. Issues of power, control, and relationship between parents and staff influenced parents' decisions as whether to participate or not. Parents often experienced intimidation, rejection, manipulation, and domination by members of the
staff, thus reducing their desires to participate. Her model differs from the previously described models due to its development based on a specific population. Its focus is also not individualistic in nature, but emphasizes the social dynamics within the cultures of the Head Start programs that were studied.

As Sissel's (1997) study exemplifies, within the last decade in particular, it appears that the pendulum has been swinging more in the direction of examining socially contextual implications and the importance of social interconnectedness when considering participation. "In these analyses, people's decisions to participate have less to do with their needs and motives than with their position in society and the social experiences that have shaped their lives" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p.71).

Several additional theorists have also discussed considerations pertaining to adult education participation. Jarvis (1985) asserts that middle-class values and ideology have permeated adult theory and practice. Bagnall (1989) also theorizes that participation must take into consideration the involvement and control of adult education participants, instead of studying their participation in terms of just their presence. Furthermore, the need to address equitable access for minority persons in participating in adult education was posited by Ross-Gordon (1990). Resistance theory as proposed by Giroux (1983) is the underlying theory for Ross-Gordon's (1990) assertion. The basic tenet of this concept is that, "Learners or teachers may passively or aggressively resist the perceived inequalities of society as transmitted through school culture" (p. 12). Ogbu (1992) and Quigley (1990) have further supported this notion. In addition, Courtney's (1992) theory points out that participation is both an individual and socially contextual phenomenon. He further states that the focus on individualistic considerations only offers a glimpse of
the total reality of participation, and that indeed, societal factors are also involved. He elaborates by stating that adult education participation mirrors, "the type of society people live in and the access they feel they have to the various social, economic, and political institutions and agencies which express the values and ideals of that society" (p. 112). Therefore, it is evident that people do not live in isolation, with their own lives and interests taking total control in their participation decisions; socially contextual dynamics are further relevant; these considerations also have an impact on one's motivation to participate in adult educational programs

Summary

To date, it can be concluded that in adult education, participation has been investigated extensively. Characteristics of participants, barriers and deterrents, and motivational orientations, have all been examined frequently. However, studies that have a psychological, individualistic emphasis have been primarily employed. Only within approximately the last ten to fifteen years have some experts in the field called for the necessity to examine social contextual factors as well. Consequently, just a few studies have focused solely on this area, or have investigated participation from both psychological and social contextual perspectives.

Additionally, quantitative studies have outnumbered qualitative explorations. Many studies have utilized surveys by mail or by telephone and have analyzed data to determine factors or clusters to explain participation trends. Scales to measure participation have also been developed. However, few studies have been conducted that explore the reality of participants' experiences through in-depth interviews or observations.
Many of the studies in the field of adult education that have been discussed in this literature review thus far, offer a baseline for examining participation by presenting typologies and factored determinants in an attempt to explain this phenomenon. Although they have contributed to the study of participation extensively, many of these studies do not capture the complexities of the social dynamics that are involved.

This study contributes to the already existing body of literature on adult education participation, by adding an in-depth exploration of the meaning participants give to their experiences through both an individualistic and sociocultural examination. Furthermore, many already existing studies have employed white, middle class populations in their investigations. This study instead includes the voices of lower-income parents who are all women, including some who are also of various cultures and ability, who are perceived by society as not being a part of the mainstream culture.

Participation of Low-Income Persons in Adult Education

Research on the participation of low-income persons in adult education in many ways is similar to the studies of participation in general, since most studies address the barriers or deterrents to participation, and motivation to participate. However, when referring to low-income persons' characteristics, the literature frequently focuses on their non-participation as often as their actual participation. Therefore, characteristics of participants and non-participants will be discussed, as well as the barriers or deterrents and motivational influences of participation in this portion of this literature review. It should also be noted that the bulk of the conceptual literature, as well as research in this area, has been primarily discussed and examined from the mid-1980's to the mid-1990's, with little being produced since this time.
Characteristics of Participants and Non-Participants

Sociodemographic studies of adult education participation have revealed for more than 30 years that participants tend to be predominantly white, middle-class, and of more highly educated backgrounds. Those of other races, as well as those of lower social classes and educational groups appear to participate less often (Johnstone & Rivera, 1965; Carp, Peterson, & Roelfs, 1974; U.S. Department of Education, 1986, 1999; Valentine, 1997; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Therefore, those who are not of the white, middle-class culture may be characterized more frequently as being non-participants in adult education (Quigley & Arrowsmith, 1997).

In addition, it has been found that "the lower one's socioeconomic status, the lower the rate of participation in any type of formal learning activity" (McGivney, 1990; Statistics Canada, 1997 as cited in Long & Middleton, 2001, p. 20). However, it should also be noted that many studies examine participation in formal educational institutions and settings that predominantly emphasize the values of the dominant culture. Participation in more informal or community-based settings that may be preferred by those outside of the mainstream is often ignored (Ross, 1989; Rubenson, 1989).

When low-income persons' participation is studied, examination focuses on characterization and classification of groups of persons in the population such as Adult Basic Education (ABE) participants, illiterate, low literate, or undereducated adults, minorities, the marginalized and/or what some investigators unfortunately classify as the under class or disadvantaged. This is primarily because these groups are often disproportionately a part of the lower socioeconomic strata of society where lower educational level, occupational status, and income of participants are often interrelated.
Therefore, characteristics of lower-income persons' participation are not always examined in isolation.

Historically, characteristics of low SES participants have therefore often been dismayingly portrayed in a negative light and have been viewed from a deficit perspective, rather than from a strengths focused ideology (Fingeret, 1983; Quigley, 1987). For example, Anderson and Niemi (1970) discussed numerous stereotypical traits that have been frequently used to characterize ABE students. Some of these included: not seeing the value in education, having a minimal vocabulary, fearing change, being pessimistic, and being lazy and dependent. Classifications such as these have lead to further negative portrayals of lower-income ABE participants by focusing on learners as being inadequate as compared to the middle-class dominant culture (Quigley, 1987). Therefore, as Hayes and Darkenwald (1988) state, "ABE has been described as a 'creaming operation' that attracts only those individuals who are most in tune with middle-class values and norms" (p.16). Consequently, adults from marginalized groups may choose not to participate, because adult education theory and practice is primarily determined by the dominant culture (Anderson & Niemi, 1970; Keddie, 1980; Ogbu, 1982; Jarvis, 1983,1985; Quigley, 1990; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991; Quigley, 1992, 1997).

Data obtained from the International Adult Literacy Survey that was completed in 1994, revealed that only 13.2% of adults in the USA who were between the ages of 25-65 and had less than a high school education participated in formal and non-formal adult education training activities. However, when those same persons were asked to discuss how they acquired information informally or incidentally, sources for learning through
newspapers, radio, television, and family and friends showed much higher levels of involvement (Quigley & Arrowsmith, 1997).

In a recent study conducted in 1999 by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) it was determined that those with lower educational attainment participated less in formal adult education activities. Results showed that 18% of those who had less than a high school diploma participated, compared to 43% who had a Bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Again, as in the earlier study, formal educational opportunities were the only types of adult education possibilities that were addressed.

In examining characteristics of minorities who participate in adult education, Johnstone and Rivera (1969) reported that Blacks represented 9 % of the total sample, in comparison to 12% of their total population in the USA as a whole. However, other ethnic and racial groups were not represented in the study. In 1984, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) revealed that 8.1 % of Blacks, and 8.2 % of Hispanics participated (Ross, 1989). Blacks' participation was down slightly (.9%) since the Johnstone & Rivera (1969) study. Hispanic participation was also slightly lower (.4%) than an earlier study conducted by NCES in 1981, where participation was 8.6%. Whites participation was 13.8% in 1981, and 14.6% in 1984 (Ross, 1989). However, in summarizing comments posited by Darkenwald and Merriam (1982), Ross (1989) states:

Differences in rates of participation in adult education between whites and blacks are more adequately explained by previous educational and income levels than by race. The disproportionate representation of minority adults...
among the poor and poorly educated makes this distinction non-significant for large segments of minority communities (p. 97).

Ross (1989) further cautions that it is the social inequalities that must be considered when examining participation trends, and that we should therefore not assume that minority participation will increase once they achieve higher educational and income levels. Deeper sociological issues related to the authority and control by the dominant culture in adult educational programming is believed to have a far greater impact on low SES persons' resistance to participation (Quigley, 1987, 1990).

**Barriers and Deterrents to Participation**

Darkenwald and Merriam's (1982) classification of barriers and deterrents to participation resulted in four primary categories: psychosocial, institutional, situational, and informational. When addressing the obstacles to low-income persons' participation, these categories have been examined in the literature to some extent (Hayes, 1988; Hayes & Darkenwald, 1988; Beder, 1991; King, 2002). In addition, barriers with social-contextual implications have been discussed as well (Giroux, 1985; Martin, 1990; Quigley, 1990, 1992; Martini & Page, 1996; Quigley, 1997).

Since lower educational level and lower income often go hand in hand, the barriers and deterrents to participation of Adult Basic Education students, low literate adults, and high school dropouts are more frequently examined in the literature, and will therefore be discussed in this review. Furthermore, as has been previously mentioned, increased poverty levels often plague some minority groups particularly Blacks and Hispanics. These persons have been the focus of discussion to some extent, though minimally, in adult education regarding obstacles to their participation (Briscoe & Ross,
Therefore, a few of the barriers that have been addressed in the literature that hinder their participation will also be pointed out.

The four categories that were developed by Darkenwald and Merriam (1982), as well the social-structural deterrents that have been described will be used to guide this examination of the barriers and deterrents to participation of lower income persons. In addition, a critique of the literature from a social-contextual perspective will be woven throughout this discussion.

Psychosocial deterrents to participation would involve the attitudes, beliefs and perceptions (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982) of potential participants that have been obstacles to their involvement in adult educational programs. For example, Hayes and Darkenwald (1988) discovered in an empirically based study with 160 low-literate adults that there were several psychosocial deterrents. These included: low self-confidence, social disapproval by others, attitudes that were negative towards classes, and low personal priority.

In addition, Lee, Williams, Barwick-Snell, Hayes & Nolan (1995) surveyed 180 rural women who live below the poverty line in 20 counties in Oklahoma to determine what deters them from participating in adult education programs. Fifty percent of the women in this study said that they felt intimidated to go to a program where they did not know others.

Hall and Donaldson (1997) also explored the deterrents to participation with a group of 13 women (5 African-American, 8 white) who had not completed high school or their GED. Through semi-structured interviews they discovered that the women believed
they could not express themselves adequately, or communicate effectively and therefore chose not to participate.

All of these studies that portray psychosocial deterrents can also be viewed in a different light. Perhaps some of these thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and fears of respondents have deeper implications. The way adult education programs are structured to perpetuate the values of the middle-class dominant culture, could also be contributing to lower income persons' belief systems in relation to their reluctance to participate.

It should also be noted that psychosocial reasons as deterrents to participation are discussed far less frequently than external barriers such as lack of funds, lack of time etc. As Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) point out, "It is less demeaning to give lack of time or cost as reasons for not engaging in education than to say one lacks self-confidence or interest" (p. 136). Furthermore, Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) state that:

Particularly among lower and working-class persons, adult education may be seen as having little intrinsic value and little usefulness as a means of achieving personal goals. In many cases, too, engaging in organized educational activities is viewed as inappropriate for mature adults, especially for men. Finally, the process of learning may be perceived as burdensome, unpleasant, or even frightening rather than enjoyable or stimulating (p. 139).

Again, however, this perspective must take into consideration the fact that formal organized adult learning is being addressed, in which the dominant culture often maintains control (Quigley, 1990). Traditionally, many persons outside of the mainstream have enjoyed learning in informal, incidental, community, or church oriented settings
where they find these learning experiences to be more comfortable and compatible (Fingeret, 1983; Center for Literacy Studies, 1992; Quigley & Arrowsmith, 1997; Isaac, Guy & Valentine, 2001).

It is further evident that institutional barriers have been discussed in the literature pertaining to low-income persons to some extent, though minimally, as with psychosocial deterrents to participation. High tuition costs, access and location problems, scheduling difficulties, and inflexible class times are a few of the issues that have been raised (Fingeret, 1984; Beder, 1990, 1991; National Center for Educational Statistics, 1990-91; Cummings, 1995). Sheared (1995) also found that "when the curriculum fails to reflect the cultural and historical realities of African-American adults, their participation in ABE programs is adversely affected" (p.311).

Additionally, Beder (1990) found through a survey of 129 adults, who had not completed high school and had never attended an ABE program, that dislike for school was cited by respondents as a deterrent to participation. Although this could be perceived as a psychosocial deterrent, it may have institutionally related implications as well. Respondents may have disliked school due to their experiences of negativity within the institution itself.

Cervero and Fitzpatrick (1990) discovered also in their longitudinal study of 18,000 students who dropped out of high school, that they re-entered formal adult educational programs at far lower rates than the general population due to the impact that institutions had on them when they were younger. It was determined that they had strong negative feelings about their former school experiences, that contributed to their decisions not to participate later as adults.
Furthermore, in a meta-analysis of the literature, Wikelund, Reder, and Hart-Landsberg (1992) also confirm the notion that undereducated adults do not participate in educational programs due to prior negative experiences in schools. They perceive adult education programs "as extensions or continuations of the school programmes in which they have previously experienced failure, loss of self-esteem, and lack of responsiveness to their personal needs and goals" (p. 4). Additional perspectives related to this theory of resistance by participants to institutional educational settings have also been discussed as being problematic (Fingeret, 1985; Fine, 1985; Quigley, 1989, 1990, Baldwin, 1991; Beder, 1991; Quigley, 1993, 1997).

In a review of the literature, Briscoe and Ross (1989) have further addressed some of the institutional barriers that have been identified in limiting the participation of minorities in adult education. A general tendency to place minority persons in groups with lower abilities during their elementary and high school years can have a lasting negative effect on their willingness to participate in future adult education experiences. Lower self-esteem, acquisition of an inferior education, and feelings of resentment all may contribute to their not wanting to be involved in future educational endeavors. Furthermore, not having enough minority staff in formal adult educational settings is perceived as a deterrent for minority students who may wish to seek support and assistance from persons of their own backgrounds and cultures.

Situational deterrents that have contributed to the non-participation of lower-income populations have been studied and described as well. For example, lack of child care (NCES, 1990-91; King, 2002), family constraints (Hayes & Darkenwald, 1988; Beder, 1990; Lee et al, 1995; King, 2002), lack of transportation (Hayes & Darkenwald,
1988), and lack of time (Beder, 1990; Cummings, 1995; Lee et al, 1995) have all been cited as obstacles. Additionally, Beder (1990) pointed out from his study with adults who had not completed high school that the actual stigma of being illiterate may be also perceived as a situational barrier.

In addition, King (2002) conducted a study that utilized a survey which was administered in person to "119 current participants in GED programs who dropped out of high school within the last 5 years" (p. 147). Most had salaries of less than $15,000 per year. Findings from this study revealed that family constraints were the main barrier to participation. Participants discussed reduced family time, problems with arranging care for their children, absence of support from family and friends, and other family difficulties as primary obstacles.

When examining situational factors such as these, poverty itself can be a direct contributor to these deterrents. As Wlodkowski (1999) asserts, "From a sociological viewpoint, unequal access to wealth and power is the foremost explanation for the diminished educational aspirations found among low-income adults" (p. 15). Furthermore, without adequate resources and finances, child care and transportation may be way beyond the reach of low-income persons. The stresses of living in poverty from day to day can further impact adult education participation, since finding a way to obtain adequate clothing, food, and shelter are often greater priorities. As Long and Middleton (2001) further state regarding low SES persons' participation in literacy programs "in the face of other urgent needs, the benefits of improving literacy skills may seem inconsequential" (p. 21).
Informational barriers have also been addressed as deterents to participation of low SES persons. For example, the landmark study by Johnstone and Rivera (1965) revealed that only 19% of low socioeconomic adults living in rural and small town locations were aware that there was at least one place available for any type of adult educational instruction. However, 85% of high SES adults living near cities, were aware of this offering. Even though these findings also represent "differences between urban and rural areas in the availability of educational resources, they show even more the influence of socioeconomic status on awareness of community resources and on information seeking behavior in general" (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982, p. 138). Not knowing of or about organized educational programs can in itself be a barrier to participation "especially for disadvantaged adults" (p.138) who usually do not attempt to seek out this information. However, Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) further point out that making personal contacts with low-income adults, and providing community based educational opportunities are important considerations so that their learning interests and needs might be more fully addressed.

Furthermore, in the study mentioned earlier that was conducted by Lee et al (1995) in which they surveyed 180 rural women who lived below the poverty line in Oklahoma to determine their participation barriers in adult education programs, informational barriers were discussed by the women as being problematic as well. More than 50 % of the women stated that they "didn't know there were any workshops or programs offered" (p. 368). However, Lee et al (1995) had a plausible explanation for this response that which takes into consideration the interests and needs of low-income persons that may differ from the mainstream culture. They asserted that the women might
not have chosen to seek out this information because it was not all that important to them. Lee's et al. (1995) perspective came from the influence of an earlier study that was conducted by Luttrell (1989) in which she examined working class women's participation in basic education through college level course work. Luttrell (1989) discovered that "participation in adult education runs counter to the powerful influences of the working class culture of poor women because book learning and intellectual work are not a valued part of that culture" (Lee et al., 1995, p. 367). This same finding was determined to be true as well in a qualitative study conducted by Maneval (2000) in which she examined the participation experiences of working-class women who reentered school through community college.

It should be further noted that each of the deterrents (psychosocial, institutional, situational, and informational) should not be viewed in total isolation since there can be a "significant overlap and interrelationship among them" (Long & Middleton, 2001, p. 22). For example, time constraints can be perceived as a situational barrier, due to the limitations of one's own schedule, however, they could also be seen as an institutional barrier if programs do not offer scheduling options to address potential participants' needs.

Furthermore, it is important to point out that these categorizations of deterrents may also have strong social-structural implications. As was mentioned earlier, the psychosocial deterrent of "not liking school" that has been described by some low-income persons could be based on the personal attitudes of individuals. However, it could also more likely be a deterrent for low-income persons due to the structure of institutions
and how they perpetuate the belief systems and values of the dominant culture (Jarvis, 1985; Ogbu, 1992; Quigley, 1990, 1992, 1997).

This theory of resistance to schooling as proposed by Giroux (1983), has been discussed in the literature as being an important consideration for attempting to explain why low-income adults choose not to participate in adult education programming (Fine, 1985; Giroux, 1985; Quigley, 1989, 1990, Beder, 1991; Quigley, 1992,1997). For example, Quigley (1992,1997) found in a study of 20 illiterate adults from Pittsburgh who did not participate in ABE that they did not reject education and learning per se, but instead turned their backs on the experience of school itself due to its perpetuation of middle-class values.

Furthermore, when addressing the resistance of minority persons Giroux (1985) posits that it is institutions themselves that create barriers to participation by not asking students for their input, eliminating opportunities for the sharing of personal experiences, promoting teacher controlled learning environments, and silencing student voices. For example, Mezirow, Darkenwald, and Knox (1975) found "that across the USA adult learners in traditional ABE classes are objects of education, not participants in a learning process" (Quigley, 1987, p. 50).

Other theorists and practitioners have also discussed the importance of giving minority learners "voice" in their educational experiences (Keddie, 1980; Giroux, 1987; Quigley 1987; Martin, 1990). For example, Keddie (1980) states that it is not actually the needs of individuals that must be met, "but how these needs are socially and politically constituted and understood, and how they are articulated and whose voice is heard" (p. 63).
In sum, when examining the barriers and deterrents to lower-income persons' participation in adult education programs adult educators must continue to consider the interrelationships among deterrents (psychosocial, institutional, situational, and informational). In addition, it is even more critical to examine the deeper, underlying social-structural implications that also play an integral part in explaining these obstacles. As Ross-Gordon (1990) suggests it is important to improve our "understanding of the sociocultural contexts of the intended learners" (p. 13) in order to improve adult education programs and practice.

Motivations for Participating in Adult Education

With a greater focus on barriers and deterrents, studies of the motivations of low-income persons for participating in adult education programs have been far less prevalent. However, a few studies related to motivation of low-income persons have been employed, and will be discussed here in this literature review.

Beder and Valentine (1990) conducted an empirical study with 323 students who were enrolled in ABE programs in Iowa. Findings from this study revealed that participants cited self-improvement, literacy and educational development, job mobility, financial need, and persuasion by others as primary motivational reasons for their participation.

In examining voluntary reasons for participation, Stalker (1993) in an in-depth study that employed semi-structured interviews of 20 workers who had a high school diploma or less, discovered that those who participated often did so because they were forced to do so within the context of their work environments. Still other participants in this study described how they had to beg employers to send them to training.
Participation in this particular circumstance was therefore deemed as a privilege that was controlled by employers. Issues of power, control and authority were paramount in determining whether employees would be allowed, or not allowed to participate. Reasons for participating, therefore, were seen as basically coerced, or controlled by the work environment.

Additionally, Sheared (1995) conducted a qualitative study utilizing focus groups and interviews with 153 African-American students, administrators, and educators involved in ABE programs in California. Findings from this study revealed that valuing education, receiving support from home as well as the institution, and being a part of a learning environment that acknowledges participants' cultural lived experiences were all reasons that respondents gave for participation. This study is of particular importance since African-Americans have often been accused of not wanting to participate in formal education because they place little value on educational opportunities and experiences. Not only did this study demonstrate otherwise but it should also be noted that historically African-Americans have consistently placed a high value on education. As pointed out by Sheared (1995) this is "evidenced by the slaves who risked their lives to learn how to read. In particular, they have struggled to obtain an education, as well as jobs that provide them with equal and equitable pay for services rendered" (p.305).

An additional study was conducted in Canada in 1999. Long and Middleton (2001) examined the motivational influences of 331 individuals who made contact by telephone with adult literacy services in an attempt to acquire assistance. "Eighty-five percent were potential learners, and 15% were family/friends of potential learners" (p. 24). Approximately 40% of the callers had an annual income of less than $20,000, and
28% were receiving social assistance. Reasons callers gave for wanting to participate included the need to acquire help with reading, writing, and math skills, to obtain high school credits or a diploma, to enhance employment skills, or to learn English as a second language. Forty-six percent of the callers also stated that they wanted to enhance their "personal and social well-being" (p. 25). Furthermore, "in response to an open-ended question about motivation…more people cited motivators related to general educational improvement, personal well-being, and daily skills/social well-being/family (58 percent combined) than motivators related to jobs and upgrading for retraining (42 percent combined)" (p. 25).

In addition, Maneval (2000) conducted a qualitative study of 16 white and 4 African-American women of lower-income working-class backgrounds who were enrolled in a nursing program in a community college. She discovered that they were motivated to participate because they wanted to forge new identities for themselves. They created a psychological spacing between themselves and their families by putting themselves first for a change. They also wanted to change their own negative perceptions of themselves in relation to their intelligence.

What these studies reveal is that there are indeed some practical reasons that have been discussed as motivational forces behind low-income persons' decisions to participate such as: job mobility, literacy enhancement, and financial need. However, as has been found in some of the more recent studies, there are also deeper social-contextual issues that underlie motivation to participate for low-income persons. These findings suggest that issues related to power and control (Stalker, 1993), cultural responsiveness of programs (Sheared, 1995), and the forging of one's identity in relation to race, gender,
and class (Maneval, 2000) can have a powerful influence on decisions to participate. Since these studies are limited, more research needs to be done in which both psychological and social-contextual forces of participation are examined particularly with regard to low-income persons who have been marginalized by society.

Summary

The literature on low-income persons' participation in adult education is scarce. Theoretical perspectives have been developed and research has been conducted however it has not been extensive. Most of the adult education participation research in general has employed mainly white middle-class populations when examining participation trends; low-income persons of diverse backgrounds have been relatively ignored.

Additionally, there have been some studies that have examined barriers and deterrents, but even less attention has been given to motivational reasons for participation. Researchers have also attempted to discover social-contextual oriented perspectives of low-income persons' participation to some extent, however this focus has been limited as well.

Lastly, additional qualitatively based research is also needed in this area so that low-income persons' voices can be heard. Acknowledging their individual and collective perspectives is paramount in obtaining a deeper understanding of the reality of their participation experiences.

Low-Income Parents' Participation in Voluntary Programs

Similarly to the literature on adult education participation in general, as well as low-income persons' participation, the literature that exists on low-income parents' participation in voluntary programs also focuses on the characteristics of participants, the
barriers or deterrents to participation, and the factors that contribute to motivation.

Although there has been some research on low-income parents' voluntary participation, the majority of studies have been conducted within clinical settings as opposed to educational settings. It has been further posited that, "very little is known about parent preferences for school-based programs, or about pragmatic, attitudinal, or other barriers that might interfere with effective parenting programs" (Wood & Baker, 1999, p. 239). Additionally, many studies focus on outcomes for children in response to their parents' participation in educational programs, with less attention being given to the parents' actual experiences of participation. The theoretical and conceptual literature that was produced primarily in the mid-1980's, to mid-1990's, also dominates the field, with both descriptive and qualitative research in this area being much less prevalent.

A summary of these theoretical perspectives that have been developed on low-income parents' voluntary participation, as well as a discussion of the findings from both descriptive and qualitative research that has been conducted on this topic will now be addressed. Furthermore, it will be important to discuss the need for more qualitative research that unveils the narrative stories of participants, in order to more fully understand the social-contextual issues that may impact their participation. Additionally, it will be necessary to discuss some of this information with regard to African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans as low-income parents, due to their statistically high levels of poverty (Tollett, 1993; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998).

*Characteristics of Participants in Parenting Programs*

Characteristics of parents who attend voluntary parenting programs will be described in this literature review; however, it is important to first make the distinction
between mandatory and voluntary parenting programs since parents' characteristics may differ somewhat depending on which type of program they might attend. Mandatory parenting programs are designed "to ameliorate a particular problem" (Kagan, 1995, p.2). For example, parents who have been reported for child abuse or neglect would be required by the courts to attend a parent education program that would most likely stress behavior modification. Voluntary programs, on the other hand, are those programs in which parents choose to be members; parents also decide on "the nature and length of their engagement" (Kagan, 1995, p. 1), and participation is therefore usually more "vigorous and meaningful" (Swap, 1987, p. 32). The primary objectives of these programs are to assist parents in further developing and enhancing their parenting skills, and to focus on parent-child communication strategies (Pehrson & Robinson, 1990). Parents may also select parenting programs to obtain additional support from outside sources since "traditional sources of help--especially the extended family and neighborhood--are less available today than they were in the past" (Powell, 1990, p.1).

Interestingly, many studies focus on the characteristics of low-income parents who often do not participate in voluntary educational programs, more than in examining the characteristics of those who do. As Rowland and Wampler (1983) assert, most studies have failed to investigate who attends parenting educational programs. However, Keller & McDade (2000) point out that approximately 1 out of 4 low-income parents may choose to seek support from a parenting program.

Further summaries of demographic information related to participation state that those who do not often participate in formal parenting education programs include parents who are generally from lower socioeconomic and educational backgrounds.
(Aronson, 1996; Charlesworth, 2000); are low-income parents of Color, or are single parents (Gross, 2001). Furthermore, teenage parents tend to participate less often than adult parents do (Coleman, 1991), with teenage parents possibly participating for only short intervals (Danoff, Kemper, & Sherry, 1994; Nicholson, Brenner & Fox, 1999). Dual-career parents also participate less often as well (Coleman, 1991). It has also been noted that, "Parents living in disorganized neighborhoods with high crime rates and rapid residential turnover, will be less likely to participate" (McCurdy & Daro, 2001, p.119). Additionally, research has repeatedly shown that low-income and minority parents are "often geographically, culturally, and psychologically distant" from educational institutions (Fruchter, Galletta, & White, 1993, p. 36).

It should be noted however that this research has been primarily directed towards formal parenting programs that are offered within school-based educational contexts. Low-income parents often distrust schools (Nardine, 1990; Liontos, 1992) and therefore have had "a long history of alienation from the school and of deliberate noninvolvement" (Nardine, 1990, p. 79). Non-formal, community, or church based programs that are often more comfortable and compatible to low-income and minority families belief systems and life styles have not been widely addressed. Parent programs within a church or community context may indeed be more effective (Rowland & Wampler, 1983; Nicholson, Brenner & Fox, 1999; Diamond, 1999; Wood & Baker, 1999) and may therefore yield different results with regard to participation trends.

Concerning the characteristics of those who do participate, Rowland & Wampler (1983) state that parents who do participate in formal parenting programs are more likely to be White and middle to upper class. Smrekar (1992) identified higher rates of
participation from middle-income parents than from lower-income parents as well. Lastly, mothers generally tend to participate in formal parenting education more often than do fathers (Meyers, 1993; Noller & Taylor, 1989). It can therefore be argued that to a great extent, parents from backgrounds other than the dominant culture are not well represented when participants' characteristics have been addressed in this body of literature. However, as has already been noted, low-income parents' participation has basically been examined in formal school-based settings where parents are often more uncomfortable, and therefore less likely to attend.

**Barriers and Deterrents to Participation**

Similarly to the adult education literature, low-income parents' non-participation in formal programs has been primarily emphasized by the examination of psychosocial, institutional, situational, or informational barriers and deterrents. In addition, the literature reveals that theoretical and conceptual perspectives have been primarily discussed. Some quantitative, descriptive studies have also been employed (Danoff, Kemper & Sherry, 1994; Dolan & Haxby, 1995; Nicholson, Brenner & Fox, 1999; Wood & Baker, 1999; Johnson, Harrison, Burnett, & Emerson, 2003). Recently, though, more qualitative research has been conducted with an additional attempt being made in examining social contextual factors that may deter participation (Sissel, 1997, 2000; Keller & McDade, 2000; Pena, 2000; Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel, 2001; Jackson, 2002). However, historically, psychological and individualistic barriers and deterrents have been more frequently investigated. Research which takes into consideration both individual and social contextual influences, is even more limited. Summaries of the major theoretical assertions, as well as descriptive and qualitative studies will be addressed in
order to make more explicit the barriers and deterrents that have been discussed and/or discovered concerning low-income parents' participation.

The various psychosocial deterrents to low-income parents' participation that would include their attitudes, beliefs and perceptions, have been summarized in the literature (Liontos, 1991; Moles, 1993; Dolan & Haxby, 1995; Charlesworth, 2000; Keller & McDade, 2000). Those who have had negative experiences with educational institutions in general are less likely to enroll in programs; feeling threatened by educators' authority has also been determined as problematic by parents (Moles, 1993). Furthermore, parents' lack of interest was cited as a deterrent (Charlesworth, 2000; Dolan & Haxby, 1995) as well as the belief that the program would not be relevant (Keller & McDade, 2000). In addition, feelings of inadequacy, failure, and poor self-worth have often contributed to non-participation (Liontos, 1991). Low-income parents further perceived their lower SES and lack of formal knowledge as participation deterrents (Moles, 1993).

Again, these deterrents have been discussed within the realm of parent participation in formal educational institutions. Since the parenting values that are projected in many formal parent education programs are often designed from a mainstream Anglo perspective they could be far less effective in welcoming the participation of low-income and minority families (Rowland & Wampler, 1983; Wood & Baker, 1999; Santrelli, Koegel, Casas, & Koegel, 2001).

Theories have also been posited regarding the institutional barriers that have shaped the non-participation decisions of low-income parents. These include various influences such as the educators' lack of understanding for the difficulties that poor
parents and their families face (Lewis, 1992), and parents' experiences of negativity with educational institutions (Thorp, 1997). Another institutional barrier to participation that has been discussed is the scheduling of parent programs to meet the needs of personnel, and not the scheduling needs of parents. This is of particular concern for low-income parents (McLaughlin & Shields, 1987) who often work extended hours or shift work. In addition, parents who have low-wage jobs usually have minimal control over their schedules (Parcel & Menaghan, 1997).

Furthermore, with regard to institutional barriers, research has revealed that the use of intimidating educational jargon by professionals, (Rich, 1987; Moles, 1993) and educators' assertion of power over parents (Sissel, 1997; 2000) has been deemed problematic by parents themselves. Providers' lack of empathy, understanding, and sensitivity to parents' cultural and environmental life experiences also deters them from wanting to participate (Lea, 2001). In addition, Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel (2001) found through in-depth qualitative interviews with ten sets of low-income minority parents that educators were often the ones doing all of the talking, and not listening to their concerns as parents. "These patterns of communication are lodged in an established social order that suggests that school personnel possess a certain body of knowledge and expertise" (p. 92). Low-income parents needs and interests are therefore not always adequately addressed.

Situational barriers to participation for low-income parents included the inability to acquire or afford expensive child care (Wood & Baker, 1999; Keller & McDade, 2000; Pena, 2000; Johnson, et al., 2003), which can literally drain major portions of parents' salaries. Furthermore, studies have shown that another situational deterrent to
participation could be having an inflexible work schedule that conflicts with parent program meeting times (Ascher, 1988; Leitch & Tangri, 1990; Charlesworth, 2000; Pena, 2000). For example, in a qualitative case study conducted by Pena (2000), in which low-income Mexican-American parents and the staff from an elementary school in Texas were interviewed, work schedules were discussed as the largest obstacle to participation that parents' faced. Working double shifts, being engaged in hard physical labor (such as cleaning houses and working in laundries) were described by parents and also discussed by the staff as exhausting and time consuming tasks, thus limiting parents' ability and time to attend educational and informational workshops or programs.

Additionally, lack of time and/or issues related to time considerations have been further discussed extensively as situational deterrents to low-income parents participation (Chavkin & Williams, 1989; Shumow, 1998; Wood & Baker, 1999; Keller & McDade, 2000; Martinez & Velazquez, 2000; Pena, 2000; Lindeman, 2001; Johnson et al., 2003). For example, in a descriptive study conducted by Wood and Baker (1999) 395 low-income parents from two elementary schools located in the southeastern section of the United States completed anonymously distributed questionnaires that contained 49 items. One of the instrument's primary purposes was to measure barriers to parental participation. The two most significant barriers that parents indicated that affected their participation were related to time constraints. The time of day that sessions were offered was problematic for many parents, and difficulties in obtaining time off from work was also cited as a major deterrent. In addition, Keller and McDade's (2000) study surveyed 52 low-income parents from Head Start through in-person interviews that were conducted by volunteers. Findings revealed that in addition to situational concerns such as lack of
child care, and lack of transportation, that lack of time was stated by most of the parents as the major reason why they would not attend a parenting education program.

Informational barriers have also been identified in the literature as a cause for non-participation. Low-income parents have stated that they did not know about the existence of programs or did not know what information and resources were being offered (Rowland & Wampler, 1983; Jackson, 2002). Jackson (2002) discovered in an ethnographic qualitative study, that utilized "open-ended questions, focus group discussions, and a review of selected publications" (p. 445) with low-income African-American parents that written educational materials were designed to communicate primarily middle-class perspectives. These documents were not created appropriately in addressing the unique issues and concerns of low-income parent participants, and therefore further inhibited their participation.

Theoretically, barriers or deterrents to participation that may be viewed from a more socially contextual perspective have also been posited. The very fact that parents have lower economic status and limited resources in our society is a major concern (Gross, 2001). Being members of a lower-income population may limit parents' participation due to lack of personal transportation, (Liontos, 1991; Charlesworth, 2000; Santarelli, et. al, 2001) such as a car. Even though public transportation may be available, making bus transfers could be problematic especially for parents who attend programs that also include the participation of the child (Santarelli et. al., 2001). As far as being able to acquire parenting educational information through either programs or educational materials, "Low-income parents have far more limited access to formal parenting programs and less discretionary income with which to purchase information" (Kagan,
These problems most definitely present themselves as sociocultural issues since parents who have less of an advantage often have far less ability to obtain many crucial resources that are available to those in society who have greater means (Lareau, 1989).

Furthermore, another sociocultural issue is that cultural dissonance can occur between parents and program providers when the cultural backgrounds of each are different (Lewis, 1992; Wood & Baker, 1999; Keller & McDade, 2000; Santarelli, et. al., 2001). Awkwardness of communication (Eldridge, 2001), and language barriers can also be troublesome for parents (Liontos, 1991; Rich, 1993; Martinez & Velazquez, 2000; Fleet, Conderman, & Locke, 2001; Lindeman, 2001; Santarelli et. al., 2001). In addition, parents of low-income or cultures different from the mainstream may not be comfortable with curricula that emphasize white middle class parenting practices (Wood & Baker, 1999). Most schools and programs are designed to address the interests and concerns of the mainstream culture (McLaughlin & Shields, 1987).

Additionally, in the study mentioned earlier by Pena (2000), she found that the low-income Mexican-American parents in her study, "faced cultural and social class differences that negatively influenced their involvement. They did not participate because they feared that they would not be understood or welcomed" (p.14). Additionally, Keller & McDade (2000) assert that low-income parents might not choose to seek out assistance, because the culture assumes that they need help and support, and because they fear they will be judged as being incapable as parents. This is often referred to as a "culture of blame" in which families of African-American and Latino descent, in
particular, are perceived as inadequate (and unjustly so) due to their generally lower socioeconomic status (Nichols-Solomon, 2000).

The minimal extent of family involvement or influence has also been noted as a deterrent to participation from a sociocultural perspective. Programs that do not invite extended family members to be a part of activities limit participation. Often, the role of these family members is highly valued particularly in Hispanic-American or Latino-American households, (Martinez, 1988; McDermott, 2001; Powell & Zambrana, 1990; Keller & McDade, 2000; Santarelli, et. al., 2001) and in African-American communities (Diamond, 1999; Keller & McDade, 2000). If providers lack understanding of different family cultures, parent participation is further inhibited (Lewis, 1992; Thorp, 1997). Additionally, if parents live in a community where family privacy is valued, or if relatives or friends disapprove of programs, parents may be less apt to participate (McCurdy & Daro, 2001).

In addition, studies have indicated that race and social class may determine whether or not low-income parents attend programs, since many parenting programs reflect child rearing attitudes that are more White and middle-class with an "emphasis on verbal reasoning, nonphysical punishment, and less authoritarian techniques" (Rowland & Wampler, 1983). Interestingly, Keller and McDade (2000), cited in their study the beliefs of a low-income minority parent who stated that she did not want to attend parenting education classes because they would "be filled with too many White women playing house" (p.294). Benson (1986) further supports this statement by saying that, "parental involvement programs designed with the suburban housewife in mind are inappropriate for most" low-income/minority parents (p. 174). Therefore, it would seem
that programs should be compatible with parent values and lifestyles in order for parents to want to attend.

A few final considerations involving sociological concerns relative to non-participation that have been discussed in the theoretical and conceptual literature are that low-income families often have lives that are highly crisis-oriented and complicated (Rosier & Corsaro, 1993). Many families live day to day in struggling just to survive (Liontos, 1991; Floyd, 1998). Additionally, the TANF (Temporary Aid to Needy Families) mandate, which is a part of welfare reform, further limits parent participation in educational endeavors due to the pressure of requiring low-income parents to find employment within limited and strict time constraints (Catalfamo, 1998; Nicholson, Brenner, & Fox, 1999).

Consequently, it should be acknowledged that one's position in society with less financial stability as well as limited resources might present many additional barriers to participation. It is therefore imperative that these social contextual implications continue to be addressed and explored.

Motivations for Participation

Much of the focus on reasons for participation or non-participation of lower-income parents is on barriers and deterrents, with less attention being paid to motivation. However, a few theoretical perspectives and findings from studies on what has motivated parents to attend programs warrant discussion. This information in the literature is primarily discussed within two basic categories: individually based motivational factors, which “include parents’ internal beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions” (McCurdy & Daro,
2001, p.115), and program focused motivational determinants, which would encompass such considerations as desirable traits of program services, as well as staff attributes.

Regarding individually based reasons for participating in parenting educational or support programs, Gross (2001) found that after conducting focus groups and individual interviews with 155 low-income families of Color that many parents wanted to attend education or support programs to increase their parenting skills. They also hoped to learn how to deal with children’s challenging behaviors. Sharing their experiences with other parents was also discovered as being important. Furthermore, sharing common concerns was further found by Maruca (2000) to be a central reason for low-income parents' choosing to participate. In addition, Floyd (1998), in an analysis of a parenting program for low-income and minority parents, discussed how parents appreciated opportunities for sharing interesting stories about their children with others in the group. Powell and Zambrana (1990) also reported in a descriptive study that low-income Mexican-American parents appreciated the opportunity to form friendships in parenting education programs.

Program focused motivational reasons for participating have also been addressed in the research. For example, concerning program attributes, Leon, Mazur, Montalvo, and Rodriguez (1984), as well as Martinez (1988) all found that low-income Latino parents preferred programs that incorporated informal learning activities, as opposed to formal learning opportunities that were structured. Parents preferred group activities, sharing ideas about parenting, and getting to know one another through the program. Floyd (1998) further discussed that low-income parents preferred participatory hands-on learning activities (i.e.- making games and materials for their children) in the parenting program that she examined. It has also been suggested that if parenting programs utilized
culturally valued resources such as community elders, provided music, dance and visual arts, and gave equal acknowledgment to male and female roles, then African-American parents may be more likely to attend (Glanville & Tiller, 1991; Holton, 1992).

Furthermore, in a qualitative study with low-income urban minority parents, Norwood and Atkinson (1997) learned that African-American parents were more motivated to be involved in parenting education when programs "validated the cultural frame of reference, values, and heritage of the participants" (p. 411). Programs that included extended family members were also discovered as being more appealing to low-income minority parents (Glanville & Tiller, 1991; Holton, 1992; Powell & Zambrana, 1990; Keller & McDade, 2000).

Additionally, studies have revealed that those programs that offered meals (Liontos, 1992; Gross, 2001), child care (Leon et al, 1984; Martinez, 1988; Liontos, 1992; Gross, 2001), evening classes (Wood & Baker, 1999; Gross, 2001), and short sessions or single sessions (Wood & Baker, 1999) increased low-income parents’ participation. Easily accessible locations (Gross, 2001), and community-oriented programs were also found to be preferred (Wood & Baker, 1999). Transportation service for low-income parents has been discussed by Liontos (1992) as crucial for increasing participation as well.

Furthermore, discussions have occurred relative to the importance of providing incentives for low-income parents in the form of monetary or material gifts to motivate them to attend (Swap, 1987; Thompson & Grow, 1993; Yates, 1993; Nicholson, Brenner & Fox, 1999; Gross, 2001). Interestingly, Gross (2001) discovered that when programs gave parents a video copy of a recorded parent/child play session, that 83% of the parents
said this was an important motivator, even more so than a monetary incentive. Nicholson, Brenner and Fox (1999) found that even though gifts such as toys for their children, diapers, and other child care supplies were given to 143 low-income parents in their study to assist in encouraging participation, less than half of the mothers completed the 10 week program. Gross (2001) further reports, however, that although incentives may spark interest in participating, low-income parents in her study usually looked first for program benefits that promoted the enhancement of their relationships with their children when deciding to participate (such as increased opportunities to improve their parenting skills).

Concerning staff attributes, findings from a study by Powell and Zambrana (1990) in which a forced choice item scale was utilized with 121 low-income mothers of Mexican origin showed that parents preferred that staff were recognized authorities on parenting. Parents also showed less preference for discussion groups that had an open-ended format and were led by their peers. In addition, parents preferred to have prior contact with staff members before the program began in order to establish trust. Lieblein (1988) concluded that the most significant contributing factor of parent participation in Head Start was the existence of a supportive staff person. Gross (2001) further found that the personality, enthusiasm, and trustworthiness of the program recruiters were important to 90% of the participants in her study. McCurdy and Daro (2001) also asserted in their conceptual model of parent participation in family education and support programs, that the cultural competence of the provider is a highly desirable trait. They defined culturally competent as having “an awareness of, sensitivity to, and responsiveness to the parent’s cultural background and history” (p. 116). As has been already mentioned, cultural considerations, particularly in reference to African-American and Hispanic-American
parents must also be addressed when discussing issues relating to low-income parents, due to their statistically high levels of poverty (Tollett, 1993; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998).

When examining the motivation of low-income parents to participate in parent education programs, it is evident that in-depth qualitative research is lacking. Few studies actually seek to uncover and examine the realities of parents' actual participation experiences. Furthermore, although some studies have addressed individually based reasons for low-income parents' participation, and/or program characteristics that have been influential, research has been minimal. In addition, possible social contextual reasons for participation, which might take into consideration parents' family backgrounds, situations or relationships, program traits or interactions with staff, neighborhood and community traits, or cultural histories, have been greatly ignored. Lastly, studies of low-income parents' participation, which take the individual and the social contextual factors of parents' lives into consideration are virtually non-existent.

Low-Income Parents' Stories of Participation

To date, research that strives to illuminate low-income parents' actual lived experiences and narrative stories of participation in parenting educational programs is severely limited. Through narrative, the authentic realities of people's' own experiences are voiced (Amstutz, 1999). Furthermore, Rossiter (1999) asserts that meaning making is central in the narrative process; and there is an interrelationship between individual and cultural stories. In addition, narrative is of particular importance in obtaining an "understanding of the 'textuality' of social and cultural research" (Gray, 1995, p. 156).
For persons who have been marginalized in society, the naming of experiences is also crucial and can be unveiled through the narrative process. As Etter-Lewis and Foster (1996) state, "the power to name is the power to define and control" (p. 4). Acquiring a sense of power in one's life is particularly essential for those who have been oppressed by the dominant culture. Therefore, from a sociocultural perspective, bringing the voices of those who have been silenced to the forefront is critical through "the vehicle of stories" (Romero & Stewart, 1999, p. xiii).

Only two exemplary studies were discovered that fully illustrate the importance of narrative in uncovering the participation experiences of low-income parents in parenting programs. Through numerous stories of the participants in these studies strong sociocultural implications were revealed. However, it should be noted that these studies illuminated parents' negative participation experiences, which could further be viewed as possible deterrents. Motivational factors for participation were not examined in these investigations.

The first study conducted by Sissel (1997, 2000) was an ethnographic qualitative study in which she explored the participation experiences of low-income parents who were involved in Head Start programs. Sissel (1997, 2000) interviewed parents and staff, and also observed in the programs. Her investigation revealed that issues of power and control exerted by staff members deterred parents' participation in the program. In Sissel's (2000) interviews with parents concerning their participation, narrative stories portrayed their anger and anxiety relative to their relationships with the staff.

For example, two parents talked about the program staff by saying: "Parents can say what they want, but the staff will only use it if they want to. The staff will run things
as they see fit. Parents have no power here, they don't run nothing" (Lily, parent, Downtown Center) (p. 215). And Bobbie, a parent from the Harbor Street Center said, "Parents get treated like dirt here. They don't want to be here. The bigwigs wonder why and are told by staff that parents aren't interested, but its due to the staff, not them" (p. 218).

A second study conducted by Lea (2001) was also an ethnographic qualitative study. Lea (2001) focused on the role of culture in determining the meanings that six adolescent mothers attached to their interactions with providers and educators in an early intervention program for parents and their children who have special needs. Children receive therapy, and parents are trained in how to help their children at home. Teachers also model for parents how to interact with their children through play. How these mothers perceived their participatory and collaborative experiences in the program was examined in this investigation. Observations during staff home visits and at group meeting times was also a part of the study in addition to interviews with staff and three of the adolescents' own mothers. Lea (2001) further posited that it was necessary to look at the adolescents' lives from an ecological perspective in which it is important to "be aware of the interrelationships that exist between the varying systems in which the family participates" (Lea, 2001, p. 7) (i.e. family, friends, and community). It is also critical to understand how these varying relationships impact the adolescent parents' functioning within the program (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Beckman, 1996, as cited in Lea, 2001, p. 7).

Narrative responses by the parents to Lea's (2001) interviews revealed that collaborative relationships were not developed between parents and providers. Program providers did not demonstrate an understanding of the adolescent mothers' lives or their
cultural and environmental experiences. For example, when Lea (2001) asked one of the adolescents what she believed one of the staff members thought of her she replied:

I think she look down on me cause I'm another young black girl who had a baby and not bein' married. She always talk about her son, and I know she think he better than me like she did a good job raisin' him. I know she look down on me but I just play the game (p. 243).

The program also incorporates team meetings in which professionals such as the physical therapist, teacher, and other child development specialists meet with the parent to discuss assessments and evaluations of the child. One mother discussed her perceptions of this intimidating process:

It was so many people there and I only knew two of them. It was like the meeting of the minds. They was like at the round table in the oval office and I was like the little servant. 'Yes suh. My child is handicapped. Whatever you say suh'. I guess have me there was a courtesy so they could say the parent was there (Lea, 2001, p. 229).

Stories like these can significantly make known low-income parents' true perceptions and experiences of their participation. This venue for obtaining research data can provide rich descriptions of parents' experiences, where survey instruments can not. Through in-depth qualitative interviewing techniques in which narrative is given precedence, parents have the opportunity to give voice and to make meaning of these lived experiences of their participation in programs.

In the examination of low-income parents' experiences in parenting programs the literature minimally portrays parents' deepest thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and experiences
of their participation through stories. In light of this gap, the addition of increased knowledge through the accentuation of narrative is greatly needed.

Summary

After examining the literature on low-income parents' participation in educational programs it is evident that much more needs to be accomplished in investigating this area within the parenting educational field. Some studies have examined barriers and deterrents, although these studies primarily investigate low-income and minority parents' participation or non-participation in formal school-based programs. Even less focus has been given to motivational reasons for participation. A further understanding of why low-income parents choose to become involved in parent programs is essential in expanding the professional knowledge base within the field.

Researchers have also attempted to discover individually based and social-contextual perspectives of low-income parents participation to some extent, however, studies are minimal. Even more limited, is the existence of research that investigates both individual and social-contextual factors combined, in order to attempt to more holistically understand low-income parents' participation experiences.

Furthermore, continued qualitative research is needed in this area so that low-income parents' voices and perspectives can be heard. It will be important to gain a deeper understanding of the reality of their participation experiences through conducting in-depth interviews, and by engaging in dialogue with parents' in order to acknowledge their individual and collective stories. It is therefore essential to capture low-income parents' participation experiences through the narrative process.
This study will hopefully contribute to the already existing body of literature on low-income parents' participation by adding an in-depth exploration of the meaning they give to their experiences, through both an individualistic and social-contextual examination of the reasons they choose to participate in a parenting educational program.

Conclusions

Participation research in the field of adult education has been extensive. Although barriers and deterrents as well as motivational reasons for participation have been examined, these issues have been discussed primarily from an individualistic as opposed to a social-contextual perspective (Courtney, 1992; Rubenson & Xu, 1997). Attention has also been given to the participation of low-income parents in parenting education programs, although it has been minimal. Most studies have emphasized the barriers and deterrents to participation, with significantly less research on what actually motivates low-income parents to attend educational programs. In addition, studies of socially contextual reasons for low-income parents' participation, or lack of participation, have been far less prevalent within the parenting educational field as well. However, this focus has been given more recognition within approximately the last five to ten years; although few studies have examined the actual meaning that low-income parents give to their participation experiences.

In the adult education field, participation has focused on three major areas: the characteristics of participants, barriers or deterrents to participation, and motivation (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). To date, descriptive studies that utilized surveys for data collection have been primarily employed. Research that focuses on obtaining in-depth exploration of adult education participants' actual experiences related to participation is
minimal. This is true within the parenting educational field as well, where parents' voices have been obscured, and their lived experiences related to participation neglected.

Examining the quantitative research and the theoretical conceptual literature that exists in adult education and parenting education was an important aspect of this literature review. However, equally crucial, was the need to discuss that there are limited examples of qualitatively based studies which examine both individual and sociocultural reasons for participation and to assert the need for increased investigation within this area. Additional qualitative in-depth investigations are necessary in order to acquire a deeper understanding of the reality of the participation experiences of low-income parents who choose to be a part of parenting programs.

Additionally, in the adult education field the motivation to participate has been examined more extensively than in the area of parenting education. In the conceptual literature and in studies completed concerning low-income persons in general and low-income parents' participation - barriers and deterrents have been the major focus. However, understanding why parents opt to participate in programs is also crucial for administrators and program planners as they seek to establish and maintain enrollment and to consider the needs of learners. Furthermore, it has been noted that participants may even leave a program if they believe that their needs are not being addressed (Caffarella & Merriam, 2000). Parenting education program planners and administrators would therefore benefit from acquiring increased information in the area of motivation in order to offer more effective and appealing programs for low-income parents.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the meaning that lower-income parents gave to their experiences that contributed to their voluntary participation in a federally funded Title I parenting educational and family support program. In other words, the major question that I addressed was - what are the psychological considerations and sociocultural experiences in parents' lives that motivated them to participate in this program?

Since interpreting the experiences of the parents was central, a qualitative methodology was the most suitable and appropriate for this study. Furthermore, it should be noted that this was a phenomenological study of the meaning participants' gave to their experiences in a particularly successful program.

Qualitative Research Methodology

Storytelling is an important component for discovering how people make meaning of their lived experiences; the sharing of diverse life stories through narrative therefore becomes essential (Alfred, 2000; Flannery, 1995; Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Neville, & Cha-Jua, 1998). In order to capture the multiple realities and ways in which the participants in this study gave meaning to their participation experiences, it was important to use a research methodology that incorporated interviewing and dialoguing, and offered the opportunity for each person's voice to be heard. I believe that this was essential in acquiring a deeper understanding of people's experiences and perspectives.
The search for how people make meaning of their experiences, how they interpret their worlds, and the attempt to holistically understand a phenomenon are the reasons why a qualitative research paradigm might be selected (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). As Merriam (1988) imparts the key philosophical underpinning of qualitative research is the construction of reality by individuals as they interact with their social worlds. A qualitative study can also be utilized to "discover, capture, present, and preserve" people's stories (Patton, 2002, p.196). Acquiring depth and understanding are of great importance. In this study, it was my intent to engage in dialogue with the participants so that I was able to uncover how they made meaning of their experiences that have had an impact on their motivations for participating in this parenting program.

Specifically, I attempted to acquire a more holistic understanding of how parents' individualistic thoughts and feelings influenced their participation. I also sought to examine how the participants' immediate and extended family relationships contributed to their decisions to be involved in the program. Furthermore, since they attend the program with their children, I wanted to discover through engaging with them in dialog, if and/or how their interactions and connections with their children affected their participation. In addition, I wanted to explore how the program and staff influenced their decisions to participate. I further wished to uncover the impact that the neighborhood/community had on their reasons for participating in the program. Finally, I was seeking to discover how participants' positioning in society with regard to gender, class, culture, and ability influenced participation. Since a major goal of this study was to more fully understand this phenomenon, and to explore the complexities of the parents'
lived experiences, a qualitative research paradigm was most useful in achieving these goals.

Additionally, through qualitative research, both individual and collective perspectives are emphasized as important for understanding a social situation (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). As Patton (2002) asserts, qualitative research can, "…permit one to understand the world as seen by the respondents" (p.21). How the parents in this study interpret their worlds was of great interest to me. I wanted to hear what they had to say about their lives and experiences. Qualitative research allowed me to have this personal and direct contact with the participants in the study, whereas this would not have been possible in a quantitative study. A qualitative study also permitted me to examine the phenomenon being studied in more depth, and in greater detail.

There are also specific characteristics of the qualitative research paradigm that should be noted. Patton (2002) outlines several major traits that include: utilizing the natural setting for research, acknowledging the researcher as instrument, and emphasizing process rather than product in the study. Furthermore, using inductive analysis, focusing on the importance of meaning making, as well as reporting research, using rich, thick descriptions are also characteristic.

Denzin and Lincoln (1998) posit that the qualitative researcher conducts her study in the context of the natural setting while, "attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 3). When observing in natural settings, the researcher is involved in the process of discovery (Patton, 2002). I therefore conducted at least one observation in each of the four groups within the context of the program. This setting provided opportunities for me to observe the program's
locations, contexts, and atmospheres. It was not my desire to control the environment in any way. However, my goal was to observe in each setting so that I could obtain a more holistic understanding of the content of the program. Furthermore, to give even further attention to the naturalistic environment, the parents who participated in the study were either interviewed in their own homes, or in one of the centers where the parenting program occurs.

In naturalistic settings the researcher is identified as the primary instrument for collecting data (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993; Merriam & Simpson, 1995; Patton, 2002). "Since understanding is a key goal of this research, the human instrument, which is able to be immediately responsive and adaptive, would seem to be the ideal instrument for collecting and analyzing data" (Merriam & Simpson, 1995, p.98). Therefore, because I wanted to obtain an in-depth understanding of the parents' individualistic and sociocultural experiences that have influenced their participation in the parenting program, the qualitative paradigm provided the opportunity for me to be the instrument for acquiring this understanding.

Naturalistic researchers must also be able to gain entry into the natural setting that is being investigated. Researchers should negotiate with those who are the gatekeepers concerning the nature of the research project. Furthermore, permission must be acquired to conduct the study, and actual physical entry into the setting must be achieved so that data can be collected (Patton, 2002; Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999).

I had made several necessary contacts and negotiations with gatekeepers of the parenting program. The center's two directors gave permission first. The Advisory Board was then contacted, and permission by board members was obtained to conduct the study.
Furthermore, both the principal and assistant principal were notified of my intentions, and I acquired their approval as well. Lastly, the research office in affiliation with the local school system gave their approval after reviewing my proposal.

Rapport with the directors and Advisory Board began several years ago, with communication actually occurring since 1990 when the program was located at another site. Additionally, I have communicated occasionally and informally with both the principal and assistant principal. This extensive opportunity for networking increased the ease of communication among us, and has built strong connections and rapport.

It should also be noted that in qualitative research, outputs and outcomes are not a primary focus. Rather, examining how something happens is the hallmark of this approach. It is not the destination, but the journey, that is important (Patton, 2002). This process approach involves observing how people interact with each other. Their individually unique interpretations and perceptions become a part of the process as well. Qualitative data collection through observations and interviews can illuminate the understanding of process. Furthermore, "process is fluid and dynamic so it can't be fairly summarized on a single rating scale at one point in time" (Patton, 2002, p.159).

Understanding the journeys of the parents who participate in this study was a central focus. Attempting to discover their individualistic and sociocultural experiences related to their reasons for participation was paramount. Through interviews and observations, this process-based approach was helpful in making the dynamics of their experiences more transparent.

To summarize, the qualitative paradigm was most appropriate for this study because an in-depth understanding of the individualistic and sociocultural experiences
that have influenced parents' motivation to participate in the parenting program was sought. Another major goal of this study was to acquire a rich understanding of the participants' lived experiences by getting as close as possible to their own perspectives. For, "what is important to know is what people experience and how they interpret the world…the only way for us to really know what another person experiences is to experience the phenomenon as directly as possible for ourselves" (Patton, 2002, p.106). The qualitative research approach was deemed as the best methodology for achieving these goals.

Research Perspective

The research perspective for this study was phenomenology, which sought to make meaning of the essence of parents' shared participation experiences in a particularly successful program. First, I will explain the definition and purpose of phenomenology, its origins and central concepts, and its description as a philosophy as well as a research perspective. I will then describe two forms of phenomenology called eidetic (descriptive) phenomenology and hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenology, and discuss how these philosophies influenced my research perspective. Lastly, I will discuss my own worldview, beliefs and assumptions that had an impact on this study.

Phenomenology's Definition and Purpose

Phenomenology, which has its roots in both philosophy and psychology, places importance on the individual's subjective experiences (Merriam, 2002). Patton (2002) defines phenomenology as "a focus on exploring how human beings make sense of an experience, and transform experiences into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning" (p.104). Its purpose as stated by Marshall & Rossman (1999) is to
obtain a description of the meaning of a phenomenon that is shared by several individuals.

The origins of phenomenology can be traced to the writings of the German philosopher, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) (Patton, 2002). "His most basic philosophical assumption was that we can only know what we experience by attending to perceptions and meanings that awaken our conscious awareness" (p.105). Consciousness, therefore, is a crucial aspect of phenomenology (VanManen, 1990; Ray, 1994; Giorgi, 1997; Patton, 2002). As Van Manen (1990) posits:

Consciousness is the only access human beings have to the world. Or rather, it is by virtue of being conscious that we are already related to the world. Thus all we can ever know must present itself to consciousness. Whatever falls outside of consciousness therefore falls outside the bounds of our possible lived experience. Consciousness is always transitive. To be conscious is to be aware in some sense, of some aspect of the world. And thus phenomenology is keenly interested in the significant world of the human being (p.9).

When examining the philosophy of phenomenology, as well as phenomenology as a research perspective, Patton (2002) states that although both are important, they differ. Phenomenology, as was just described in connection to the writings of Husserl, is a school of philosophical thought. Even though all qualitative research is in a sense phenomenological because emphasis is placed on the lived experiences of participants, a phenomenological study, however, brings to the forefront the examination of the structure or essence of an experience (Merriam, 2002). As Patton (2002) asserts, "there is
an essence or essences to shared experience. These essences are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced" (p.106). The study of the essence of shared experience, therefore, is what is at the center of a phenomenological study.

For this study it was my intent to capture the essence of the shared experiences of the participants, with regard to the meaning they gave to their individualistic and sociocultural experiences that have influenced their participation in the parenting program that they voluntarily attend. I therefore attempted to discover the patterns and themes that emerged from these shared experiences through this phenomenological research perspective.

Patton (2002) further suggests that there are two crucial considerations when conducting phenomenological research. First, investigators want to learn about the experiences of participants and how they go about interpreting their world. Second, researchers want to directly experience the phenomenon as closely as possible for themselves, in order to know what the interviewees have experienced. It was my desire to achieve these goals with the parents who were involved in this study; therefore in-depth phenomenological interviewing was utilized.

*Eidetic (Descriptive) and Hermeneutical (Interpretive) Phenomenology*

Avid followers of Husserl tend to view phenomenology as "pure description of lived experience" (Van Manen, 1990, p.25). A critical component of this descriptive phenomenological method is what Husserl (1970) calls *bracketing*. Van Manen (1990) imparts that this involves:
How one must take a hold of the phenomenon and then place outside of it one's knowledge about the phenomenon. It is better to make explicit our understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories. We try to come to terms with our assumptions, not in order to forget them again, but rather to hold them deliberately at bay and even turn this knowledge against itself, as it were, thereby exposing its shallow or concealing character (p.47).

A way of bracketing one's experiences is referred to as *epoche* (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Before beginning the interview process, "the phenomenological researcher has written a full description of her own experiences, thereby bracketing her own experiences from those of the interviewees" (p.113).

However, there is also a form of phenomenology called hermeneutics that focuses on the act of interpretation; this philosophical perspective was first developed by Frederich Schleirmacher (1768-1834) and further considered by Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911). Martin Heidegger who also believed in the hermeneutical perspective argued that Husserl's concept of "bracketing" was not possible. Heidegger, who worked closely with Husserl, felt that it was impossible to make any interpretation without some attachment of one's own perspective. Hermeneutical (interpretive) phenomenology is therefore associated with Heidegger, where *interpretation* of experience and meaning is elucidated (Giorgi, 1985). Whereas, Husserl's philosophy emphasizes eidetic (descriptive) phenomenology in which *pure description* of meaning is given. Within the constructs of Husserl's philosophy, the researcher "brackets" herself out in order to be free of the
interference of her own values, beliefs, and experiences in the research process (Giorgi, 1985).

However, "Hermeneutic researchers use qualitative methods to establish context and meaning for what people do" (Patton, 2002, p.115). Hermeneutists "are much clearer about the fact that they are constructing the reality on the basis of their interpretations of data with the help of the participants who provided the data in the study" (Eichelberger, 1989, as quoted in Patton, 2002, p. 115). Furthermore, the hermeneutic perspective posits that,

If other researchers had different backgrounds, used different methods, or had different purposes, they would likely develop different types of reactions, focus on different aspects of the setting, and develop somewhat different scenarios (Eichelberger, 1989, as quoted in Patton, 2002, p. 115).

Therefore, the researcher can only describe the meaning of the experience from her personal life experiences, background, and own world-view perspective.

Phenomenological inquiry can therefore be descriptive or interpretive, or as Van Manen (1990) asserts, it also can be both. This study of the individualistic and sociocultural experiences of lower-income parents concerning their decisions to participate in a parenting program was both descriptive and hermeneutic in nature. I not only described the experiences of the parents, but I also interpreted the data with their assistance, in order to construct reality. Hence, the meaning of experience was clarified through interpretation (Denzin, 1989).

Who I am impacted how I conducted all aspects of this study. Consistent with Heidegger, I did not think that it was possible for me to totally bracket out my personal
biases and assumptions. I could not become completely neutral, since my perspectives and beliefs are complexities that exist within my being. However, I did make explicit my own world-view, beliefs and assumptions, so that I would be more fully aware of them during the research process.

World-view and Beliefs

Because a person's beliefs, values, and attitudes are formed as a result of his or her background and position in society, it is crucial to note that these aspects of the researcher's identity can have an impact on a qualitative research study. These world-views and beliefs were therefore examined and stated.

Concerning my background and positionality in society, I am a white, European-American, middle-class female who grew up in an environment where higher education and economic stability were greatly valued. I also experienced the privileges of being white in a society that traditionally has marginalized people of Color. Since I conducted a study with parents who are from different cultural backgrounds than my own (African-American, Hispanic-American, Asian-American), and with most having had less educational opportunity and economic security than I have had, I was cognizant of my background and positionality when interacting and communicating with the participants. How they responded to me, as well as how I interacted with them was affected by our varying core sociological belief and value systems.

However, even though my study was not conducted within a critical paradigm, in which my intent was to confront and challenge the systems of power and oppression in society, I have been highly influenced by both critical and feminist theories through graduate course work in adult education. I have been made acutely aware of critical
perspectives that make apparent the subjugation and marginalization of those who are considered to be outside the mainstream of the Euro-American, middle-class culture. Furthermore, my feminist beliefs have been developed from acquiring a deeper understanding of how women have been oppressed due to the power and dominance that has been projected by a predominantly white male patriarchal culture. As a result, I believe that I have become more empathetic and understanding of issues involving the difficulties of those whose voices have been left out of dominant discourses in society. It was my intent to embrace this understanding as I communicated and interacted with the parents in this study.

It is also important for me to note that I have become cognizant of the concept of "othering," which has been discussed by Fine (1998). When we as researchers focus on participants who have been marginalized as the "other" we cause greater separations and oppositions between ourselves, and our participants. Tradition has shown that qualitative researchers often choose "to simply write about those who have been "Othered" (p.135). However, it was my desire instead, to be with those who have been oppressed by listening to their voices and stories, and by engaging with them in shared conversations, as Fine (1998) suggests.

Furthermore, it is important that I describe my interests in the parenting program that will be a part of this study. I was hired as the Education Director of this program in 1990 when it was under the auspices of a local university. In 1992 I was promoted to the position of Center Director. At this time, the program served mainly middle-income to upper-income parents and families, and was an observation and participation laboratory center for undergraduate students majoring in primarily education or psychology.
In 1996, the program was moved to a lower-income area, in hopes of being of assistance and support to parents and families in this community. It was no longer a program that was sponsored by the university, but was now under the direction of the PreK-12 public school system located within one of the 23 counties in the state of Maryland. In 1995, a little less than a year before the program left the university, I began a position as an instructor there in the Department of Early Childhood Education. Therefore, I did not relocate with the program. Although I have remained in contact with the Center's staff, and have remained on the Advisory Board, which meets one to two times a year, I am no longer in daily contact with the program, nor do I know the parents and families who are participants.

In summary, the research perspective of phenomenology, focuses on lived experiences, and how people consciously make meaning of those experiences, both individually and collectively. In-depth interviewing is utilized in phenomenological studies to assist the researcher in coming as close as possible to the phenomenon that is being examined. It is also important for the researcher to make explicit her own experiences, world-view, beliefs and assumptions so that she is aware of these considerations during the research process. Phenomenological inquiry seeks to answer the question, "What is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experiences of this phenomenon for this person or group of people?" (Patton, 2002, p.104). This was the focus for conducting this study with a group of lower-income parents who have chosen to be involved in a parenting educational and support group, in an attempt to discover the individualistic and sociocultural influences that have motivated their participation.
Program Context, Community, and Culture

This program, which combines a parenting education component with a play group for children ages birth to four years old, is situated in one of the 23 counties in Maryland, and operates under the auspices of that county's public school system. The home base of the program is in a school that is a special education facility for persons from Pre K to twenty-one years of age. This particular program however, is not solely for children with special needs, although it does reserve approximately one-third of its spaces for children who have been identified as being developmentally delayed. In addition to the home base site housed in this school, the program operates their remaining sites in other satellite facilities. Two bedroom apartments that are located in apartment complexes within the community, a community center in the county, and a new site which has been opened in another section of the county are all utilized as center locations. All of these sites, including the home base, are in Title I School Districts that receive federal funding to serve the needs of lower income families. In the school year 2002-2003 the program served 95 children and 74 parents/caregivers in the eight sites. Due to my own scheduling limitations, only parents from four of these eight sites were included in this study. Three of the groups were in the apartments, and one was in the home base school.

The sector of the county where the program is located has the highest percentage of lower-income families than any other area in that county (Kingeter, 2000). Europeans arrived in this part of the county in the late 1800's and were attracted to the 175 miles of shoreline that surround the area. An airplane factory and steel plant were built nearby prior to World War II. During and after the war thousands of people were employed in
these two major corporations (Community Profile Network, 2002). However, within the last two decades, these corporations experienced extreme down sizing, forcing many people to become unemployed.

This area continues to be predominantly European-American (approximately 75%). African-American persons make up approximately 20% of the population. Persons from other cultural backgrounds are included in the remaining 5% (U.S. Census Block Groups, 2000). The population for this study mirrors the demographics of the area, with 75% of participants being of European descent.

The majority of the parents in this program come from two-parent households. In this particular study this was also true. Furthermore, the majority of the women in this study did not work full time outside of the home.

The program recruits parents by distributing flyers to the local schools in the area. The apartment complexes also advertise the program to perspective and current renters. Furthermore, the county's Infants and Toddlers Program refers families to the program whose children have been identified as having special needs. Lastly, "word of mouth" among those in the community also contributes to recruitment efforts.

Staff is hired through the county's public school system. The two directors both have Master's degrees in education and related fields, and are European-American. Assistants in the program are also hired through the county. Most assistants are former parents who have participated in the program with their children; the majority is also European-American. Currently, one former parent is a full time Instructional Assistant. The other assistants are in part time paid positions. Most work less than 20 hours a week. The directors make recommendations concerning parents' previous experience, strengths,
and abilities in working with families with regard to who might be hired in the program as assistants.

Population for the Study

Merriam (2002) states, "Since qualitative inquiry seeks to understand the meaning of a phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants, it is important to select a sample from which the most can be learned. This is called a purposive or purposeful sample" (p. 12). In this study, the parents who participated in the parenting educational program were the best suited to tell their own stories of how their individual and sociocultural experiences have influenced their involvement in the program. Through the use of a purposeful sample, in-depth information was obtained from the parents concerning their motivations for participating.

Criterion-based sampling, a category of purposeful sampling, was utilized in this study. In qualitative research, this selection of participants would “include all cases that meet some criterion, useful for quality assurance” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, as quoted in Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 78). The criteria used for recruiting the participants for this study was the inclusion of parents who participated for at least one year in this parenting education and family support program, and who participated in four of the program’s eight groups with their children. Due to my own limitations involving scheduling, only parents from four of the eight sites were involved. In addition, as a result of privacy issues, parents' exact income levels were unable to be accessed. Therefore, the criterion for selecting lower income parents for this study was based on the selection of only those who lived within the Title I School District, since these school districts have more than 50 % of families who are considered to be of lower-income. Parents who
participated in the program and who did not live within the Title I school district were not asked to participate in this study since their income levels would be above lower-income. Furthermore, it was also my intent to include parents in the program who are from various cultural backgrounds so diverse perspectives were represented. The staff introduced me to the parents who met the above criterion. I then explained to them the purpose and details of the study, using a script (Appendix A), and asked them if they'd be willing to participate.

In qualitative inquiry it is depth rather than breadth that is sought. Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that “in purposeful sampling the size of the sample is determined by informational considerations. If the purpose is to maximize information, the sampling is terminated when no new information is forthcoming from new sampled units; thus redundancy is the primary criterion” (p. 202). Therefore, the extent of information that was obtained from each additional interview was assessed to determine how many respondents would make up the sample size in the study. After engaging in this process 16 parents (12 European-Americans, 1 African-American/European-American, 1 African parent, 1 parent of Hispanic descent, and 1 Asian parent from Japan) all of who were women, participated in the study. Four parents out of this total number of participants, were also paid parent assistants in the program.

Consent forms that also described the study and requested participation were also distributed to and signed by the parents (Appendix B). Participants' rights to confidentiality were further respected and safeguarded. Parents were asked to select their own pseudonym to be used in the study. Fourteen parents chose their own pseudonyms, while two parents asked me to select the pseudonym for them.
Data Collection

Since my intent in this study was to obtain rich, thick, in-depth data about how parents made meaning of their individualistic and sociocultural experiences in relation to their motivation to participate in a parenting education and family support program, qualitative research methodology was best suited for this study. The collection of data in qualitative inquiry comes from three major sources: interviews, observations, and documents (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002). For this study, all three of these methods were used. For as Merriam (2002) asserts, "if at all possible, researchers are encouraged to use more than one method of data collection as multiple methods to enhance the validity of the findings" (p.12).

In-depth interviews

"Interviews yield direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge" (Patton, 2002, p.4). Furthermore, interviews offer the opportunity for greater depth, more than any other method, and can help the skilled and sensitive researcher to obtain information from respondents that they might not share in any other way (Merriam & Simpson, 1995). Since I conducted a phenomenological study, in which my intent was to capture how participants make meaning of their experiences and to discover the essence of their shared experience, interviewing was highly appropriate.

Basically, there are three different types of interviews: the informal conversational interview, the general interview guide approach, and the standardized open-ended interview (Patton, 2002). For this study, I utilized the general interview guide approach, which is also referred to as a semi-structured interview (Merriam, 2002).
this type of interviewing, "topics and issues to be covered are specified in outline form; and the interviewer decides the sequence and wording of questions in the course of the interview" (Patton, 2002, p. 349). I therefore developed an interview guide for this study (Appendix C). Furthermore, I collected brief biographical data information summaries from each participant (Appendix D).

Patton (2002) states that there are several strengths and weaknesses to this approach. The strengths include: comprehensiveness of the data is increased by the outline, collection of the data is somewhat systematic for each interviewee, and gaps in the data can be anticipated and closed. Furthermore, interviews are relatively situational and conversational. The weaknesses noted are that salient and crucial topics may be omitted, and that different responses from varied perspectives of the interviewees may be obtained, due to the researcher's ability to be flexible with the wording and order of the questions.

The interviews were either at the site of the parent education program, or at the respondents' homes. All interviews, with the exception of one, were held in a private room at one of the program's locations. The one interview that wasn't, was held in the parent's home. These options were given at the convenience of the parents. Since the program's staff was available to watch their children during the times of most interviews, it was more convenient for most parents to be interviewed at the program's sites.

After receiving the participants' permission, the interviews were audio recorded. Tape recording the interview is important because it "provides a nearly complete record of what has been said and permits easy attention to the course of the interview" (Glesne, 1999, p. 78). All recorded interviews were then transcribed verbatim to create a written
text. Both initial and follow up interviews were conducted. The initial interviews were used to collect primary data for the study. The follow-up interviews were utilized as member checks, and to confirm and clarify information provided by participants from the first interview.

*Observation*

So that I could obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the program's setting and atmosphere I also observed during each of the four group sessions in the program. Observation is also important as a data collection method, because it provides "a firsthand encounter with the phenomenon of interest" (Merriam, 2002, p.13). It is also beneficial in acquiring a better understanding of the context, which then becomes helpful in gaining a more holistic perspective (Patton, 2002). It was my intent to observe once, for approximately 1-2 hours in each of the four groups selected for the study.

*Documents*

Documents are another major source for collecting data; they may already exist in a situation or setting, or they can be researcher-generated (Merriam, 2002). "Whether preexisting or researcher-generated, documents often contain insights and clues into the phenomenon, and most researchers find them well worth the effort to locate and examine" (p.13).

In this study, documents were researcher-generated through the collection of optional journal entries written by the participants during the research project. Journals can "make thoughts visible and concrete, giving way to interact with, elaborate on, and expand ideas" (Kerka, 1996, p. 2). Keeping a journal or diary that correlates with the phenomenon being studied is an effective method for obtaining data through documents
(Janesick, 1999; Merriam, 2002). It has been utilized frequently in educational research (Cavazos, 1994; Grams, 1993; Grossman, 1988; Lawrence, 1988; Pyke, 2001; Stallman & Roe, 1993; Wang, 1993), as well as in parenting educational research with adolescent low-income mothers (Miller-Johnson, 1992; Yusim, 1997).

In addition, it should be noted that journal writing has been used often in adult educational environments with those who are from various cultural, educational, and/or economic backgrounds. This has been made apparent by those who have discussed its successful implementation with English as Second Language (ESL) students (Mlynarczyk, 1993; Orem, 2001; Wang, 1993), and with reentry male and/or female adults in literacy or basic education classes (Bardine, 1995; Fallon, 1995; Peyton, 1993). It has also been deemed beneficial with lower-income parents in a family literacy program (Linder, 1996), and with women in prison who are mothers (Ports, 2003). Furthermore, writing has been described as an effective learning tool for many women, including women of Color (Heilman, 2000; hooks, 1994), and for women with minimal educational backgrounds who have reentered school (Palmer, Alexander, & Olson-Dinges, 1999; Walden, 1999). Since the economic, educational, and cultural backgrounds of the parents in this study are similar, the utilization of journal writing was appropriate.

Parents in this study were not required to keep the journals, however, but were told that it is an option to do so. Ten of the sixteen participants in this study chose to write in their journals anywhere from one to six times. Questions to guide parents in the journal writing process were also provided to give parents a focus for reflecting on their participation experiences (Appendix E), since providing guidelines has been deemed more successful, than open-ended journal writing experiences (Sommer, 1989). These
questions were distributed on individual slips of paper, one at a time, to parents on a weekly basis for approximately six weeks during the study. They were placed in pocket folders, and then in a sealed envelope, both of which I provided. Either the directors of the program gave them to the parents, or I brought them to them when I came for the interviews. When they finished writing in them, they returned the folders to the directors in sealed envelopes, to ensure confidentiality. I would then pick these up when I visited each week.

Additionally, an incentive program was incorporated in correlation with the collection of documentation through journal writing. The successful use of incentives has been discussed and sometimes included for increasing parent involvement in family support programs (Swap, 1987; McCurdy & Daro, 2001). Incentives have also been utilized with parents from various cultures, (Kum, 1997) and with lower-income parents (Wikelund, 1993; Gross, 2001). In addition, Head Start, a federally funded program for lower-income preschool children and their families has also successfully utilized incentives for parents to reward them for their involvement and assistance in the program (T. Randall, personal communication, December 4, 2000).

Furthermore, the parenting program in which the parents in this study participate already had an incentive program in place. Parents are offered the opportunity to choose a gift for their children (usually a book or learning toy) from what is called "The Box" if they bring their information folders for discussion to the program for three consecutive weeks in a row.

After discussing this successful use of incentives extensively with the program's director she and I were in agreement, and I contributed children's literature books for
"The Box." The parents who chose to keep journals made a selection each time they brought in and completed their journal entries.

**Data Analysis**

According to Patton (2002) "phenomenological analysis seeks to grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for a person or group of people" (p. 482). Moustakas (1994) outlines four steps for phenomenological analysis. These include *epoche*, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of texture and structure.

"Epoche is a Greek word meaning to refrain from judgment, to abstain or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things" (Moustakas, 1994, p.33). In a phenomenological study, it is crucial that this attitude shift be accomplished (Patton, 2002). It is critical for the researcher to be aware of, and to make explicit her prejudices, assumptions and viewpoints with regard to the phenomenon being studied, so that a sense of openness to the experiences of participants can be acquired. It is an ongoing process, as opposed to being a single event.

Before and during this investigation I was continuously aware of my own worldview, beliefs, and assumptions so that I could maintain a conscious understanding of my own preconceptions. Keeping a journal throughout the study assisted me in the ongoing process of examining my biases, so that I was constantly aware of them throughout this inquiry.

The second step identified by Moustakas (1994) is phenomenological reduction. During this phase the phenomenon is examined "on its own terms" (Husserl, 1913, as quoted in Patton, 2002, p.485). The location of respondents' key phrases, and the
interpretation and inspection of meanings occur at this time. Reading and rereading of the written text is necessary so that the researcher is forced "to become familiar with those data in intimate ways" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p.153.

The third step is imaginative variation. Here the researcher identifies the invariant themes within the data, and develops "enhanced or expanded versions of the invariant themes" (Patton, 2002, p.486). This is accomplished through the process of inductive analysis, where themes are allowed to emerge.

Patton (2002) further describes the fourth step, which involves the synthesis of texture and structure. Content and illustration of an experience, without containing the actual experience, is represented in the textural portrayal. This is a representation of an experience through abstraction. An example of this would be to provide a description of the feelings that have occurred as a result of the experience. This process is then followed by the structural description of the meaning of the experiences that have occurred within the whole group. Lastly, the textural and structural descriptions are integrated to provide "a synthesis of the meanings and essences of the experience" (p.486). For this study, the purpose was to examine the meaning that lower-income parents gave to their individual and sociocultural experiences that contributed to their voluntary participation in a parenting educational and family support program.

Analytic procedures involve six major phases: Organizing data, generating categories, themes, and patterns, coding the data, testing the emergent understandings, searching for alternative explanations, and writing the report (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Throughout the process of data analysis, "collected data are brought into manageable chunks and interpretation as the researcher brings meaning and insight to the
words and acts of the participants in the study" (p.152+). During this study I moved through these six phases in my analysis of the data, while also keeping the stages of phenomenological analysis in the forefront.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability are four major considerations in assessing the trustworthiness of qualitative research. Therefore, each of these criteria will be discussed in relation to this study.

Credibility

Prolonged engagement is helpful in insuring credibility. This refers to the researcher's involvement in the contextual setting for an extended period of time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Erlandson, et. al, 1993). This process can assist in building trust and in developing rapport with the respondents (Erlandson et. al, 1993). During this study I observed in each of the four program sites. I also engaged in investigating the question of this study through in-depth interviews, most of which occurred at the program sites, throughout a 6 month-time period.

Triangulation is also utilized to ensure the credibility of a study. Since I utilized observations, interviews, and document analysis, this increased the trustworthiness of this study because these multiple methods, which establish triangulation, were being employed. I made comparisons between the interviews that I conducted with the parents, and the observations of what I saw in the program. I also checked and compared the interviews with the journals.
Peer debriefing, another source for generating credibility, involves the assistance of a researcher's professional peer to provide help with the analysis of materials generated by the study. "The debriefer asks probing questions, plays devil's advocate, and provides alternative explanations" (Erlandson et. al, 1993, p.140). For this study, my advisor served in this capacity.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) also posit that the most critical way to evaluate credibility is through member checks. This strategy involves, "allowing members of stakeholding groups to test categories, interpretations, and conclusions" (Erlandson et. al, 1993, p.142). In this process, the investigator checks with the participants to determine if the information obtained from them is accurate. I incorporated member checks following the initial interviews, by conducting second interviews to double check accuracy.

Researcher credibility is also an important consideration that influences the way findings in a study are received (Patton, 2002). Since the researcher is the actual instrument in qualitative data collection, it is important to identify "…any personal and professional information that may have affected data collection, analysis, and interpretation -either negatively or positively- in the minds of the users of the findings" (p.566). As previously discussed, I made my world-view, beliefs, and assumptions known, and continued to do so throughout the duration of the study.

Transferability

Transferability means that an inquiry is judged in terms of the extent to which its findings can be applied in other contexts or with other respondents (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thick, rich descriptions of qualitative data assist in this process. The investigator, "attempts to describe in great detail the interrelationships and intricacies of the context
being studied" (Erlandson et. al, 1993, p.32). I therefore have provided highly descriptive data in order to contribute to the transferability of this study.

**Dependability**

The dependability of a study refers to its reliability or consistency (Erlandson et. al, 1993). It involves the utilization of methods and techniques to assure that the study's results can be trusted. Employing overlapping methods (i.e. - observations and interviews) and creating an audit trail may enhance the dependability of a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study, I used the overlapping methods of observation, interviews, and document analysis. A dependability audit provides an audit trail through documentation, such as interview notes, and a running account of the study, such as through the investigator's own journal. Therefore, I also made interview notes and kept my own journal throughout this study as well.

**Confirmability**

The confirmability of the study "Means that data (constructions, assertions, facts, and so on) can be tracked to their sources, and that logic used to assemble the interpretations into structurally coherent and corroborating wholes is both explicit and implicit" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p.243). Triangulation techniques, a reflexive journal, audit trails, and field notes are most often utilized to determine confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

As has been previously described, triangulation for this study was achieved through the incorporation of interviews, observation, and analysis of participants' optional journals. In addition, I kept a reflexive journal to record information about myself as the researcher, and the research process itself during this study. Since the
researcher is the primary instrument in qualitative studies, it is important to be aware of, and to record, one's personal experiences, reactions, and biases while in the field (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 1999). Furthermore, "The journal provides information about the researcher's schedule and logistics, insights, and reasons for methodological decisions" (Erlandson et. al, 1993, p. 143). The journal then becomes a part of the audit trail.

The audit trail includes a complete record of the processes used in a research study (Gall et. al, 1999). Therefore, if the study is being reviewed from the outside, conclusions, interpretations, and recommendations should be able to be traced to their sources to determine if they are supported by the inquiry (Erlandson et. al, 1993, p.35). Hence, I also kept a running record of all processes that were utilized during this study.

Additionally, field notes are essential for confirmability. Patton (2002) discusses their importance by stating that they are not an option in a qualitative study. They "contain the ongoing data that are being collected" (p.305). I kept field notes as well, when I observed within the context of the program.

Summary

The purpose of this study, which was to examine the meaning that lower-income parents gave to their individualistic and sociocultural experiences that contributed to their voluntary participation in a federally funded Title I parenting educational and family support program, was restated in this chapter. Furthermore, the rationale for choosing a phenomenological, qualitative research study was described. Researcher worldview, beliefs, and values were also discussed. The chapter additionally explained the use of a purposive sample for the study. Lastly, data collection methods, data analysis, and criteria for establishing the trustworthiness of this inquiry were also addressed.
CHAPTER 4
INTRODUCING THE PROGRAM AND THE PARTICIPANTS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to obtain an understanding of the experience of parents' reasons for participation in a voluntary parenting education and family support program from both a psychological and sociocultural lens. In order for the findings to make sense from this study it will first be necessary however, to introduce the program and participants. This is important so that further knowledge can be gained as to what the program's environments are like, as well as to understand more fully whose voices are being represented in this study.

Program Overview

This study was a phenomenological study in which the meaning that participants' gave to their experiences was being sought through in-depth interviews, as opposed to being an ethnographic study in which observation/participation and interviews were utilized. However, so that I, as the researcher, could acquire a better understanding of the program's environment, I observed at least one time in four of the program's sites in which the participants for this study were involved. Based on these observations, the following overview can be presented.

The program operates a total of eight sites under the auspices of the public school system in one of 23 counties in the state of Maryland. All of the sites involved in this study are located in an area of the county which has the highest percentage of lower income persons than any of the county's other sectors (Kingeter, 2000). All of the locations are in a Title I school district that serves lower-income populations. To qualify
as a Title I school, at least 50% of the students in the school's district must be considered low-income in order for the school to receive funding.

Each site operates a group for approximately eight to ten families, one morning a week for two hours for parents (or other caregivers) and their young children who are birth to four years old. It is not a drop-off program for children. Parents/caregivers are involved with their children through play experiences and creative activities primarily during the first hour of each two-hour session. During the second hour, parents/caregivers then participate in a parenting discussion group under the guidance of the program's director. During this discussion time, parent assistants, who are hired by the program, continue the activities with the children. Even though the program involved in this study is not exclusively for children who are developmentally challenged, one-third, do have special needs, since the program purposely reserves spaces for them.

In taking into consideration my own scheduling concerns, I was able to interview parents who participated in four of these eight sites; therefore these were the only four locations that I saw. Three of the four sites in which I observed are located in two bedroom apartments that have been donated to the program by privately owned and operated apartment complexes within the community. The fourth site is housed in a public school building that is also the program's home base, and where the staff's administrative office is located. This school is primarily a special education facility for persons from Pre-K to twenty-one years of age.

From my observations in both the apartments and the school, I saw how each setting was designed and arranged. The apartments looked like someone's home. The living room areas had carpeting, and either couches or chairs, end tables, lamps etc. and
were decorated in warm colors. The children's play areas were held in the living rooms. The dining areas included tables and chairs, and were set up for the parent discussions. The kitchens were fully operational, and each time I observed, coffee and tea were made for the parents to enjoy. While I was there during one session close to Thanksgiving, the staff, parents and children together prepared a full holiday meal in the kitchen, which everyone shared. The bedrooms of the apartments were reserved for children's activities as well. Children's tables, chairs, toys, books, and even climbing equipment were housed and utilized in them. The bathrooms looked just like something you'd see in someone's home as well, with colorful wallpaper, rugs, shower curtains etc.

The school was much different than any other school that I have previously seen. Equipment and materials designed specifically for children and adults with special needs were in the hallways and classrooms. Children's toys were located throughout the environment as well. Staff members were frequently walking up and down the halls with students talking to them and helping them to use the equipment. I often saw the school's administrators and other support staff (custodians, office assistants, etc.) informally chatting with each other and the students in the hallways. There is also a room specifically designated as a "Resource Center" where families could go to make or borrow educational or parenting materials. The classroom where this program is housed was large, open, and warmly decorated. There is also a playground designed for both typically developing, as well as for children with special needs that is right outside of the classroom's doorway. The room has a partial kitchen area with a large refrigerator, cabinets, and counter topped space. The rest of the room contains carpeting, couches for
the parents to sit together for the discussion group, and a great deal of equipment and play materials for the children.

My observation of both environments led me to conclude that comfortable environments were in place for parents and their families. By their very nature, the apartment sites were homelike settings, and the school appeared to be far less institutional than many typical educational facilities.

The Participants

In-depth interviews were conducted with a total of 16 parents. 12 White-European-Americans, 1 African, 1 African-American/European-American, 1 Hispanic, and 1 Japanese parents who participated in the program for at least one year, and who attended four of the program's eight sites were involved in the study. The area of the county where this program operates is primarily composed of White, European-Americans (74%). Black or African-American persons are represented by approximately (20%), Asian persons (2%), persons of other races approximately (2%), and those of two races (2%) (U.S. Census Block Groups, 2000). The participants' race/ethnicity for this study mirror the demographics of the area with the majority of participants being of European-American descent (75%).

It is also important to note that only parents who attended this program with their children were included in the study, even though there are a few other caregivers (grandparents, aunts, child-care providers etc.) who attend the program with children as well. Only parents who attended for at least one year with their children in four of the program's eight locations, as the primary participants, were included. This criterion was established because the researcher was seeking the parent perspective in this study.
However, when participants were actually selected according to this criterion, only mothers turned out to be the primary participants. Although several of the mothers in this study indicated that their children's fathers did attend on occasion, they were not the principal parent participants in the program.

This chapter will also give brief descriptions of the 16 parent participants, all of who were women. Pseudonyms were used in the place of their names so that their identities could be protected and confidentiality maintained. These descriptions will provide the reader with an understanding of each individual participant, how they are similar, as well as different from each other, and a few highlights pertaining to the information they shared in the interviews.

Amy is a 26-year-old White mother of one child who is 3 years old. She is married and identified herself as a "stay-at-home mom". She has had 2 years of community college, and worked outside of the home for awhile when her child was very young. Amy chose to quit work however, because she wanted to spend as much time at home with her child as possible; she felt that she was missing out on so much of her daughter's growing years. Furthermore, day care was also extremely expensive, and most of Amy's salary was being eaten up to pay the provider. Consequently, she and her husband are living off of only his salary now, which as Amy said, "isn't much." She further said, "Everyone keeps asking us when we're going to have another kid. We're poor and we'll probably be poor forever. I'd rather give her everything than try to split it up with another one". Amy grew up in a family where her parents were able to rely on her maternal grandmother for consistent help and support. Due to geographic separation, Amy's parents are not able to be close by to help her with raising her daughter. Her mother-in-law lives close by, but is
only minimally involved with the family. Amy has only recently begun to allow her to spend time with her child, since her mother-in-law just got out of an abusive relationship with a male partner. Amy was in an abusive relationship herself when she was younger, and was therefore uncomfortable with her child being exposed to that type of situation. She has begun her second year of participating in the program and believes strongly that the program has helped her to become a better mother and to learn to take care of herself. Amy also shared that she had experienced deep feelings of isolation and depression before she became involved in the program. She enjoys spending time with her child in the program's playgroup, and participating in the parent discussions. She said that one of the greatest experiences that evolved from her participation in the program is that she has met another mother in the group who has become her closest friend; the two women's daughters have become best friends as well.

Cassie is a 29-year-old White woman who has had two children together with her fiancee whom she lives with; he also has three children from a previous relationship who live part time with them as well. The children's ages are 1, 4, 9, 7, and 12. Cassie feels deeply connected to the program, since as a child she went to the school where one of the program's sites is now housed. The school is primarily for children with special needs and Cassie attended classes there for quite some time until, as she told me, she was ready to go to a "regular school". She feels comfortable with the environment and with the people due to the familiarity that it provides in her life. She says, "It's like a family, another family." Cassie emphasized throughout the interviews that the program teaches her what to do with her children and helps her to be a better parent. She also said that other than from her fiancee', that she gets no support or help as a parent from anyone else except
through the program. Cassie has participated in the program for three years, and was beginning her fourth year when this study began. Towards the end of the study, she and her fiancee' were planning their wedding which will be held before the end of the calendar year. He currently works on the weekends goes to school during the week. For Cassie, being in the program also gives her the chance to get out of the house.

Chastity is a 32-year-old self-identified Hispanic woman who is married and the mother of four children, ages 4, 8, 12, and 13. She has had one year of college, and now works in the program as one of the paid parent assistants. Chastity initially became involved in the program when she was referred through the Infants and Toddlers Program because her youngest son was speech delayed. She was in the program for one year with her child. After he began pre-school, she then became a part time assistant in the program. Chastity said that when she was a child that she spent a lot of time with both her immediate and extended family. "Aunts and uncles, while I was growing up and particularly became older, were always there. So the families spent a lot of time together. It was the family who gave all these opinions, not community things. You got your support from your family. Family was who gave you advice, the family told you what they saw that was going on." Currently, her sister is close by, but many of her family members live out of state; her mother, who she was close with, is now deceased. Being in the program as a parent participant was helpful for Chastity's child to be around other children, and for her as a "stay-at-home mom" to get a chance to socialize with other adults. Although Chastity does not feel that she "bonds in friendship" very often with others, she thinks that through the program she is still able to communicate. She said, "you'd have to be foolish to join a program and then not utilize it by not expressing or not
asking, and sometime you have to ask in front of some of the other parents because we are all doing the group together." To know that you were not the only person going through various parenting challenges was an encouraging aspect of being involved in the group for Chastity. After the interviews were completed, Chastity told me that I reminded her of just how much she appreciates the program.

_Jessica_ is a 34-year-old White, married, mother of two children, ages 6 and 9. Jessica said, "I started college…I never finished, because I ended up pregnant. We got married and I got pregnant right away." She hopes to go back to college someday, after her husband finishes his schooling. Jessica worked full time until her first child was born and then she lost her job shortly afterwards. For awhile after that, she was self-employed as a home day care mom. Like Chastity, Jessica is now a part time paid parent assistant in the program, and has been involved in this capacity for three years. Initially, Jessica joined the program after hearing about it from a friend when her youngest child was 12 months old; she continued to participate until her child was about 3 years old. Jessica is quite comfortable with school environments. She was PTA President at one of the area's local elementary schools for two years. She said that she knew everyone there, which made it "a more positive experience." Jessica is struggling with raising her children by herself right now because her husband is away in the Army. For Jessica, being in the program with her child gave her the chance to seek other people's advice about parenting. She enjoyed hearing other people's viewpoints, stories, ideas, and opinions. To be reassured that she was "doing okay as a parent" was also important. Socialization opportunities for her child were essential factors as well. Being employed now in the program has also been a great experience for Jessica. She says that it is her time away,
her break, and a chance to get away from household and family responsibilities for awhile.

*Julie* is 27 years old. She is White, married, and the mother of three children, ages 2, 4, and 5. She has graduated from high school and has also taken a few college classes. She has participated in the program for over three years. One of the most wonderful things about being in the program for Julie was that she has made some very close, bonded friendships with a few of the other mothers. She has still maintained friendships today with some of the women she met over the past couple of years, even though they are no longer in the program. Julie initially came to the program because her oldest child was developmentally delayed. She received a referral from the Infants and Toddler's Program. Julie also sees herself as a person who gets a great deal of support as a parent from her husband; she says we are a "balanced team." Since Julie had been going through some difficult times in her life (a problem pregnancy, dealing with her child's developmental problems, and handling the stress of being a parent who was quite often alone at home) the program helped her to talk about these challenges. It has also assisted her in addressing such issues as discipline, as well as the doubts and guilt of being a mother. She feels extremely comfortable with both the staff and the other parents. She also said she would recommend it to anyone. Julie said too that she knows she cannot raise her children alone. She said it is so nice to have the help of her mother, her cousin, members of her extended family, a close friend, and the mothers and staff of this program.

*Karen* is 39 years old, White, married, and the mother of three children, whose ages are 4, 7, and 9 years. She has completed school through the 12th grade. Karen
identified herself as a "housewife." However, at the time of this study, she had just begun employment as a parent assistant in the program. She works about 12 hours a week, and was thrilled to be getting out of the house by getting the job. Karen's extended family lives out of state. She moved here with her husband and children from Virginia when her now 7 year-old child was 3 months old. They came to this area where her husband found a new job at the local steel factory. Karen felt very isolated and alone when she first came here. She felt that she was always stuck in the house with the kids, and was never really able to get out very much to meet others. When she began attending the program she said, "I started to meet people." Although Karen has not really formed any close relationships with any of the other parents in the program, she thinks that it was important for both her children and her to find the opportunity to socialize. Also, the program has helped her to realize that she is not alone as a parent and that other parents have experienced many of the same challenges that she has encountered. Actually, when Karen first joined the program, she was pleasantly surprised to discover that it had a parent discussion time, since she was really only anticipating a children's play group.

Kasey is 28 years old, White, married, and has five children. Their ages are 9 months, 2, 3, 5 and 6 years old. She is a high school graduate and does not work outside of the home; her husband is employed by a local toy store in the area. Her husband works long hours so Kasey is often at home alone with the five children. Kasey has been in the program for three years and attends faithfully every week. Although her two oldest children are in school during the day, she is able to bring the youngest three children with her to the program. She found out about the program through flyers that were distributed through the local school where her oldest son attends. Kasey has developed a close
relationship with the community outreach person who also has close ties with the
program. She has received a great deal of support and assistance from this person in
finding places for her and her family to live. Kasey is happy that the program provides a
safe place for her children to play, since she does not feel secure in allowing her children
to play in her neighborhood. She also has little help and support from extended family, so
the program has been helpful in assisting her with raising her children. Since she does not
often have a chance to sit down and talk to other parents about parenting, the program
helps to fulfill this need as well.

Lee is 33 years old. She is White, married, and the mother of three children. Their
ages are 8 months, 3 and 10 years old. Lee has completed 12th grade and has also taken a
few business classes since she graduated from high school. She identifies herself as a
"homemaker" and describes one of her favorite hobbies as cake decorating. She takes
classes on Sunday afternoons when her husband can watch the kids, and enjoys making
and decorating cakes for special occasions. Her husband is a policeman who works "on
desk duty" due to an injury he received at work. Lee has been in the program for more
than two years. Her child is speech delayed so she heard about the program through
Infants and Toddlers. A friend of hers who also worked for Infants and Toddlers told her
that the program would be great, "there's parent interaction and the kids will play." Lee
knew pretty much about what to expect from the program. Lee's parents divorced when
she was two years old, and "it was me and my dad a lot." Her dad drove a truck so he was
out of town quite often thus she spent a great deal of time with her grandparents. She
described her home as being "out in the boonies" and in a large, wooded area. She said
that many of her extended family members lived on the same property. That was where
they got their support since "we had a lot of family close by." Her family still lives relatively close, so they are very helpful to her now when she needs them. The program has helped Lee to realize the importance of taking care of her self. She also benefits from hearing other parents' thoughts and opinions about parenting, and believes that the social aspect of the program has been important for both her and her child.

Lisa is 32 years old. She is White, single, and has one son who is 2 years old. Lisa and her son currently live at home with her parents. At the time of this study, she was also engaged. Lisa has completed the 12th grade and has also been trained to be a medical assistant, although she is not working at this time. She was referred to the program by the Infants and Toddlers program because her son had several medical difficulties. He has trouble eating and swallowing and is speech delayed. She has been in the program for two years. Her parents are very supportive and give her child a great deal of attention. Her mom attended a special feeding program to learn how to feed her son if she wasn't available to do so. She said that both her mom and dad are very close and involved with her son. She also has a neighbor with a child who has a similar problem so they talk with each other about their difficulties and experiences. Her fiancee' however really doesn't take an active role. He works sixteen hours a day, and "when he's not working, he's sleeping." She further stated, "I kinda get most of my help from my mom and dad." The program has been most helpful for Lisa in reassuring her that other people are going through similar experiences with raising their children. As she said, "they've all been there." She also feels that she has learned many new ways of parenting that have been helpful, and that the program has been beneficial in assisting her and her son with issues involving separation anxiety.
Masa is 32 years old. She is African and has recently come to the United States from Liberia just within the past few years. She is married and has three children whose ages are 16 months, 2, and 8 years old. Masa is a high school graduate and identifies herself as a "housewife." She has been in the program for one year. Masa's 2 year-old-child is speech delayed, and she was referred to the program through Infants and Toddlers. At the beginning of this study she was at home full time with her children. However, shortly afterwards, she began to work and will soon be taking classes in pursuit of becoming a LPN. By the time this study ended, her husband was the one who was bringing the children to the program most of the time. Masa's father came to the United States from Liberia first and got a job. He sent money back home to his wife and children. Masa's mother pushed the children to go to school, stressing its importance for her and her siblings. Masa described the living conditions in Liberia as extremely hard due to the war that is going on there. There are no jobs to be found in Liberia even for the people who have college degrees. She said, "You not working, you can't pay rent, you can't get food, no food, it's real hard there." Masa exclaimed that she was very glad to be here in the USA. However, she has no extended family that lives close by. Her father is deceased now, and her mother lives in Ghana, so that she can be far away from war torn Liberia. As she describes it, her mother had to leave because they were killing people from her tribe. Masa said it is so hard, because she wants to see her family, but she cannot see them. Other than this program, and her husband, the only other support she has is from one family whom she has become friends with; however, their children are younger than hers are, so she ends up being their support person. There are no children that are her children's age that they can play with in the neighborhood, so the program
provides social interaction for her sons as well. Since the family does not have a car, they get to the program by the cab service that is offered.

Michelle is 25 years old, White, married, and the mother of four children, ages 10 months, 3, 5, and 8 years old. She is also expecting her fifth child. Michelle completed school through the 9th grade. She works occasionally on a part time basis at a local convenience store in the evenings after her husband gets home from work to watch the children. Michelle lives close by and is able to walk to the program which has been beneficial for her and her children since she doesn't have a car. Michelle often feels very overwhelmed with raising four children in a small apartment. She expressed the need for more programs like this one to help people like her with raising their children. She also discussed how she really didn't want to get pregnant again and said that she knows she and her husband should have used birth control. Laughing, she said, "Yeah, like they always say if you don't do something, it's going to happen!" Michelle said she likes to come to the program because "it's a few minutes alone away from the kids." She also spoke of her own parents' lack of involvement in her childhood and discussed the poverty that her family faced. She said,

My family was really poor. I didn't have a lot growing up. We wore second hand clothes and you know my parents really weren't there anyway. I mean when I was really young, I can remember like years, like donation baskets given to us by churches or whatever, what's available. Yeah, my grandparents, my mom's dad used to buy my diapers and my wipes when I was a baby. And my grandmother and my grandfather raised me throughout the years 'til I was ten, 'til they passed away.
Michelle also spoke of the program's ability to help provide for her, her husband and her children. Learning parenting skills is not the only service the program offers. As Michelle discussed, she and her family have also benefited from the kindness of the program's staff, parents and affiliated organizations in giving them food and clothing when needed.

*Rebecca* is a 28-year-old White, married mother of one. Her child is 3 years old. Rebecca has completed high school and works part time in a clerical position. Her husband is unable to work due to a medical disability. Rebecca was referred to the program by the Infants and Toddlers program because her child is developmentally delayed. Her daughter was unable to sit up by 9 months of age, and was speech delayed. She has been in the program for three years, since her child was an infant. In addition to this program, her daughter also attends a pre-school outreach program four mornings per week. Rebecca has been through many challenges concerning her daughter's developmental delay. "Because Annie is delayed the doctor had her go through all kinds of tests like hearing and vision tests, EKG, echo-cardiogram, ultrasound, MRI. She's seen a geneticist. I think she's been seen by everybody. They don't know why she is delayed."

The program's staff has given Rebecca a great deal of support and reassurance during this stressful time. In Rebecca's extended family there is no one else who has a young child, so being in the program has been helpful for her in talking to other parents who have children who are the same age. Rebecca and her husband do not have a car, so she relies on her mother to take her to work and to the food store. She and her daughter get to the program by way of a cab that the program provides.

*Samantha* is 31 years old. She is White, single, and the mother of one child who is 8 years old. Samantha was a parent participant in the program with her son for two years.
Her pediatrician referred her to the Infants and Toddlers program because her child was speech delayed, and they then referred her to this program. She then worked in the program as a part time paid parent assistant, and has now advanced to the position of full time Instructional Assistant. Samantha is a college graduate with a BA degree in history. Samantha's grandmother was the one who raised her as a child. She said that she saw her grandmother as being primarily alone in raising her, and that she didn't go outside of the house for help or support. When Samantha attended the program with her child she was grateful for the van transportation because she didn't have a car at the time. Her child's father worked during the day, so he took the only car that was available. Samantha enjoyed being in the program because it was a good opportunity for her child to be around other children since he was an only child. She also liked getting out of the house to be with other adults, since she was a "stay at home mom." Samantha also has limited interactions and contacts with people in her neighborhood which she described as a low-income, transitional area, and a place where you really don't get to know a lot of people well enough to feel comfortable. When Samantha was offered a paid parent assistant position in the program it opened many doors for her. She returned to school to finish her college degree. Her grandmother gave her a car to get to work, and she became more independent. When she took the job she said her son's father "lost a lot of ground," since he preferred that she stay at home and not work. Samantha said that after getting the job, "I started kicking my walls down." She is now living on her own and raising her son.

*Star* is 35 years old. She is White, single, and the mother of three children. Their ages are 18 months, 4, and 8 years old. Her fiancee' also lives with her and the children. Star came to the United States from Germany 12 years ago. She has been living in this
area for about 4 years. She is a high school graduate who also does book keeping work part time from her home. This is Star's fourth year in the program. In Germany, her mother was a divorced single parent who raised her and her two siblings by herself. Star describes her mother as not being around very often because she had to work so much. Consequently, she wants to raise her children differently by being more available to them. As she said, "I don't want to be my mother. I don't want to live like my mother."

Star follows many of the practices in parenting that were a part of her German upbringing, however. She keeps her children on a strict schedule everyday. As she says, "You cannot change it. If you change it you have chaos." Star spoke also of the importance of family togetherness, rituals, and closeness as an essential part of her heritage that she now shares with her own children. For example, she said, "I got from my grandma though, the Sunday dinner. Sunday is the big family day. Sunday we eat breakfast together. Sunday we eat dinner together. Sunday mom makes a cake. If I'd forget to make Sunday, a cake, my son would have a fit." She has no close family or friends in the area and has found the program to be very helpful "to talk about my problems." Star found out about the program from a flyer that was sent home through her oldest son's school. Her middle child then benefited from the program because, "she was disabled at the time so it was a good program to help her play with other kids, maybe learn the motor skills and all that." Star's daughter had seizures when she was a baby and lost all of her motor skills and speech. Star feels that she has a lot to offer many of the other mothers in the program since she is older and more mature than most of the other mothers in the group. She currently attends the program with the youngest of her three children, a typically developing boy.
Tonya is 28 years old. She is of African-American and European-American descent. She is the mother of seven children. Three of the seven children live with her. Their ages are 1, 3 and 4 years old. Tonya is separated from her former spouse, who is currently incarcerated, but she has a current male partner who lives with her and the children. He is the father of the 1 year-old child. She identifies herself as a "stay at home mom." She has been in the program for three years, and was initially referred by the Infants and Toddlers program. Tonya was placed in a foster home at the age of two, where she stayed until she was adopted when she was five. She said, "I'm the oldest, I'm the oldest and I'm the only one of my father's and my mother's children who were put up for adoption." Tonya said that the family adopted her "to replace the daughter they had lost. She died when she was five." She said she was abused in that family until the age of eleven, and then she was taken out of the family. However, as she says about the situation now, "I'm over it." Tonya does not feel that she gets a whole lot from the parent discussion group in the program. She believes that since she is the mother of so many children that she has already been through many of the situations that are discussed. Tonya's main interest in the program is that it offers a safe and structured place for her children to play. She also feels that she has acquired a great deal of support and assistance from one staff member in particular. Tonya described the program as, "Just a speed bump in the middle of the street. It's just a speed bump on a journey, you know, you stop and spend a few hours there, {you think about} everything...and you keep going. And you keep on going...life doesn't stop 'cause of playgroup. It just slow(s) you down for 2 hours."
Yuki is 38 years old. She is Japanese, married, and the mother of two children whose ages are 2 and 3 years old. She is a high school graduate and does not work outside of the home. She has been in the program for one year. Yuki came to the United States from Japan about 3 years ago. Her husband's family lives out of state in Illinois, and her own parents still live in Japan. She misses her own family very much and wishes they were here to help her with raising her children. She is friendly with one other Japanese family that lives in a different county in the area who she talks with "all the time." She said she sometimes chats with a few neighbors about raising children, but that she is often home by herself and likes to come to the program to talk to people. Yuki takes her children to dance class and to the neighborhood playground, but other than these few activities and this program, she is not involved in any community organizations or church groups. Yuki is grateful to the program for helping her to learn what to do as a parent through the discussion group. She also says that she feels safe in the program with the staff and their ability to care for and watch her children.

As can be summarized from the biographies of the participants, the 16 women described were between the ages of 25 to 39 years old. As was also stated before, 12 were of European-American descent, 1 was of African descent, 1 was African-American/European-American, 1 was Hispanic, and 1 was Asian (Japanese). The majority of the women were married, engaged, or living with a male partner. One participant was a single parent who lived on her own while raising her child. Educational background ranged from completion of the 9th grade through the completion of an undergraduate college degree, with most participants having completed the 12th grade.
All of the women in this study were mothers who had anywhere from one to seven children.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview and description of the setting, which was the focus of this study where parents and their children participated in a parenting education and family support program. Information about the area where participants lived as well as their biographical profiles was also presented. In the next chapter, a discussion of the findings concerning their reasons for participating in the program will be addressed.
CHAPTER 5

PRESENTATION OF THE FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to obtain an understanding of the experience of parents' motivational participation in a voluntary parenting education and family support program from both a psychological and sociocultural lens. Psychologically, parents' motivation was examined by taking into consideration their personal and individual reasons for participation. From a sociocultural standpoint, the influences of participants' families and neighborhood/community environments, and the program and staff itself were a focus of the study as well. The sociocultural perspective further considered the socially constructed notions of gender, class, cultural difference, and ability and how these positions within society affected parents' participation in the program.

Initial and follow-up interviews for this study were audio taped and transcribed. Parents who participated in the study also had the option of writing in a journal about their thoughts and feelings related to participation in the program. Of the 16 participants involved in the study, 10 kept the journal and wrote in it anywhere from one to six times. The transcripts in addition to the journal entries provided the data for which the findings of this study are based.

This chapter will give descriptions of the major themes that emerged from analyzing the data collected. These themes came from a detailed analysis of the participants' narratives. Only through these detailed stories will the reader be able to acquire a deeper understanding of what motivated parents from both a psychological and
sociocultural perspective to participate in this program. Motivation for participation is not only a personal, individualistic decision, but a choice that is made due to the impact of the social-contextual environment, and the influence of participants' positionality within society as well. Furthermore, the essence of the meaning parents' give to their participation experiences can best be captured by hearing their voices, through the narrative process.

The findings of this study are organized into three major areas: 1) The Social Contextual Influences of Participants' Families and Neighborhood/Community. 2) Program and Staff Creates Community Within Community, and 3) Attentiveness to Issues Involving Gender, Class, Culture and Ability. The Social Contextual Influences of Participants’ Families and Neighborhood/Community will be discussed first because it is important to be able to see how the participants’ partners and extended families demonstrated assistance towards caring for the children, and how they supported their participation in the program. It is also essential to discuss the social contextual environment of parents’ neighborhood/community in order to more fully understand the concerns and challenges families faced within this setting that influenced their motives to become involved in the program. Next, it is essential to acquire a deeper understanding of how the program and staff created community within community within the constructs of the program. Lastly, it is important to view how they were also strongly attentive to issues involving gender, class, culture, and ability. The data display on the following page will summarize these major findings of the study.
DATA DISPLAY

I. The Social Contextual Influences of Participants' Families and Neighborhood/Community

A. Variations in Family Support
   1. Existence of male partner support
   2. Opinions and support of extended family
B. Concerns Within the Neighborhood/Community
   1. Absence of young families with children
   2. Negative environmental forces
   3. Experience of minimal connection

II. Program and Staff Creates Community Within Community

A. Offers An Extension of the Home Environment
   1. Locations embedded within the community
   2. Atmospheres are comfortable and homelike
B. Cultivates Support for the Parent-Child Relationship
   1. Hearing and sharing parenting viewpoints and stories
   2. Receiving validation and reassurance
   3. Dealing with separation anxiety
   4. Learning to become better parents
   5. Encouraging time for parent and child
C. Creates a Healthy Environment for Children
   1. Fosters opportunities for social interaction
   2. Offers activities in a structured environment
D. Provides A Caring and Connected Staff
   1. Relates effectively to both parents and children
   2. Shares parenting ideas and resources

III. Attentiveness to Issues Involving Gender, Class, Culture and Ability

A. Assists Women in Moving Within and Beyond the Caretaker/Mother Role
   1. Identifying marginalization of stay at home mothers
   2. Meeting needs for connection
   3. Creating a sense of self-worth and importance
   4. Dealing with the "Super Mom Syndrome"
B. Addresses Needs of Lower-Income Families
   1. Providing services at no or low cost
   2. Extending assistance beyond parent education
C. Is Culturally Sensitive to Individual and Collective Needs In Practice
D. Promotes Understanding and Support for Those with Special Needs
   1. Creating an environment of acceptance and support
   2. Making needed connections with other services
The Social-Contextual Influences of Participants' Families and Neighborhood/Community

In this first section, the influences of participants' families and neighborhood/community settings will be described so that an understanding can be acquired of how these social contextual forces influenced parents’ participation in the program. First, variations in family support systems will be addressed. The existence of male partner support concerning fathers' involvement with the children, and their support for mothers' participation in the program will be discussed. Opinions of extended family members with regard to participants' involvement in the program will also be summarized. In addition, support of extended family members in assisting participants in their parenting roles will be highlighted. Secondly, participants concerns about their neighborhood/community environments will be described. The absence of young families with children in neighborhoods, negative environmental forces, and the experience of minimal connection within neighborhood/community settings will be discussed.

Variations in Family Support

All of the participants in this study except for one were married, engaged, or living with a male partner. The participant who was not in any of these situations was a single parent, living on her own with one child. One participant who was engaged lived at home with her parents and her child.

Many of the participants stated that their male partners were involved to some extent in providing support and assistance in raising the children, and in helping with family responsibilities and tasks. Furthermore, several partners encouraged and supported
the participants and their children in attending the program, while some also attended the program on occasion themselves.

Additionally, several of the participants spoke of their extended family members' opinions concerning their participation in the program. Many of the participants shared that they had positive support in this regard from extended family members.

Several participants also shared that they received a great deal of support or some support in their roles as parents (either emotionally and/or with routine care-giving of the children) from extended family members. However, a few participants were also geographically separated from their extended families and therefore lacked support in this capacity. These variations regarding family support will now be addressed.

Existence of male partner support. Several of the participants in the study discussed the existence of male partner support in the family care-giving role, and described how their partners assisted in taking care of the children and/or family and household responsibilities. Some, however, felt that they took most of the responsibility in the task of child rearing, but did indicate that they did receive some assistance from their partners.

Several participants also revealed that their partners were supportive of their decisions to participate in the program. Due to the fact that most participants' partners worked full time during the day, they were unable to participate regularly in the program themselves. Therefore, the mothers in this study were the primary participants in the program with their children. Some participants said, however, that if their partners were off from work that they attended the program on occasion.
With regard to receiving support from their partners in caring for the children and family responsibilities Jessica, Masa, Julie, Star, Amy, Karen, Lee, and Cassie felt strongly about this. For example, several of the women shared their feelings about this.

As Masa shared, “(My husband) he help a lot…all of the time.”

Jessica said also about her husband,

He totally helps. When he left in February (for the military) it killed me. He does bath time and they like him to tuck them in at night and we literally split everything. He does half the cooking. If I don't feel like cooking one night he'll cook. It's like different meals he does better than me-and the same thing- I do better than him. I never realized how much he does until he does go away. It's very much more stressful.

Julie too discussed her husband's support,

He's wonderful. I started working when my second one was about 6 months old…it's supposed to be part time but a lot of times it isn't. It's kind of been the best thing for us. On the weekends mainly my husband has to do everything that I have to do during the week. So that works out really well. It makes a more balanced team because he's now doing the things that I've been doing all along.

Star reflected on the importance of this as well,

The father make(s) the kid too. For me in my relationship is 50/50. On Saturdays I go wash the clothes, I bring it home, he puts it away. I cook the food; he washes the dishes. So everything is equal so the kids can see what is not only one way; that both sides have to do their chore. He gets up at 7 AM and he gets the kids ready to go to school, and then he goes to work from 9 to 6. When he comes home
he takes over the kids. He feeds them, gives them a bath, get(s) them ready for
bed…do their homework…50/50, when he's home that's his job, I'm
downstairs…at 6:00 my day's over. Daddy takes over. Yes, 6 o'clock I'm done
with them (Laughs).

Cassie said too that her husband shared in the responsibilities for the children. She
stated, “Both of us (take care of the children). If he's not home, then it's me. If he's home,
it's him. So it has to be both of us.” Lee also added,

Recently I started working part time but…I only wanted to work when he was
available to watch the kids. So he does that on a couple evenings a week and on
weekends. He's just really good with you know helping me make decisions...those
little daily decisions where you're really not quite sure…you know, with the baby,
whether he should start solid foods yet and things like that. He cleans up the
house and he takes turns getting up in the morning especially on the weekends.
He's really good about taking them so if I need to lay down or I need to go out.

In addition to these several parents who discussed extensive partner support in
raising the children and helping with home responsibilities, some of the other parents said
that although they did not have a great deal of support, they felt that they received help to
some extent. Chastity, Yuki, Kasey, Rebecca, and Michelle each talked about how they
do receive some support in various ways.

Chastity shared that she prefers to take the lead role in the home, but that her
husband is supportive to a certain degree as well. She said,

I take the major role in basically everything. I take the lead, you know, like I do
the bills, I make the major decisions. The schools will call him, but he will call
me and we will discuss things. I mean, everything is discussed, but ultimately decisions are mine. Basically…usually it is left to me. But…he's very supportive. I could never say he's not. But he kind of rests on the fact that he thinks my decisions are good…he's pretty much the laid back one. But he'll take an active role and he'll help me discipline …and he'll sit with him and play computer, and he'll take an active role, but the decisions like that would be me.

Yuki said too, “Husband helps when he comes home, but daytime it is me.” Kasey also discussed that her husband is helpful but that his intense work schedule that evolved from the need to take care of their family of seven often limits his ability to assist at home. She said,

He'll come home and give them a bath, help them with their homework, feed them, whatever I need. It depends, because like I said, at Christmas time he works 'til after dark. By the time he comes home I already have baths done. They might even be in bed…you know I understand that he has to work to pay for bills and stuff. I understand why he took all these hours. Sometimes I get mad but then I think he's the only one working, taking care of five kids, me and him. I have to understand.

Rebecca felt also that she took the major responsibility for raising their child, but that her husband, who is medically retired from the military, did give her some support. She stated,

I usually do the taking care of her mostly. My husband does sometimes. He's medically retired from the Army. He doesn't work. It's mostly me. But he does sometimes…he plays sometimes and watches her some, I guess he disciplines her
some because she doesn't listen to me very well. He usually watches her when she's taking a nap or something. I guess if she's finished taking her nap and I'm still not there… I guess he'll pick her up and play with her…stuff like that.

Michelle shared also that her husband helped when he was home from work and able to do so. She said,

(He helps) when he's home. (Laughs). I either walk out the door as soon as he gets home…go to work… or sometimes just go get a breather…like to a library or go to the store to get what I need. Just have time by myself. I feel guilty sometimes because I don't take none of the kids with me…but why should I? "Cause I have them all day.

In addition to the majority of participants feeling that they had either extensive or some support in dealing with family responsibilities, some also discussed that their partners were supportive of their participation in the program. For Amy, Masa, Cassie, Tonya, Chastity, Star, and Yuki this was particularly true.

As Amy described, “He was very happy when we started coming because I was much happier when we started. He thinks it's great…he loves it. He's just happy that we've got it, because we're all better for it.” Masa stated as well, “(My husband) he like(s) program…good idea to come.” And as Cassie also shared,

He likes that I am out of the house and talking to other parents. He likes me to talk to other parents and see…if my children are the same way as other children are. He says I'm doing the right thing, getting help with the children.

Tonya felt similarly when she said,
He thinks it's great... because I am here all day, every day, and I really don't have a lot of friends... he thinks it's really good... I have three children interacting with other children, but I also have a chance to speak to other parents. You know especially about little day-to-day... little parenting issues that we have.

Chastity added too, "And my husband thought it was a good idea you know. Sure, get 'em out there, go where the action is. And it was for the both of us. Both of us got to get out. " And finally, Yuki mentioned, "My husband likes that I come here."

In addition to supporting participants' involvement in the program, some of the mothers mentioned that their partners attended the program on occasion as well. Conflicting work schedules were what often hindered their participation. As Julie said, "He's supportive... he's been quite a few times. When we first joined he could come more often because of his work schedule. Now he comes two or three times a year." And Amy stated as well,

One or two weeks he's been off on Wednesdays... so, if he can get out of bed and come over, he'll come over before we're done and walk home with us or whatever. A few days, when he's off all together and he didn't go out the night before, he'll come for the whole group. He comes on the field trips when he can. But he loves it...

Karen described her husband's visits. She shared,

He was glad he came because my son really wanted him to come to see what he did. To come to his play center. He was excited about coming. Everybody was really friendly. He said, "I didn't say much" and he doesn't talk much when he
doesn't know people. But, he said they were talking and he said a few things…he helped with the art project.

Lee also explained,

My husband brings them when I can't. When I had Seth and I was home I didn't want to go out right after I had the baby. He would bring him so he wouldn't miss so many days…everybody is real supportive…he liked watching Seth play. I just don't think he enjoyed the social interaction part like I do 'cause he goes to work and he interacts with his cop buddies there. And it's different for him. I think he felt kind of strange the first time I took him because he was the only man there. But everybody was pretty nice to him. He didn't have a problem being welcomed. I just think it was a little odd for him -too much estrogen! (laughs)

The majority of the participants in the study did feel that they either had extensive support or some support from their partners in the care of their children and/or in taking care of home responsibilities. In addition, several of the participants discussed or commented on their partners' encouragement of their involvement in the program. Furthermore, some even spoke of their partners' attendance in the program as well. A network of support from partners regarding assistance and attentiveness to family responsibilities and needs appeared to be in place for many of the participants in this study.

Opinions and support of extended family. Analysis of the data revealed variations in extended family opinions relative to parents' participation in the program, and with regard to the extent of participants' ability to acquire extended family support in their parenting roles.
Regarding extended family opinions, Jessica, Chastity, Samantha, Karen, Rebecca, and Lisa all discussed this in a positive light. Each felt that they had extended family members who supported their decisions to participate in the program. As Chastity shared,

Mom doesn't live anymore but she did know about the program and she was supportive about it. She thought it was good to get him out there. And my sister…she was supportive and even did all the same things for herself with the twins. So everybody was pretty supportive.

Samantha said as well,

My mom and all of my family (were supportive)...my sister is now in the program. So they were all grateful that he (child) was getting some help…that I was getting out. So they all knew it was a benefit.

Karen recalled too,

My mom thought it was wonderful because it got me out of the house and got the kids with other children…other than being in the house with Mom all the time…with friends. I really don't have any other family here, so…I mean they were really happy…they thought it was a really good idea.

And Rebecca stated, “They like it. They think it’s a good idea. My sister's kids are bigger…some of the things they remember (about parenting young children), but they're not going through it right now.”

Tonya and Julie however, shared that some of their extended family members disapproved of their participation in the program. Tonya discussed the problem of
addiction that her family members have, and shared why they do not support her participation in the program. She stated,

They think it's stupid. Everybody on my side of the family are drug addicts. So that to them-that's stupid… to actually do things with your children. They're not the type of people who do things with their children…they think it's stupid.

Julie described her father's disapproval of the program regarding the discipline methods it promotes. She said,

Truthfully, my father who is a strict disciplinarian and comes from the old school thinks it's too liberal. His first instinct is "corporal punishment." I said, "Dad, you have to come with me to my play group and listen." He said he'd be glad to, but he hasn't come. I said, "Maybe you could give a seminar on why spanking your kids is the only method of discipline." (Sarcastically) -we'll get some feedback from that one!

Regarding extended family support in their parenting roles, several of the participants indicated that they did receive support. Jessica, Lisa, Julie, Samantha, Lee, and Amy described these support systems as being strong. For example, Jessica, whose husband is currently away in the military shared,

Basically, all my family is close by so they're pretty much the ones we lean on the most…my sister-in-law and I…we live just streets away from each other so we are pretty much giving each other advice all the time. Because sometimes you just wonder if you're doing the right thing; and…you need that sounding board.
Lisa, who lives at home with her parents and her child who has special needs explains that she receives a great deal of support from her parents and her sister in particular,

I kinda get most of my help from my mom and dad…when Ben was in a feeding program she (mom) would go with me to the feeding program and she learned how to feed him cause it's a special way of feeding him. So, if I'm not there or if I can't for some reason feed him then she's able to do that. And…Ben sleeps with my father…they're really close. And when they go out to the store they take him to the store and…he's spoiled rotten… Phew! (Laughs)… rotten! And…I'm the baby and they're (her siblings) all older. I think it's my son who's 2 and the next one is 11 so there's a big difference. But my sister, my oldest sister, is a great help. She's raised four children and she's in the nursing profession so she kind of eases my fears.

Julie also shared that she has strong support from her parents, particularly her mother. She explained, “I have my mother as a tremendous support system. She's within shouting distance. Both my parents…I get their input on parenting issues.”

Samantha, who is a single parent, stated too that she felt fortunate to have the support of extended family. She said,

I get a lot of support from my mom, my sister, and my brother, and grandmother…I do get a lot of support. I don't know if I'd want them right next door, but they're close enough, and I'm extremely lucky to have an extended family that's very close.
And Amy felt that even though her parents were far away, that she did receive a
great deal of help from them. She shared,

Even though they're far away my parents help out a lot. And you know,
emotionally, I call my mother up and I've gone, "Ugh! I'm going to put her in a
box and mail her to you! (Laughs). You know, but they do what they can even
though they're far away.

Tonya, Michelle, Rebecca, and Kasey indicated that they received some support
from extended family; although they did not seem to be able to rely on them for quite as
much help as the others. As Tonya described, she gets some help with one of the
children, but not with the others,

(Keisha's) godmother works for the Department of Social Services…she's been
sick lately. But before she got sick she was around…for Keisha. But she has
another godmother who lives downstairs. They give her a bath once or twice a
week. Nobody takes them (my sons) because they're bad. Everybody will take
her…I just don't allow anybody to take her.

Michelle, who has four children and is pregnant, stated that she receives support
from her sister on occasion, but the rest of her family members are not close by. She said,

Once in awhile my sister will baby sit or she will help me, like she knows I'm in a
jam, she'll help me, like pay bills or something. I got a good sister. She's the one I
fall back on when I need help…my Mom lives in Tennessee…she takes care of
her mom, and her mom takes care of her. And my father lives in West Virginia
with his girlfriend.
Rebecca mentioned that she had some support in the care of her daughter while she went to her part time job. She stated, “My sister watches her on Monday, and my mother watches her some on Wednesday. Then my mother takes her over to my husband so she can take a nap.”

And Kasey indicated that she also received some assistance from her husband's mother, but not a great deal. She said,

My relatives aren't really around for the kids to help me raise them. His mom's there for them; but other than that, nobody else is there…I wouldn't say that I get help from a lot of people. I mean only their grandmother would help 'em.

Yuki and Masa have only been in the United States for a few years; and Star came to the USA from Germany a little more than a decade ago. All three of these women discussed that they were geographically isolated from extended family, and therefore received no support and assistance from them. Cassie too shared that she was alone without support from extended family.

For Yuki, this was particularly true since her parents are still living in Japan. She shared, “I wish family was here. I need some more help - no Grandma, no Grandpa. I wish Grandma and Grandpa was here. Grandparents would be important for my kids…a lot of help…would help me.”

Masa's father is deceased, and her other family members are in Africa. She too discussed that she has no extended family support. She said,

Because of the war in Liberia, my mother and sister (are) in Ghana. Especially my mom. I want to see her…oh, it is not easy. It's hard because like your family is
there...you want to see your family...you can't see them or talk to them, and to get there is not easy.

Star also has no family that lives close by since most of her family is still living in Germany. She said, “One sister lives here, but is far away; and then my fiancee's...they live in New York...so we are the only one.”

Cassie too also shared that she has no other family support except for her husband-to-be. She said, “That's it...my husband-to-be...that's all the support I have.”

Variations in participants' family support systems were evident in the analysis of the data for this study. However, many of the participants did appear to have either strong or moderate support systems in place from their male partners with regard to taking responsibility for the children and or family needs, and in receiving encouragement for participating in the program.

Several extended family members were also encouraging of participants' involvement in the program. Many of the participants in the study also felt that they had strong to moderate support from extended family members in supporting them in their roles as parents. However, a few participants discussed that they had no support at all, especially if they were geographically separated from their family members.

Concerns within the Neighborhood/Community

Many of the participants discussed concerns that they had within their neighborhoods/communities with regard to the absence of young families with children, negative environmental forces, and experiences of minimal connection with others. These issues impacted their decisions to participate in the program, since the program met
several of their needs that were not found within their neighborhood/community environments. These concerns that participants discussed will now be addressed.

*Absence of young families with children.* Several participants discussed the fact that their neighborhoods' demographic composition consisted of very few young families with children. Therefore, it was important for them to attend a program that would give their children other children to play with. Lee, Jessica, Cassie, Rebecca, Karen, and Masa all talked about this to some extent. As Lee shared,

> There's not too many kids…we live in an old house that was built like in the 20's so there's a lot of elderly people there that have lived there all their lives. A few kids kind of moving in you know… that's another reason we were looking for a group…there weren't any kids his age or close to his age.

Jessica talked about this as well,

> Mostly we kept coming (to the program) because there isn't anyone in and around my daughter's age where we live. Mostly on my street it's a lot of older people.

Then, there's a few people who have teenagers and things like that.

Cassie too felt similarly, “I wish there was friends their age (in the neighborhood), but there aren't…I don't see much kids.” Rebecca described her neighborhood as well, “Most of the people around us don't have children. Most of them are older and their children are grown and they don't live there anymore…there aren't many neighbors with young children.”

Karen also stated,

> The most important thing to me was getting my children out because they're just with me. They didn't know anybody else other than their siblings because where
we live there wasn't any other little children; so they enjoyed playing with other children.

Masa too indicated that there were no children in her neighborhood for her children to play with, and that the program was the only place they had to play. She said, "besides in the school (program), they don't go out."

For these parents the need to find a place for their children to socialize and to be with other children was evident, and was a significant factor that influenced their desires to participate in the program.

Negative environmental forces. Several parents also discussed some of the problems within their neighborhoods that contributed to their feelings of not wanting their children to be a part of the environment. Participants described crime concerns, a lack of activities for children, and people with problematic behaviors in neighborhoods as negative forces within their communities. Michelle, Kasey, Samantha, Julie, Amy, and Tonya, in particular, felt strongly about this.

Michelle described that being in the program with her children gave her more of a feeling of being able to trust her surroundings, as opposed to how she felt about the environment of the neighborhood. She said,

(In the program) you get to know the people that your kids are around. …I think it's bad around here…I always see cops around. I don't care for it too much around here. Because, I mean cars have been stolen, all kinds of stuff has been going on around here lately. I really wouldn't know to trust it.

She also noted in her journal, “When I come to this program I feel safe and secure for my children.” Kasey also talked about this problem as well,
(It's) a real bad neighborhood. It's just too much wild stuff outside and the police outside everyday…somebody's getting locked up…it's a bad neighborhood. I know what it's like around here (at program) and all the people are nice. I like bringing my kids here.

She also wrote in her journal, “In this program it is a safe place for the kids to play and (I) don't have to worry about anything.”

Samantha not only discussed the issues involving crime, but also described concerns about other children and parents in the neighborhood. She explained,

It's scary…it's really scary. This past spring break, you know, 2 o'clock on a Tuesday afternoon, he was outside riding his bike and he comes running in and telling me that the cops and the dogs are out. Well apparently there was a drug bust on the next court. Just this past week there was a murder/suicide that happened across the street from me. So you know, I have a hard time allowing him outside and we have such a different type of neighborhood that even playing with the kids is an issue. I don't know any of these parents. I don't know how they are going to react to something. I'm not sure if I would send Tony to some of these people's houses because of the area…I need to know their parents. Do they get home? Will they be home? How many other kids are going to be there? Because you just don't know whether or not you are going to walk into a house and there's guns in there, or what type of neighborhood it is. You just don't know.

Samantha further discussed the program's ability in helping her to feel more at ease. She said,
It (the program) gave him an out. It also gives you like a fishbowl…you can check things out. Here, when you're here, you pretty much know the parents…you kind of learn over a month or so in the very beginning how parents are going to react to each other. Around my neighborhood…I don't know these parents. I don't interact with them at all. At least I'm interacting (in the program) with them one day a week, Sometimes if I get to be friends I'll be interacting with them more. But, around the neighborhood it's not like that; so it's not a safe environment that I feel comfortable allowing him out on a regular basis.

Julie too shared her uneasiness with some of the other families in her neighborhood. She explained,

The problems I have with some of the other children in the neighborhood…is with the parents' difference in the parenting styles. And the children in my neighborhood are pretty much running free. I mean as young as two and three are up and down the street.

Amy further discussed concerns regarding other people within her neighborhood and a potential for violence as well. She stated,

We had problems with our upstairs neighbors last year. They ended up getting evicted. There was some issues you know. We were calling the police almost every night and it was horrible. So, for awhile there, I was like almost afraid to leave the apartment because the woman is a nut job. This morning we got woken up at 6 AM because of the people in the next building…they were screaming and cursing at each other. Apparently he busted her lip this morning and wouldn't give her, her cell phone. We heard all this through the wall. So, Jim's sitting there, I
had my ear up to the wall, of course, 'cause you know if I'm listening I might as well hear. He goes, "Get away! Because you never know when a gun can go off and a bullet can come flying through the wall."

Tonya was also strongly concerned about her neighborhood environment, with particular fears of potential violence, and a lack of something structured for children to do. She shared,

Without programs like (this), life is just going down hill, especially in this neighborhood…there's nothing for these children structured to do. (In the program) I know there's not gonna be hollering, fighting, and disrespect; there's not going to be any guns. They're having structured play…it's not violent. They're not allowed to play with guns, no type of gun simulation, nothing. Like if you went outside and it was time for children to be outside you would see a lot of children their age and smaller out there by themselves. At the park by themselves, fussing and fighting and all of that…it's all about parental supervision, and they really don't. This is basically a poor, poor community…a lot of them are on drugs and don't care…they're just surviving. They do what they gotta do and they don't spend much time with their children.

Like Tonya, Julie also talked about the fact that there was nothing constructive in the neighborhood for children to do. She explained,

Like if you grab an issue of (name of local family magazine) and you look at what's going on, or whatever, it's like (in different areas)…there's all these different things to do. But when you get to (this area), there's nothing. And you have to go to (these other different areas) if you want your child into these nice
programs; you know these classes. But in (this community), there's really nothing. My children look forward to this program every week.

These participants' stories concerning negative environmental forces within their neighborhood/community demonstrated that they felt a lack of a sense of security in allowing their children to interact with other children and families in these surroundings. Their narratives also projected a sense of the absence of structured activities for children in their community. It was evident as well from what they shared that the program offered a safe haven for their children to play, and an environment that was constructive.

*Experience of minimal connection.* Several parents also shared that they experienced minimal connections with others in their neighborhood/community settings. For Star, Lee, Samantha, Chastity, and Tonya this was particularly true.

Star, Lee, and Chastity discussed an overall feeling of disconnection. Star, who is from Germany, compared this feeling to what she has experienced in her country. She described, “In my country the neighborhood raise the children. Over here everybody stays by themselves. It's very hard to connect with other people. So the program helps.”

Lee also felt that families did not make connections within the community, as they should. She said,

I don't think any one person can contribute everything a kid needs to know their whole entire life without them interacting with other parents and other family members and the community. But it doesn't happen much these days, though, unfortunately. I think everybody's gotten a "it's not my business" attitude.
Chastity also similarly shared, “(In my neighborhood)...it is more disbursed... you know I think it is everybody doing more of their own kind of thing.”

Samantha focused on the transitional status of her neighborhood. She also discussed,

People are more isolated today then we were (as children). We used to sit out and talk to our neighbors - know our neighbors. Now a days, you really don't know your neighbors. Especially where I live; there's a lot of transition. So you don't get to know 'em. They might be there for a year but they're gone. I live in a low-income area...so a lot of the people are there, long enough, then try to move on.

For Tonya, who described her neighborhood as being an area that had a great deal of crime and drug traffic, the issue was a sense of not being able to trust people, therefore limiting connections for her family. She said,

I have a friend (in the neighborhood) who comes over here almost every day and plays with my children, and we'll walk to the store, we'll go to the park or whatever. But would I actually let her watch my children for 10 or 15 minutes while I went and did something? No! I don't trust you as far as I can see you. I think in this society...the word "friend" is used too much. You need to watch friends, closer than you need to watch your enemies.

Two of the parents, Tonya and Star, also mentioned that they were not comfortable in making connections within the church in their communities, due to negative perception or experience. The church, which often can increase connections in neighborhoods, was rejected by both of these women.
For Star, it was an issue of mistrust. She said, “I never went to the (church groups). I see church is a big influence on family…but you listen to the news…I don't trust the church. (Laughs).”

Tonya shared that she was uncomfortable with an incident involving the preacher's judgment and criticism, so therefore she no longer goes to the church in her area. She said,

Just because you go to church doesn't mean you're going to church with a bunch of people who actually believe in the Lord. They might just be there for show. I've learned that from experience too. I went to church with my oldest son…and my husband. I was pregnant with my other one, and then we went to church and the preacher was talking about AIDS and he called the gay people faggots. That was the last day I went to that church.

For all of these participants, a feeling of minimal connection within their neighborhood/community was revealed through the thoughts that they shared. Being participants in a program, such as this one, gave them opportunities for connection within the neighborhood/community, and was therefore essential.

As the analysis of data revealed, concerns within the neighborhood/community of many participants was an influential factor that contributed to their participation in an organized, constructive program that met theirs and their children's needs. Living in older neighborhoods that had few young families, negative influences such as crime and violence, a lack of structured programs, and behavior problems among children and other adults were also seen as concerns for parents in allowing their children to become involved with others. Furthermore, the experience of minimal connection with members
in the community environment was a driving force that contributed to their participation in a program that supported a sense of community connection.

In sum, in this section, the influences of participants' families and neighborhood/community were discussed regarding parents' decisions to participate in the program. Most participants in this study indicated that they had strong to moderate support from their partners in managing family responsibilities, and in assisting them with child care duties. Several participants also received encouragement and support from partners, as well as from other family members in their decisions to become involved in the program. Furthermore, several parents in the study discussed that they received support from extended family members within the context of their parenting roles. Those who were geographically separated from family were lacking in this support, however.

Concerns within neighborhood/community were also described as being problematic for a number of participants as well. The absence of young families with children in neighborhoods, negative environmental forces related to crime, violence, and a lack of supervision were major concerns. Furthermore, the experiences of minimal connection with others in the community setting were described by many participants as contributing factors towards their desires to be involved in a program that offers a sense of community connection, structured activity, and a feeling of safety and security.
Program and Staff Creates Community within Community

In this next section, the program and staff's ability to create community within community is described. First, analysis of the data revealed that the centers’ locations provide an extension of a home environment for parents and their families. Secondly, parents described the importance of the program's ability to cultivate support for their relationships with their children. Thirdly, they discussed their satisfaction in being involved in a setting that they believed was healthy and positive for their children. Lastly, participants' stories revealed that the staff was caring and connected in their relationships with families. Participants shared the value of the staff's strengths in nurturing both them and their children, and in sharing a wealth of parenting ideas and resources within the context of a supportive setting that assisted them in their roles as parents.

Offers an Extension of the Home Environment

Parents' shared their thoughts of the importance of participating in a program that was located in areas that were close to home and embedded within their communities, either in local public school buildings or in neighborhood apartment complexes. The program’s home base is situated in a public school building that is a special education facility for persons from Pre-Kindergarten through adult (up to age 21). Although this particular program that is the focus of this study is not exclusively for families who have special needs children, one-third of the children have been identified as having developmental challenges. In addition to the home base center, the program operates seven other satellite centers that are housed either in public elementary school buildings or in apartments that are donated by apartment complexes in the area.
The atmosphere of these sites was described as being warm, comfortable and homelike by parents; they further discussed the settings as being unique. Not only do they offer a place for their children to learn, interact, and play, as many programs for young children do; but they also provide a discussion group for the parents. This environment further encourages family connection more so than in other similar settings that tend to focus on either the parent or child, and do not provide opportunities for interaction for both.

Locations within the community Several of the parents talked about the fact that it was important to have the program close by so that it was easily accessible for them and their children. As Amy described, she looked for a program similar to this in the area, but instead she was glad to be able to find this one,

Well, we live down the street. So if it's not raining or snowing or frigid we walk down and that's nice, cause it's like a nature walk along the way. It's close to home, very close to home. Cause I tried when we first moved back up here, trying to find just a play group, and the only ones I could find were on the other side of the beltway.

Chastity further described the problems with transportation that she had, and also spoke of how important it was that the program was offered in different areas that were close to families' homes,

I was lucky the group that they held was at my apartment complex. So I didn't need transportation…I was lucky enough that they held this group…over at my complex, which is just a matter of walking across. Maybe if it hadn't been close
enough, I tell you I don't drive. I was really stuck. And what's good about the program, they run in different areas…I think that's a great benefit for the parents. Having it "all right there" was another factor that was mentioned by Jessica as being important, "We could walk but mostly I drove. It was right down the street. But most of the people over there either walk or just drive themselves because it's all right there."

Because the program's centers were right in participants' communities, it was helpful for them to access the service that they provided. These locations thus became extensions of their home environments.

Furthermore, a few of the parents also discussed the importance of the connections within the community between the program and the apartment complexes, and the schools as well, in being able to offer locations that were right within their neighborhood areas.

As Amy discussed, the apartment complex helped in leading her to the program. She found that it was one of the best things that could have happened to her, since it assisted her in making this important connection. Amy explained,

Apparently, when we moved into the complex in the rental office with the moving packet that gives a little pamphlet about just the whole group. I think they have Boy Scout meetings down here too. I think they have computers on the other side. You know, stuff like that. I didn't even give it a second thought and then I think it was about last November, I found it when I was going through cleaning out all the junk. Oh, let me call and see what it is. I think it was about the best phone call I've ever made.
Star mentioned that the connection with the school was what led her to the program, “When my son went to school I think they sent home the paper that they have this program, and you can sign up.”

Finally, Chastity talked about the importance of the community connection of having the programs’ being housed right within the apartment complexes themselves. She said,

I thought the community itself was helpful in that the complex provided an apartment and took us there…it was a free apartment. So that's a great community support. If they didn't provide that, you might not be able to reach that area of the community.

Atmospheres are comfortable and homelike. Many participants further described the environment in positive ways stressing the importance of the homelike atmosphere of the apartment sites and the wide-open space of the school-based centers as being particularly effective. For example, Tonya, in describing the apartment environment in particular, shares her thoughts about how the setting feels to her, and the importance of its lay out in giving people the opportunity to be closer together,

It feels more homey. It feels more comforting (in the apartment)…even though it's small, each little area has its own specific purpose. You know blocks, the kitchen and the table with the puzzles and all that. I love the way they set it up though, because it used to be, back there on the tables… it used to be the computer room. We weren't able to use that area back there, you know. The children just spent more time in the kitchen or in the living area, but now that they have that space that's great, because everybody can sit together. So that instead of sitting together
on the floor reading a story, you can all sit together at the table and you know, they can all see the book and...that's where we do arts and crafts...that's great.

Jessica also discussed her perceptions of both the apartment and school environments and described what she believes both have to offer,

I think both of them (school and apartment sites) have their different things that are special. Like in the apartment you have a full kitchen...so you can cook and do all those different things and you're separated into different rooms. It's a lot more homey. It's a little more homey cause you have your comforts of your wall to wall carpet or if you need to go to the bathroom you have a real bathroom that feels like a home bathroom...it's less institutional. Where in here (the school), it's all in one big open space. So if you are in the kitchen area and they (children) wanted to be with their parent they could because they could still see them across the room.

Lee stressed how the apartment provides a comfortable homelike environment, while at the same time functions as a school; a characteristic that she and her child have come to enjoy,

The apartment works out really well. I mean it seems really strange at first to go to an apartment cause Seth calls it "school." And he would say, "This isn't school," (laughs), "This is somebody's house." But the experience of once you get in the apartment it isn't any different then in the school, you kind of forget you're there. It's comfortable, it's cozy; it's really nice.

For Chastity, although she finds the kitchen in the apartments as helpful for completing cooking activities with the children, the school environment provided more of
a sense of connection in having everything in view, and yet still having separate spaces that were more openly connected,

And now the advantage of the apartment would be that they have their own kitchen. Where…we do cooking activities as part of our project. You don't have to go anywhere… but you can do this, you know, if you want to make soup you can do it. Whatever… if you want to bake cookies with the children you do it… Where this classroom (in the school) had it (kitchen) the new one won't…so it will be a little bit different. I mean while it is nicely set and we usually have a two-bedroom apartment that we use…we only use one bedroom. That's the one that has the slide and all that so you can go back there and the children can play. But its all back there and you didn't have to go away from everything. Where here (in the school) you can just see everyone and wherever they move you can see everyone. I think the atmosphere is good (in the school). While the apartment is nice, it had all the same things as the school; it has a kitchen and what not. (In the school) everything has a separate space and still all in view. So it's all right there. If you compare apartments with this, I prefer this (the school).

Some of the parents relayed their perceptions and feelings pertaining to the overall atmosphere of the program, describing what it is like for them to be a part of its environment. Some also shared that the environment felt like home, or gave them a feeling of "family." As Cassie said, “It's like a family…another family.” Amy further shared,

I think the family feeling from it has been a big thing, you know, cause I have a family and I don't get to see them often. But this is a set thing…every
week...you're going this day and it's definitely something we look forward to. It's a good warm fuzzy. (Laughs)

Lisa too described the program's ability to make her feel that she is "part of a family." She noted in her journal,

When I come to the program I feel part of a family. The people that run the program make you feel comfortable and they are concerned about things that are going on with your child.

Star added as well, “We are a family because we talk about private, personal issues.”

Kasey summarized her overall feeling about the program in her journal by describing the pleasure that she and her children acquire from being in an environment that feels like "home." She wrote,

When I come to this program I feel like I am at home. I can sit down and let my kids play and know that they are okay, and I can sit down and talk to different parents and watch our kids play together. Being in this program is a time that I really enjoy and look forward to that day coming. I and my kids wish that this program was more than one day a week. When you are there it goes by so fast. I just feel so good about us going there.

In their journals, Julie and Jessica wrote about the program in terms of the color that each felt best described the program's environment. Julie emphasized the cheerfulness of the setting when she wrote, “The color that would best describe my experience in the program would be purple, a bright, cheery purple. The program is such a happy, cheerful place to be - purple would be the only color for it.”
Jessica emphasized the program's feeling of warmth when she chose the color yellow to describe it, “The color that best describes my experience in the group as both a parent and an assistant would be yellow. I think yellow signifies a warm friendly environment which is what I have always felt when I am here.”

Furthermore, Yuki and Amy felt that the environment gave them a sense of feeling safe. As Yuki shared, “In program I feel safe. Everybody watch each child. It's comfortable for me and other parents.”

And Amy stated too, “It was just a safe feeling…I mean no one is going to let her go running around in the parking lot loose by herself. I know that everybody else is looking out for the best interest of everybody else.”

Finally, Samantha described the program as being like a circle that has many facets that make it into a unifying whole. She said,

You can't have, you know, the beginning of this (the program) without the end or the end without the beginning, because without all the parts it's not going to work. It's more of a circle…it's not… it's where everything's…working together. It's not like parts of a block or something like that. Just coming in…then the parent, the kids and parents playing on the floor together. Kids, you know, going right to the kitchen area. You have certain kids who just want, you know, one specific thing. The parents bonding…you know, you'll have a couple of parents, you know, who click right off, and seeing that, especially if it's a couple of parents that you don't think would talk typically outside of this room. Then you know, everybody coming together and doing art and the parent discussion. ALL of that makes up this program…they work together and they make this who it is, what it is.
Parents’ overall perceptions of the centers' environments were positive. The descriptions of the atmospheres validate the importance participants placed on the comfort they experienced. As discussed, the design and lay out of both the school and apartment settings were also appealing and inviting to families. The program's atmosphere was described as warm, cheery, and homelike. The idea of it being like "family" was revealed as being beneficial as well for participants. And as Samantha explained, the program is like a circle, a unifying whole.

In sum, parents' descriptions of the importance of the program's embedded locations in their communities, comfortable and homelike atmospheres assisted them in being participants in an environment that was an extension of the home. All of these qualities were of value in influencing many parents' participation in the program.

*Cultivates Support for the Parent-Child Relationship*

All of the participants in the study discussed the program's ability in assisting them in cultivating support for their relationships with their children. Many parents described the essential components of the parent discussion group, and their conversations with program and staff in enriching their parenting roles. Major themes that emerged from their narratives included hearing and sharing other parenting viewpoints and stories, receiving validation and reassurance, dealing with separation anxiety, wanting and learning to become better parents, and encouraging time for parent and child. All parents felt strongly about one or more of these areas as being an essential component that influenced their participation in the program.

*Hearing and sharing parenting viewpoints and stories.* Many parents discussed this facet of the program as a critical entity that assisted them in their roles as parents. To
be able to share ideas with others that were experiencing similar problems was important, and to obtain others' views on how to handle challenges was seen as highly beneficial.

Karen felt that it was important to be able to share ideas with others since there was no "booklet on parenting." She shared,

You need other people to help you to know you're fine and you're doing things right because there's no booklet in parenting.(Laughs). They don't tell you, you know, how to do it and there's this way and that way. To have other people, you know, help you and for you to help them. You know, exchange ideas that would help.

Amy talked about how important it to "bounce things back and forth." As she described,

We've all been there or something. Everybody has a little different experience with whatever they're dealing with. But someone else has had something similar and you can bounce things back and forth. "Well, I tried this but it didn't work, but it might work for you."

Samantha shared a similar feeling when she said that the discussion group helped her to acquire "more of a bouncing board type situation." She added, “A lot of times other parents would have the same issues and problems. And they'd seem to fix things themselves by hearing others. You can get ideas how to fix it or help it along.”

Julie added that the discussions were particularly valuable for her as well in helping her to look at her options from many perspectives,

The discussion topics…I live for them. I walk away with so much. I like to get a perspective from everywhere, whether it's parenting or otherwise. I like to get a
whole bunch of thoughts about it and come to an educated decision. It's just been nice hearing everybody else's advice.

Jessica thought similarly, “When the different situations come up, I can think about what other people have told me, how they dealt with it, and then I can just go from there…how I'm going to deal with it, or what we're going to do.” And Massa shared as well, “We discuss when the kids are playing…everybody participate…we learn from each other.”

Rebecca felt it was important to hear from others in the discussion group, who also had children about the same age, about their views on raising children. She shared, The discussion…I like that. To see what everybody else is doing to raise their children…to see what can help about raising a child. You come all together with children the same ages as yours and the parents can talk to you about things…parents can get together and share their stories about child development.

Kasey, Yuki, Cassie, Karen, Amy, Lisa, Star and Michelle all felt that being able to obtain ideas from others was important, and discussed specific issues that they hoped to acquire help with, or had already gained some assistance in dealing with through the discussion group. For example, Kasey said,

They can give you different ideas…things like to raise your kid or things you may have trouble on…to get ideas from that. I might talk to them, or something… see if their child had the same problems that my child is having or how they deal with it. What is gonna be the most important right now, I want them to be potty trained…potty training…something that I would need help, because he is 3 years old and I still can't get him to do it.
Yuki felt similarly about the same topic, “You can talk with parents…how to raise children. Sometimes I don't understand what to do, so parents talking helps. I ask sometime about potty training, how to do, I ask other parents…other parents help too.”

Cassie felt that learning different ways to discipline was important. She said,

I like to listen how they discipline. I try to see if it works at home; and then I do it the same way the other parents do. I ask their opinion and they give me some answers - what I should do or who I should go to.

Amy shared some similar feelings as well,

We all spend a lot of time on discipline. They're toddlers and they're psychotic. (Laughs). But we all sit there you know…well this is what we did to try to get her to stop hitting. And then for awhile my child spent three weeks eating nothing but applesauce and the doctor can tell me that's normal if she wants, but it's nice to hear it from other moms…we talk about different topics that drive us completely insane (Laughing). I get to talk to people who really care that she hasn't gone potty (or that) she keeps me up all night.

Karen too talked about a few topics that she recalled as being significant for her,

Another thing we would talk about was "choose your battles." Now, I try to tell my husband that. (Laughs). Why yell because their shoes are on the wrong feet? They're the ones walking in them. That's not a good battle, just leave it, let 'em go.

We talked about picky eating, potty training, and a lot of stuff. We just talk about it and enforce it more. And then you pick up a little - tidbits here and there. We talked about everything… from runny noses to running rears. (Laughs).
Star reflected on the benefits of being able to hear and share different opinions.

She said,

I like it because everybody has a different opinion. And even if you have a
different opinion, in the end you come to the same solution. It's like, if you think
the solution is to spank your kids and then from other mother(s) you can learn, no,
ignore your child…or overwhelm them with love…is better than spanking. So
you learn from each parent a different quality.

Finally, Michelle felt that there was valuable insight that she gained from the
discussions with other parents, even though things did not turn out for her as she had
hoped. She stated,

It taught me not to have no more kids. And here I got pregnant again. (Laughs).
We were talking about, like after I had my last one…I really didn't want no more
and I should have taken care of it, and we all talked about it. They said, if you
don't do something, it's going to happen (Laughs).

Chastity, Tonya, Samantha, Star and Jessica all liked the thought of being able to
use what they heard in discussions that was valuable, and then being able to discard the
rest. For example, in reference to the discussion topic of "time out" Chastity said,

The parents' discussion groups are so very important. As soon as I entered the
program I learned you can speak to children. You don't have…you know…there
are other ways, and that "time out" could work. Some kids like time out because
you send them to their room and then they can play there. (Laughs). Now my son
didn't like it because he didn't like being isolated from the family. That was for
him a time to go up and get himself settled. And it does work for some and it
doesn't work for others. You take with you what you could, and if it doesn't work for you, you let it go.

Tonya also shared, “I feel as though it's what you take out of it. If the parent wants to get something out of it they're going to get something out of it. If they don't, then they don't.” Samantha similarly said, “(In the program) learning about parenting (is important)...whether I was going to use it or not, but at least learning that there were other options out there and how to use them.” And as Star stated, "You can get advice from anybody but it doesn't mean you follow." Lastly, Jessica expressed her feelings on this as well, “I always think about everything (that) anybody tells me. (Laughs). I don't always agree, but I'm open to everybody's opinion. Actually, (even) if you don't agree with it, it gives you a starting block.”

Some of the parents also spoke of the value they felt in being able to give assistance to others in the group by sharing their viewpoints, or just listening to other parents during the discussions. Karen talked about the fact that she was already finished with dealing with certain issues, so she listened to others when they brought up various topics. She said, “I was done with that (potty training) so you know, I just sat and listened, because I didn't have that problem, because he was older and he was potty trained at the time…thank God. And the picky eating…”

Jessica also said that in addition to listening, she liked to try to be of help. She shared, “I always think the sleep issues are interesting because I’ve never had 'em with my children. I always enjoy just sitting back and just hearing what other people's problems are and trying to help them with them.” Similarly, Samantha shared, “It was
nice to hear about everything. There were some things that I had already gone through with him. There were two younger children there, so I was able to give some opinions.”

Lee too discussed this same idea, “I feel helpful, by putting in, you know, ‘I've put two kids through that situation that you're having and this is what I did.’ It makes you feel like you're helpful (chuckles), a helpful part of the group.

Tonya, who is the parent of several children, expressed her thoughts about listening more than trying to actually obtain help with problems since she felt she had more experience,

Well, the discussion… I think it's helpful for those parents who don't know. But I - parenting is all I do, that's just all I do. If I don't know, I'm going to ask somebody. I'll question something, you know? The parental discussion is not… it doesn't benefit me. You know what I mean? But it does give me a chance to offer different advice and give resolutions to the other parents.

For Star, who identified herself as one of the older mothers in the group, being able to help those who were younger and less experienced was also important to her. She said,

It sounds funny, but for my culture (German), we raise children differently. And the way I am, because I was older when I had my children, was a little wiser. Last year the group was all young girls. So they learned from my experience.

It was clearly evident from many participants' narratives that they valued hearing and sharing parenting viewpoints and stories. Parents were able to acquire newly formed perspectives, and to discuss their many thoughts and experiences in an environment that was supportive of their common issues and concerns.
Receiving validation and reassurance. In addition to acquiring ideas and information from each other, many participants spoke of the benefits of feeling validated and reassured in their roles as parents within the program's environment. To know that they were not alone in the challenges they faced in child rearing was important.

Karen and Rebecca both described that being with the other parents in the program helped them to realize that they weren't abnormal; and that other parents too were experiencing many of the same challenges that they faced. As Karen said,

I got out personally and spoke with other moms and found out they had similar problems as to what I was having. And we were all like, "Yeah!" That I'm normal, just like any other mom. I'm not, you know, crazy like I thought I was. (Laughs).

Rebecca too, felt similarly,

It (the program) taught me that I'm not crazy, that other parents experience the same things. It's just things children go through. It's nothing that you've done to make things happen. If it's just, I'm not having a good day or something, like everything's going wrong. And you feel you're a terrible mother and everything.

You can come here and know that some of the stuff's going on with them.

Karen, Rebecca, Chastity, Jessica, Lee, Cassie, and Julie also expressed the importance of not feeling alone as parents. They shared that being with other parents in the program reassured them that they were not isolated. They also felt it was important to be with others who shared the same problems. Karen stated, “But you know I'm amongst other moms with the same problems. That helped me a lot because I thought I was just like all by myself. That I was the only one who felt the way I felt. (Laughs).”
Rebecca wrote some similar thoughts too in her journal, “When I come to this program I feel good, happy, that I am not alone because some of the parents are going through some of the things that I am going through with my child.”

For Chastity, realizing that she was not the only one who experienced various issues in parenting was important to her. She said, “And me being a stay at home mom gave me a chance to also …hear about issues and be able (to) address them and get feedback from other people. You were not the only one going through it.”

Jessica too discussed how being with other parents in the program helps in realizing that others share the same problems. She said,

A lot of the times you come in here and think, I'm doing it all wrong (laughs). And then after you talk to somebody you realize, hey, you know what, I do this better than that person; or that person might do something better than me. We're not doing anything wrong we're just doing it our way. Just hearing everybody else's horror stories and…that I wasn't alone. And if you think you don't need any help with anything you're going to come here and hear other people talk and then think, "Oh I do have that problem."

Cassie talked about this as well, “I say I have problems as well. I just tell them (other parents) I have the same problems. They're going through the same thing I'm going through.”

Julie relayed a story of personal support that she received from others in the program during a difficult period in her life. She also gained reassurance in not being alone with her problems, especially from one parent in the group. She said,
The year before last this (program) was my saving grace. I was going through a difficult pregnancy with my third, and I had two little boys. I had some potential problems with the baby. It was a lot on me. I was just drifting through it like a fog. This was my saving grace. Something I knew I had every week. I had good friends here. I came in, sat down and was able to talk and discuss the pregnancy. There were two of us pregnant at the same time. She was also having difficulty too. We discussed issues with the pregnancy and raising the children, the exhaustion of it all. It was my lifesaver for that year. I think emotionally I was having a lot of issues.

Knowing too, that there were parents in the group who had children the same age (or close to the same age) and who were going through the same developmental stages as their children were was also helpful for some of the parents. They could be reassured that not only were their children experiencing various growth patterns according to their age, but that other parents' children were experiencing these issues as well. The fact too that the parents were all sharing these experiences together was helpful. As Amy said,

We can all interact. The kids are all going through the same type of things. And the parents are going through the same type of things. Or, they've been there. So, it's nice that everybody's in the same stages. You know, to have other people in the same stages or some of the kids are a little younger than her, some were a couple of months older. But that, other parents… are going through the same thing I am.
Lisa shared a similar thought,

And… you know that I think being able to talk to other parents - you know that you're… got something in common with somebody else and that you know the children are all doing the same thing. Like when Ben has a temper tantrum you know, I'm embarrassed and I feel like I'm the only one that's ever went through that but…they've all been there.

For Lee, this feeling was shared as well. She said,

You don't really wonder if you are the only one, you just assume you are. "Oh my kid has got to be the worst kid!" But you know…you find out other people's kids do the same exact thing. They feel the same exact way. That they get angry too, that they get tired or they get stressed. It makes you feel a lot better as a woman, as a person, as a mom.

Jessica too felt that being with other parents who had children who were at the same developmental level as her child was helpful. She gained reassurance from others in the group when she thought that her child should have been walking at an earlier age, even though her child did actually learn to walk at 17 months, which is still within the normal range. She explained,

And then my youngest…my daughter didn't, she didn't walk when most other children walked. So that was helpful for me cause I could hear from other parents that she was fine. I had problems dealing with the fact that she didn't walk at 12 months or 11 months, or whatever it was. So they really helped me a lot with that. They kept reminding me, "Well, she is tiny and you do carry her everywhere," because she was so small.
Two parents spoke also of the staff's ability to reassure them and to help them to feel better about themselves as parents. There are no directions for how to parent and there, "isn't a right way and a wrong way" of how to do things with your child.

Rebecca and Julie both described how the staff assisted them in feeling better about themselves in this capacity by giving them meaningful feedback or guidance. Rebecca discussed,

They don't come with a manual. You might think that you're doing the right thing. I guess there really isn't a right way and a wrong way. There's just doing the best that you can to raise the child. You can ask questions and they (staff) answer your questions…they help you feel better about things.

Julie shared her feelings as well,

Joyce is one… you can tell her anything without fear or judgment. She's just…even if you did the worst thing as a parent she could tell you, "Maybe what you did was wrong but I can understand…but, I can see why you did it that way." No judgment from her whatsoever…(I felt) validated as a parent.

Lastly, Julie also summed up her thoughts about feeling validated by the program when she wrote in her journal, “When I leave the program at the end of the session I feel validated and empowered. Being a mother is at times a thankless job, and (this program) makes me feel appreciated.”

To be reassured and validated was an essential benefit for many parents in the program. To realize that they were not the only ones who were experiencing various challenges helped them to feel that they were not alone in their parenting roles.

Furthermore, they were able to understand that the behaviors of their children were often
similar and developmentally sound; and that if they made mistakes as parents that it was okay; they were still doing a good job as parents.

_Dealing with separation anxiety._ Separation between parent and child is a particularly stressful experience during the infant, toddler, and preschool years. Often, not only does the child feel anxious and sad when the parent leaves him or her temporarily, but the parent sometimes experiences anxiety about this separation as well. Parent and/or child personality can be a contributing factor to this issue too. Some parents discussed how the program assisted them in handling this experience more comfortably for both themselves and their children.

During the program parents and children are together in the setting with each other; parents described how this type of environment assisted their children in separating more easily. As Lisa said,

I think its good that they can all play together at first (during the program)... kind of like a warm-up kind of thing. If we were to come in and be separated in the very beginning, I think he would be more clingy to me.

Chastity described the value of the program for her child as well,

I think he _learned_ to be independent in the program, because it was just he and I at home. Even now you can see he will go and play and he will come back, but he'll play. "I can see Mom, but I can play and still see Mom!" (Laughs).

Samantha added,

I loved it that way (the way the program was designed so parent and child could see each other) because he has some separation anxiety...did and still does. So, it was really good to have him check in.
Karen also shared about her two children,

And I know it helped them so when they started school they weren't scared to death. Because my one son, Jack, he was here and in Pre-K at the same time and I think it helped him because he was very shy, a clinger; he was on my leg. So it's helped him a whole lot… he still didn't want me to leave the first few days but now he loves it. He goes to school all by himself. And Christopher also. He just started Pre-K and he was here two years…two and a half years.

For Lee, the program was helpful for her child in making a gradual separation.

She said,

It seemed to be helping a little when Seth and I first started (the program). He would…he would go play. And then he would come over and like, sit with me and not want to leave and play with the rest of the kids. Then slowly he got to where he knew I was going to be there…this (program) was good for that. I just think we needed a little more. Maybe if we started earlier…or something like that.

Lastly, Jessica wrote in her journal about the positive experience she had concerning her child's growing comfort level in the program, “The strongest or warmest experience I had in the group was when my daughter finally stayed in play without me for the entire parent discussion. I felt like we had finally made progress with her separation anxiety.”

In addition to helping their children separate, Karen, Lee and Chastity described how it helped them as parents to separate from the children as well. As Karen said,

Jack and Christopher were off to the side (during program) but I could see them, so I knew they were okay. But I still had my own time (in parent group). And that
made them a little more independent away from me, and yet they were right there in the same room.

Lee discussed this too,

The practice of him separating…for me, I mean that's one of the things I told them (staff) that's pretty important. 'Cause… I'm close to all my kids and between Kelly and Seth there's a big difference. She's ten; she was my baby, and then when I had him, she was in school. He was the focus of my attention. So, that's another one I'm not looking forward to sending off to school. So, it (the program) helped both of us…that aspect of the separation a little bit during class when I actually could leave.

And for Chastity separation for her was also an issue,

I think I had more issues leaving him than he had. (Laughs). Because a lot of what they have here (in the program) now is at school. So, it's not so new. He is not walking in the classroom and like, "Wow!" You know a lot of what they have in this room particularly they have…just like in school. I tell you I had more issues than he did (laughs). I rode the bus with him for like three days (laughs). And I was worried about it because he and I were home alone all the time together. Until his brothers would come home from school. I was worried that when it was time to push him off he doesn't want to go off. But he did.

Lisa also described how discussions with either the staff or other parents helped her to deal with the separation issue.

I was having a problem because I'm a stay at home mom and as far as leaving the house my son would have separation anxiety. And Diana was giving me
suggestions on how to calm his fears when I left the house. And you know, what she told me to do is explain to him, you know, that I am leaving and I would be back and I did and it worked better. Before that, I was trying to sneak out of the house in the evenings. So that has helped a lot. If I tell him that he may cry for just a second, but he knows that I'm going to come back. Before I was just sneaking out of the house and not saying anything; so I was gone. So even if I wanted to go to the bathroom, he was like right on me because he didn't think that I was going to come back out. There's another parent that her child just started a 3 year-old program and she's talking about the separation anxiety and how you know she felt so bad when she would walk away and he'd be screaming. And right now with Ben I can't drop him off at daycare or anything like that…he screams and carries on to the point where he throws up. So we we’re discussing, you know, what she's been doing. You know, afterwards she would take him to McDonald's, or like tell him if he has a good day at school… things like that.

Parents’ descriptions of how they learned, or how their children learned, to deal with separation was another facet of the program that was beneficial for several of this study's participants. Separation anxiety was at times difficult for their children, and at other times was even challenging for the women as mothers. Separation issues were discussed sensitively and supportively with and among parents within the context of the program.

*Learning to become better parents.* Many participants in the study also spoke of their desires to learn, or what they had already learned, in becoming better parents. They either spoke of wanting to learn new skills or how to interact more positively with their
children; or they discussed the fact that they wanted to learn to become better parents than their own parents were to them.

Yuki, Michelle, Chastity, Rebecca, Cassie, Masa, Amy, Lisa, Samantha, Karen, and Kasey mentioned ways that they would like to learn, or have already learned, to be better parents to their children from the program. As Yuki shared, “(I wanted to) learn more of what to do with child in parents' meeting - how to raise child, study about child rearing. It's a very good program. They (have) got a lot of studies.”

Chastity added that the program actually helped her learn more than she expected. She wrote in her journal,

When I came to this program I felt like I was learning a couple different positive parenting roles. At first you think you are just giving your child an opportunity at socialization. Before I knew it I was getting something out of it too.

For Rebecca, to learn specific information about child development was important to her. She stated in her journal,

I like to talk to other parents and teachers and listen to them about the way children act, play, and learn at the age of 3 and at other ages so I can get an idea of what I can expect. I know that children develop at different paces and that no child is alike. I just want to get an idea about what to expect at different stages of development.

Cassie talked about the importance for her in learning how to be a "good parent" when she said,

I picked out this place because they helped me understand more about parenting. Learning how to be a good parent. Learning how to correct the right way. Doing
things, you know how a mother should be there. How to teach Michael to get along with other children. Parent discussion...how you discipline, how you do the right thing. That was the hardest thing to do. I didn't know how to discipline Michael. He likes to do anything he wants to do. That's what I'd let him do. Now, he's more structured.

For Masa, this was true as well. She stated, “(I learned about) being a good parent...they touch (on) everything.”

Amy explained that she is learning how to manage situations with her child in different ways. She shared,

I'm looking at situations and how I'm trying to handle them and...I see a big change. Before I'd let her play play-dough and I would do the dishes. Then, the play dough's in the carpet, on the wall, and I'm freaking out and screaming at her. And I'm like, well, if I do this first then I can sit with you and we'll do it together...so that's been good. (I've learned also) - calm down she's only 3. (Laughs). Like my husband looks at her like when we go to the mall, and she starts throwing a fit, like she wants to go on the carousel horse. We say, well we can't. Sometimes we don't have three dollars...to ride the carousel horse. So we tell her we don't have enough money. Then she threw a fit and my husband says, "Okay, that's it, let's just leave." And I'm like, "No, I'm out of the house, I'm out at the mall; I'm staying at the mall. If she wants to cry and scream she can...I don't care. But I'm not giving in."
Lisa too shared that she has learned "a better way of doing things." She said,

I think this program has shown me more that… I have a habit now of looking at
like my friend and think…"Why are you doing that?" and it might be right for her,
but you know I can see now a better way of doing things.

Samantha said that she learned to let her child create his own artwork without her
interference. She explained,

I learned (about) keeping my hands off of his art. That was hard for me because
I'm the perfectionist and I wanted everything to be perfect and I learned…and it
wasn't easy. Diana would yell at me and say, let him do it…and that was always
great!

Kasey wrote in her journal about the importance of learning from others in the
group. She noted, “When all of the parents sit at the table and talk about different things
maybe it's something that I need to know about.”

For Amy, Samantha, Star, and Tonya it was important for them to learn to
become different parents than their own parents. As Amy discussed,

It's (program) had a definitely guiding influence…which way to go; because I
think a year ago, I think we were going down the wrong path, with the way we
were dealing with her as far as discipline and stuff like that. I think it's been a
guiding force. It's definitely been that, a big learning experience. I saw what my
parents did with me and my brother and I said I don't want to do that… I had a lot
of problems with the discipline, but I like that I got so many more options from
being here, 'cause I was running out of options. I don't want to hit… my father hit
- belts. There was a lot of screaming and yelling when I was little. It was
traumatic. It's still traumatic. I don't want her to have to grow up like that. I don't want her growing up thinking it's normal. I grew up thinking it was normal.

Samantha also discussed how she wanted to learn to parent differently, particularly with regard to discipline too. She explained,

I knew I wanted to parent differently than I was parented. Discipline was one because…I was raised, you know, with the paddle…spanking and things like that. So I was trying very hard not to do that. Prior to the group I didn't always know how to…but, during the group I learned “time out” or you know consequences and things like that. So it just opened me up to other experiences and other options.

Star shared her story of how she wants to be a different parent to her children as well. Being there for her children was important to her, and the program helped her to make up her mind about this. She said,

The program helps you because you learn. If you don't have experience with raising kids it's good to get information about what other mothers do by raising their kids. And you can make up your mind if this is what you want to do or not. My mother had three kids and was a single mother. She was not home, so I want to be there for my kids. She was never around. I would go to Grandmother's and she would watch us. She was never there.

Tonya discussed why it is so important for her to come to the program with her children, in order to offer them something better than what her parents offered her. She shared,
A lot of times, oh my God, I have to get up early (to come to program)…oh, I don't want to do this, but it's for them. I want my children…because I wasn't raised the way I feel as though they (my parents) should have raised me. I try to raise my children, you know, differently. I want them to be educated and happy and smart. I also want them to give their opinion. My children are my world…I want them to voice their opinions. I thought all I wanted to do was speak…it's just eating me inside. I want them to express themselves. I know…that my parents didn't do for me what I feel that parents should have. So, that right there teaches me. I use them right there as learning experiences. What could I do to change things? What could I do to make things better for my children? So they don't feel that way.

For several of the participants, to learn newer or different ways of parenting was important. As each of these parents shared, the program assisted them in looking at various options for becoming better parents.

*Encouraging time for parent and child.* Some of the parents talked about other programs that were available in the area, but they said that none had the parent discussion group in combination with the playgroup for young children that this program offers. Within the context of this program, parents are encouraged to play with their children for the first hour of the two-hour session. During the second hour, children are supervised by some of the staff assistants, while the parents participate in a discussion time with the program director/parent program coordinator. This is a simultaneous operation that engages both parent and child. Some programs in the community offer family support
services, but do so separately, either having something for the children or something for the adults.

Five of the parents, Rebecca, Chastity, Kasey, Star, and Michelle all said that they had not heard of other programs like this one. Being together with their children in this environment on a regular weekly basis, fostered opportunities for quality time to be spent between parent and child.

For example, Rebecca referred the program to other parents that she met and described it as being valuable, since it is one that involves both parents and children together. She said,

I don't know of any (other programs like this). I just think it’s a good program for parents and children. When I was at the park there was a couple there with a child and they asked me if there were any programs around and I told them about this center. That it was a good program and that it was for the children and the parents.

Chastity also added that she had not heard of any other programs that had the parent discussion group. She stated

I haven't heard of a program like that (with a discussion group). I've heard there's a "Mommy and Me" program. It's probably more free play and not so much structure.

And Michelle shared as well, “This (program for parents and young children) is the only one around here. It's the only one I know of.”

Karen and Lisa both discussed the importance of being able to attend a program with their children, which also includes the discussion group, and sees this aspect as a
positive component for the parents. Karen described another program that is for both parents and children but states that it lacks the discussion that she prefers,

There's (name of another area) they have a tot center, like a co-op thing for the parents to do, to volunteer to help every so often… I've not ever been there but I've heard of, about other parents using it. But I think it's more child oriented, but it's not for the child and parent. I guess I would more prefer being in something where they had a parent and child, and you know, we had parent discussion. I would prefer that more than just… I mean that would be good for the child, to be able to play with, 'cause the tot center is more based on children of the same ages. I mean Jack would enjoy that better, but for me…

Lisa described other groups that serve a different purpose, a gymnastics program for her child, which she also attended, and a language support group that she brings her child to as well. But for Lisa, like Karen, she emphasized the importance in having the discussion time that this program offers. She said,

We've been to Gymboree and… Ms. Smith has a language group that we attend on Mondays… that's a little bit different, they don't have a parent group… that wasn't a bad program but I like that the parents get to have a discussion here.

Lee added that this program offers her the chance to connect with other parents in ways that other programs that she has attended (with the exception of the PTA which is geared more towards families with school-aged children) are unable to do,

Really, only, I've met other parents through the PTA. We go to a meeting and all our kids play together, you know, but that's it. Really, there are no official groups that I know of, similar to this. In the beginning, when it was just me and Kelly, it
was just her and myself. It would have been nice if there were a group like this
when Kelly was little. We were living in (another county) and were living with
Rick's mom and we would take advantage of programs like, “Pregnant Women
and Children” because we needed assistance. We had WIC for awhile and things
like that. But they never made us aware of any countywide program like this. It
would have been nice.

Jessica too felt that groups such as the PTA and Recreation Councils in the area
involved parents, but not in the way this program does in giving parents the chance to
interact in an environment together with their children. Jessica also stated that there was
another program that is similar to this, but it addresses the needs of families with older
children, whereas this program was more for families with younger children. She
explained,

Not that I know of (is there a program like this). I mean unless you want to get
involved with the PTA. Then your Rec. Councils, but that's not really parent and
child interaction, it's more you're bringing your child there. Yeah, because mostly
the Rec. Council is sports and everything for the kids. FACT (Families and
Children Together) reminded me a lot of this. 'Cause I know a lot of the
discussions were the same only geared towards the older child, where here it is
grounded the younger child.

Samantha further described other programs in the area that offered services more
for the parent than for the child, but discussed them as being different because the
children are not together with the parents in the same area,
I have been told that CHADD has something similar to it (the program) and that's
with children with ADHD, but I have not been involved in anything like that as of
yet. I don't think it's together. I think it's more parents talking about their children
and their issues and I'm not sure if children are actually involved in the program. I
think…there's something they do at (name of another program) where the parents
come and the kids come but parents are taking GED courses while the kids are
still in the same building and they provide daycare, but it's still not the same
because they're still in separate rooms.

Amy noted too in her journal a unique facet of the program, one that gives her as
a parent the chance to connect with other parents' children. Amy writes, “When I come to
this program I like to get down on the floor and play with the children. Not just my own,
but whatever one's closest to me. I like seeing all of the children playing and learning.”

Some of the parents also described the environment as being one that promoted
opportunities for them as parents to spend quality time with their children. Chastity, Amy
and Julie described how amidst their busy lives, the program's environment encourages
them to spend time focusing on just their children by fostering interaction and
connection. As Chastity revealed,

I've found that a lot of times when you're at home…you're thinking…I've got to
clean this or I've got to clean that. And a lot of the time, more time than you'd
like, you would leave the child to play alone or watch TV while you cleaned or
you scurried, and you did this errand or did that errand. And you would play with
him for awhile…but I found in the program, I learned to play with him more. I
learned to sit with him…when I came to the program…there weren't any dishes
there! (Laughs). There wasn't a bathroom to clean. You came to the program and it's just about you and him.

Amy too felt that while in the program she could turn away from all of the tasks she had to complete and focus only on her child. She wrote in her journal,

I feel relieved because I know that for 2 hours I can push everything else out of my head and focus solely on my daughter. I don't have to worry about cleaning laundry piles, bills that have to be paid, car repairs etc. It's special time for us just to learn and have fun…it also makes me wish that my mother could have spent time with me like this when I was little. I think that's what I enjoy the most about the program - the quality time.

Julie also shared these same types of thoughts,

With the program we are encouraged to sit down and play with our kids. That's the main focus of the program. You kinda come away from the program wanting to do better as a mother. It helps you remember because you get so caught up in the day to day. I have two "To Do" lists running at all times—one for home and one for work. And they're both weighing heavily. It helps me to remember "To Do" lists can wait…

As can be seen from parents' comments, the unique setting that this program offers was valuable to several of the participants. Most family programs do not have something that encourages parent interaction, such as the discussion group that this program boasts. Providing this entity within the program gave participants the chance to interact with others in desirable ways by bringing both parents and children together within the programs' contexts. This fostered a sense of community by providing
opportunities for parents and their children to be a part of an environment that supports the family together as a whole, and gives parents a chance to spend quality time with their children.

In sum, as analysis of the data revealed, the program was influential in its ability to cultivate support for the parent-child relationship. Parent participants in the study expressed the importance of being able to hear and share parenting viewpoints and stories within the context of the program. Many further described the essential value of finding reassurance and validation in their roles as parents from other program participants. The fact too, that the program assisted some parents with issues involving separation anxiety was beneficial. Parents shared stories of how the program influenced their thoughts about wanting and learning to become better parents. Lastly, the structure of the program itself, where parents and children have opportunities to participate together, encouraged quality time for interaction. These factors contributed significantly to parents' desires to be involved in the program.

*Creates a Healthy Environment for Children*

All of the participants in the study discussed the importance of the children's participation in the program. Many parents described the setting as an ideal place for their children to flourish. Two main themes emerged from their stories regarding their children's involvement. First, parents discussed the program's ability to foster social interaction opportunities for their children with other children. Second, they described the structured environment that offers learning activities for them as being important as well.

*Fosters opportunities for social interaction.* Almost all of the parents discussed the benefits of the program in providing social interaction for their children as being a
crucial motivational force that contributed to their participation. Parents discussed the importance of their children's opportunities to connect with other children, to make friends that were otherwise unavailable through family or community, and to get used to being with other children in preparation for school.

Several parents specifically described the need for their children to have others to play and socialize within a child-oriented environment.

Samantha talked about her son's need to have others to interact with since he was an only child. She stated,

I was a day care mom, and I had one other child. Occasionally, I had…every once in awhile…I had another one. But… since it was just the two of them it became more like brothers. And so that wasn't always a positive, you know? So, it was nice for him to see people that he wasn't seeing on a regular basis…to learn how to interact with other children. It was the fact that it was just "an out" for my son…he was an only child…someplace for him to be with other children…learn some things, whether it be good or bad.

Chastity too was dealing with a similar situation. She shared, “So, he was the only one at home, kind of like he was an only child. To bring him to these groups gave him a chance to socialize with other children.” Lisa also discussed that this was the only social opportunity for her child. She said,

I think that it has helped him socially…you know, being around other kids, and even with his language. And you know, I tell him he is going to school and we'll go over the names of the kids in his group…so that he can remember them. I think
it's good for him to be around other kids and you know they do little activities. I really like it…this is really the only time that he gets any real peer interaction.

Lee also felt similarly,

Well, it's an opportunity for Seth to interact with other kids that he might not normally be able to. My daughter is school age so she goes to school all day. It's just him and I until my youngest son was born. This is an opportunity for him to play with other kids.

Several parents also described the benefits of the program in giving their children a chance to be with children their own ages. As Karen said,

The reason I was coming back was because my children enjoyed it for one. And they had other children to play with other than their siblings at home, close to the same age.

Amy felt similarly,

I love that my daughter gets to play with children her own age, and how she learns from watching them and teaches by showing them. Best of all, I love that she has her very first best friend. I enjoy watching her interact with the other children. Also, for the experience it's given my daughter. It's one thing to get a toddler to share with parents it's a whole different thing to get a toddler to share with other toddlers!

Jessica also shared the same thoughts,

Well, for me, it was the fact that my child had other children to play with in and around her age group. She didn't have playmates and things like that so I just needed her to get into something where she could have somebody to play with.
And for Tonya this was true as well,

I wanted to find something...because they're too little to go to school. I needed to find something to give them interaction with other children. They're interacting with children their own age. They're seeing children their own ages, you know, are getting into...what they're interested in.

For other parents, the socialization opportunities in the program gave their children needed preparation for school. As Michelle discussed,

I think the most important is that the kids get to interact with other kids, so they can know other children. So that will give them a chance to get used to other kids when we come...to get him prepared for school, for being around other little kids.

For Kasey this was also essential,

I signed up because I figured it was somethin' for my kids to do once a week, you know? But they really didn't have nobody to play with when school was in. So I tried it, to see what it was gonna be like. I wasn't sure what it was gonna be (laughs)...what I was signing up for... 'cause I just thought it was something for the kids. I just wanted them to like, get in and things, and sharing and playing with other kids. You know, and doing different projects that they do. I just wanted 'em to start doing stuff. So when they (get) to go to school they'll know how to share toys and play with other kids. At that time...before they came in, they really wasn't good at sharin'.

Cassie felt that the socialization opportunities in the program were helpful for her children because they needed something for them beyond the family or home environment. As she said,
The program is nice place to have, to go to. You meet other parents and the children meet other children...they interact and play with them. I like my children to be with other children. They're stuck with my other kids, and I like them with kids their own ages.

For Masa and Yuki it was beneficial that their children were exposed to opportunities in learning to share, As Masa stated, “It is really helping me now...Dante is learning how to share with his brother. This is the only group I have.” And as Yuki wrote in her journal, “Kids play together and they can learn how to communicate with other kids. And how to learn about clean(ing) up toys too. (It) teach(s) them to share and play together.”

Finally, Jessica expressed the importance of having her children socialize with children from various backgrounds. She stated in her journal, “I also liked to see my daughter interact with children of different backgrounds that we might not have met otherwise.”

It is evident from parents' comments that socialization for their children was an essential factor that also influenced their participation. For these participants, having these opportunities was extremely valuable.

Offers activities in a structured environment. Almost all of the participants also spoke of the fact that they were appreciative of the program's ability in providing a structured atmosphere for the children that offered stability and a chance for them to learn, play, and grow.
Michelle wrote in her journal about how all of the activity within the program reminded her of the color green. She noted, “The color green is what I would describe. This program is always on the go. New activities each week - children having fun.”

Amy described the importance of the program's environment, and all that it has to offer her child. She shared,

I think the activities with the other kids, you know, the playtime and the arts and crafts, and then they have something to bring home, which is always nice...our wall is decorated even still from last year...all her art-work is up on the wall...I like the craft time and they have some different crafts that I haven't seen. So...again we can go home and make something else like we made at school. It all goes together very nice. I think it's a great program. It's been a really great thing to open up the world and give me more options on how to show her how to do things and ways to help her to learn.

Lisa and Tonya discussed the value of structure being offered within the program. As Lisa shared,

Well, the fact that there are other children there that he is able to play with and learn to share and they read them stories and they do little craft activities, which is letting him experiment with other textures. Being able to get out of the house and knowing that it's structured and knowing that he is learning something while he's playing.

Tonya also said,

It's safe, comfortable, and they're learning something. Even though they're not in school, I want them to have a big day schedule. They need that. Children
need...they're in the house all day long and they need...I mean all this energy is pent up. They need to have structured activities.

Several of the parents further discussed specific activities that they enjoyed seeing their children participate in doing, Jessica, in particular, enjoyed seeing her child accomplish art projects at such a young age. The fact too that the program taught sign language to all of the children was also important to her. She stated,

Watching my daughter do art projects at 12 months old...never in my wildest imagination would I dream that a 12 month old could do different art projects on their own. And then the way they are here, they really stress that your child do it on their own, and just sitting back and watching them. It was exciting to see her accomplish her own thing. And...one other really positive aspect of coming to the group was the children being able to learn sign language. Because we don't know any of that at home and they still remember that.

Masa emphasized the importance of storytelling and reading together, “They tell the stories. We have playtime...they do a lot of things for them (children). They're reading...reading to the children.” Samantha also shared through an entry in her journal about the value of the activities, “When I came to this program I liked to watch my son do his artwork and see how it was going to turn out. It was always interesting to see what they were going to make and with what.” And Yuki wrote a haiku in her journal expressing her thoughts about the activities,

I like that after story time, Question are ask
craft time
helps develop creativity
Chastity and Kasey discussed how the program's setting influenced their thoughts about how to structure the environment for their children at home. As Chastity explained, 'Cause at home I didn't have a lot of the things that they have there, and some of the things I didn't even think about, you know, until you actually take them there and okay, he could play with this, and he should play with this.

Kasey said as well,

It gives the kids a chance to play and with the drawing and making stuff...I see different stuff that they do here that I can try to do at home. They give your child a lot of different things that they can learn to do...like the different projects, and reading the books, and playing with the other kids.

Parents made known their thoughts and feelings about the value of the children's environment and all that it has to offer their children. This component of the program was perceived by participants to be a significant contributing factor that motivated them to participate in the program.

As was revealed through participants' stories, the program's ability to create a healthy environment for the children was highlighted. Fostering opportunities for children's social interaction, and offering activities in a structured environment were viewed as important elements of the program that contributed to parents' participation.
Provides a Caring and Connected Staff

All of the participants overtly expressed various powerful and positive statements about the staff. They described many admirable traits that the staff possessed that were helpful to them as participants in the program. Analysis of the data revealed two major themes related to staff strengths that contributed to parent participation: 1) relates effectively to both parents and children, and 2) shares parenting ideas and resources.

*Relates effectively to both parents and children.* Parents described how important it was that the staff related positively to both them and their children. The fact that staff was friendly, non-judgmental, easy to talk to, and caring, was described as valuable. Furthermore, parents discussed the importance of the staff's nurturing relationships with their children. The fact too that staff members were also parents themselves, contributed to their ability to relate to families more effectively.

The staff's strength in assisting parents and children to feel at ease in the setting was described as important to many participants. For example, Amy expressed positive thoughts in her journal concerning one of the directors' abilities in particular in helping her to become comfortable in the parent group,

Joyce is just wonderful at putting people at ease. And I always feel comfy during the discussion time. Sometimes we get going on a topic and I find myself ready to share all my deep dark secrets, almost like group therapy 😊

Tonya too spoke of this same director's strength in helping her and her children to feel welcome and accepted in the program,

The program itself is great. But it really helps that Joyce is running the group, because Joyce is just totally cool, totally cool. She, talking about her personality
itself, you know when you come in everybody stops and they're like, "Hi such and such" and points everybody out you know, has a discussion with everybody to see how everybody's doing. It makes me feel welcome and it makes my children feel welcome.

Samantha also wrote in her journal about the power of the welcoming environment that both program directors provided,

I have had so many warm experiences while being in this program. But what I remember as affecting me the most was just walking in the door. When we came to group Joyce and Diana always seemed to make it a point to say, "Hello", and see how things were going. They made me want to come back each week.

Helping participants to learn each other's names was an important task that the staff assisted parents with as well. For Yuki and Karen this was particularly important. As Yuki said, “I'm comfortable with everybody, but don't know everybody name. Diana always help.”

For Karen, the fact that the staff helped people in learning names by providing name tags was significant. She stated,

Well…like when someone's new they give you a name tag. Well everybody had name tags, not just a new person. So that way you could see everyone's name. And that made you feel more comfortable 'cause you're actually 'goin, "What's that person's name?" or (you) don't say nothing. So that helped a whole lot and you know, welcome, and…ask your name and share some information, you know? Everybody did that so you felt more comfortable. You knew what was going on.
Not only did the staff welcome families warmly and help them to feel comfortable, they also were accepting of parents in a non-judgmental way. Julie, Lee, Karen and Jessica all spoke of the staff's potential in helping them to express their concerns in confidentiality and without fear of judgment. As Julie described in her journal,

When I come to this program I feel comfortable. I feel as though I could say anything without embarrassment or fear of reproach. The discussions that we have are confidential. Whenever one of us admits to a parenting mistake, rather than being lectured, we are offered alternate solutions.

Karen discussed the importance of not feeling that she is ever being looked "down upon." when she said,

You could talk to Joyce about anything, even if it was something personal. To talk about in confidence if that's what you needed. She'd give you information to where you could find help or try to help you herself. She never seemed to look down upon you. She always made you feel normal. No matter what the problem - normal - very friendly.

Jessica also believed that she could say anything to the staff, “They were all easy to talk to and get along with. It was great. It was comfortable; I could talk to them about anything.”

The fact also that some staff members were close by in the community also helped Star to feel that she could get to know them, and that she could also tell them anything. She shared,
Ms. Tina goes to the same school with, like my kids. So I see her over there and my kids know her. And when they have events at the same school its…when you go to the school you know somebody so you feel comfortable, rather than being around strangers. And you can talk to them about anything.

Samantha further described how the staff was "reachable" and "attainable." She explained,

I guess the fact that they were "themselves." Granted they were on their own level and on the other shelf, the shelf wasn't too far off that it couldn't be reached. They were reachable, you know, who they were, was attainable. You could talk to them; they weren't talking at you. They were actually talking to you so they didn't make you feel that you weren't smart or that something you said or something that you did with your child was wrong. Whether they thought it or not, they didn't make you feel wrong. There was nothing that put them off. You could talk to them in your own way. And it might take you a few minutes to get your point across, but they were attainable.

Star also discussed that the staff showed sensitivity, care and concern, and that she was able to develop a sense of closeness with them. She said,

We're close and they know my children, and any time I have a question or problem I can call them. I love them. I think that Ms. Joyce can read me like a book right now. So… she sees in my face expression that's a good day or bad day because you know the other person.
Michelle discussed how it was important to her that they treated her with respect, “It's just that, how they treat you. They treat you with respect. They're a lovable bunch. They're just helpful and they're nice.”

Participants also expressed the value they felt in the staff’s ability to relate warmly and in a caring way towards their children. As Amy described,

But I think, the children come in and even if they have only been gone for a week they hug them and you know they miss them. And we run into them in Target or something and it's (takes a deep breath with excitement)... you know, and that's just, they obviously care about the children and the children obviously care about them. I look forward to coming to see them. My daughter comes in and hugs them which she doesn't do that to most of the family. I trust her instincts.

Tonya praised one staff member in particular in her ability to relate well to the children,

Joyce is really good, and she's really good with the children. She should be rewarded for what she does; she's great. I'll personally walk around from building to building and hand out flyers for openings in play group. Joyce, she's really great and understanding and the kids just love her.

Jessica and Cassie shared that their children felt very comfortable with the staff. As Jessica said, “They were easy to talk to. They all loved the kids. So the kids would come in and play with them... and like my daughter, she wasn't afraid of any of them.” And as Cassie added, “They love it here. Ever since Michael was one year old, he attached to one of the instructors here.”
For Lisa, the fact that they took an interest in her child was commendable,
just that they are very supportive… I feel like they really take an interest in the
children. It isn't like this is just a job and it isn't what they have to do. They're
friendly…they genuinely seem concerned about the progress that Ben is making.
He had medical problems…and even at times they called the house because we
were out about 8 weeks from the program. He was in a feeding program and they
would call to see how he was doing.
And finally, for Lee it was notable that the staff’s positive interactions with her
child helped to solve a parenting problem that she was having. She shared,
I never had a problem working or talking to any of them. They're all really nice,
really good with the kids. They are really helpful when you have a question. For
example, last week Seth really wanted to bring toys with him to the group.
Generally, they don't like you to do that because they might get broken or lost,
you know kids fight over them. He was screaming, "I want to take my toys!" So
he wanted to put them in a book bag and bring 'em. When we got to school I
asked, you know, the leader of the group, "Could you tell Seth toys are not
allowed at school?" and they're really good, you know, at helping you understand
how to talk to them in a way that is more…that's more constructive. You know,
where I couldn't say, "Seth, you can't take your toys to school." She would just
take the time 'an say, "It's a rule in school." So they're really good about how they
interact with the children and how they interact with the parents.
In addition to feeling that the staff interacted comfortably with their children,
parents further described the importance of staff members being parents themselves in
order to work more effectively with them and their children. Tonya felt strongly about this when she shared,

It also helps that she, Joyce, is a parent and Joyce expresses you know the things that she's done… and she talks openly about her children and her family. And that's real good because, you know, she's telling us from experience. So therefore, you know in different situations you can go to her and you can relate and it's nice to know you can have somebody you can relate to. It's not just a teacher working in a school who doesn't have any children, and doesn't know anything about children, who's only doing it because this is where they get their paycheck or this where their education has taken them. We had a social worker who used to come for David and she didn't have any children and we had a lot of problems. You know and I had to tell her…don't give me any more advice because you are not a parent…you don't know how it feels to be a parent. So therefore don't tell me what it is to do with my children… I don't like taking advice from people who don't have children. They don't know what I go through on a daily basis.

Jessica too said that it was important that the staff had been through similar experiences as parents themselves, so that they could better understand the issues that other parents' face. She explained,

It's not so much that they are superior to you. They can sit with you and you can see they've been through the same kind of things you have. It's not like when you're going to a doctor, per se. They're telling you to do this, and do this and this. Nine times out of ten, they haven't done it themselves. So, it's pretty much that you know that they already have gone through this stuff and they're helping you
out because they can help you out a little bit more because they've experienced these things.

Amy wrote in her journal about how she too felt that it was essential that the staff had their own children and families. She wrote,

I know Joyce has kids of her own and it helps that she's more than willing to share the stupid things her boys did when they were little. And she admits that she didn't always know the right way to react either. Ms. Barbara is also great at making people comfy. She's more kind of like a grandmother. Maybe I just look at her that way cuz she's about the same age as my parents. She tells about her grand kids and how her kids were. And I think Ms. Veronica is great too cuz her kids aren't that much older than ours. And she's not in the best of financial shape either. And she's the closest to my age. Mostly I feel comfy with them cuz they share about their own problems (and good times too!) with their kids. No one there is pretending to be the perfect mom or anything.

The fact that the staff was able to help parents by listening to them, being supportive, answering their questions, and helping them to solve problems was important participants as well. They further expressed appreciation that the staff was flexible in discussing what they felt was important in the discussion group, instead of always adhering to the curriculum.

Julie wrote in her journal about the staff’s ability in particular to "boost her confidence" as a parent. She expressed through her writing,

Whenever I have doubts or guilt about my children the staff at the program helps to boost my confidence. Sometimes they reinforce that what I am doing is correct.
Sometimes they offer more possible ways of handling a situation that I am dealing with. I like having options presented to me so that I can weigh the pros and cons in order to make an informed decision regarding my family.

Michelle felt it was important that the staff was patient in explaining things to her as a parent. She said,

Because they talk to you, they have patience. They explain things to you if you need to be explained, they take their time going over stuff. They're not like, you know, if you have something to ask, you ask and they help you answer it.

Cassie too thought that it was helpful that the staff was proficient in answering her questions. She shared, “They (staff) help me out if I have a question. Say if I have a parenting question, they help me out on that. Or if I have a discipline question for Michael, if he's out of hand, they help me with that.”

Jessica described how the staff’s ability to help parents with problems is significantly important. She stated,

A lot of people just come and they're down in the dumps, they think they can't get through anything. And after talking to some of the people here, they realize that can get through it and they can deal with it on their own.

For Yuki, who is from Japan, it was important to learn some of the ways Americans raise their children; she explained why she felt the staff helped her in this respect. She said,

American children raised more independent and do themselves. Japanese, more close, don't let children do as much, don't feel as safe. I like Americans' way to raise child. In Japan everybody do same, but everybody different in America. In
Japan, teacher teach children all the same, but in USA, everybody do their own business…(I) like better. They (staff) does this, and I like.

Julie and Chastity both expressed that the staff’s flexibility in helping them to resolve parenting issues was also desirable. The fact that they did not always stick to the curriculum was perceived as valuable when parents had other concerns that they wanted to address. As Julie described,

Sometimes we get far off the topic. Last year Joyce would have a topic and it would just snowball into something completely different. She would let it go where the interest lies. She didn't stick to her book. If we get off the topic and talk about bedtime battles or something, Joyce will just go with that and we discuss that. Or if there was an issue a parent was struggling with, that would be our focus.

Chastity also shared, “And if there was anything that we wanted to discuss, it wasn't like we had to stick to just that forum, you know? It was always a kind of open thing…very open.”

Parents' stories about the positive ways that the staff made them and their families feel was a crucial facet that contributed to their desire to participate in the program. To be comfortable and welcomed in a non-judgmental and supportive environment was viewed by parents as a valuable aspect of the program. The staff's ability to be helpful in solving problems and in being flexible when discussing concerns outside of the curriculum was also mentioned as important to some participants.
*Shares parenting ideas and resources.* Many participants also discussed that the staff was resourceful and shared many ideas with them about parenting either through discussions, or by providing valuable resource materials. As Jessica stated,

They (staff) are so friendly and they can be right on that person's level and give them ideas and help and resources. A lot of people don't have the resources. Some families don't go to the library and they don't have computers so they don't have those resources. When they do the handouts it's during the parent group and they talk about the handout during that group…so, if there's something in there that a person didn't understand or had a problem with it, then they would talk about it.

Tonya too felt that this was important. She shared how one staff member helped her obtain the resources she needed. She said,

I'd say the best part about the program though is with itself, is, I have a personal relationship myself with Joyce. That me and Joyce discuss things. He (child) is considered disabled emotionally. He doesn't have it all; he's very destructive, a very angry child and we don't know why. So I have my discussions with Joyce as far as Infants and Toddlers and resources and things. That's the good thing about Joyce running the group is that she has the resources, she's able to, whatever it is that you know, us parents need, we can go to her privately.

Karen was grateful for the staff's ability to be resourceful in getting you "the help that you needed." She stated,

If you had questions or concerns you could speak to them and they would give you the best advice they could give you, or places you could go to get the help
you needed, depending upon whatever your situation was. They would steer you in the right direction.

Karen also felt that it was beneficial that the program led parents in other directions as needed in finding out about needed information and services. She stated,

We do have the parent section where you can sit down and talk, that way you can ask questions. Like I said before, if they can't answer it they will refer you to something else and you can learn about other programs and other things that are out there. Like I didn't know what Title I was or you know any of that stuff.

Several parents also discussed the value of the materials that the staff provided in helping them in their parenting roles. Karen was appreciative of the resourcefulness of the staff in helping her children after the death of her brother. She shared, “A lot of times she (staff member) would refer you to books. She brought in pamphlets when my brother died last year for the children to cope with the death.”

Amy referred to some of the materials as the "Mommy Bible" and told about how they were helpful to her and her husband. She shared,

The Parent Child Magazine, I like that… but they would, whatever the topic is, you know, potty training or discipline, you know, and there's a couple of photo copies, you know…try this, or if you want to go for this approach, try this. Now I have some things I can go home and start trying tonight…so I find it very helpful, and my husband too. And I can take the papers home and show them to him… we can be on the same page with what we're, or how we're dealing with her, good stuff like that. I have the ones (handouts) from last year and I go back and look in my notebook…a lot of it too is in the Parenting magazines. We sit and talk and
make notes all over them. It's good to go back. It's like the "Mommy Bible." And he (husband) read the "Mommy Bible" (and) went through Joyce's handouts.

Jessica and Lee too discussed how the materials were helpful for her in dealing with such issues as discipline and sibling rivalry. For example, Jessica said,

I utilized the handouts for mostly everything they handed out. I read it, back and front…very useful, very useful. A lot of it is about sibling rivalry and discipline because they were mainly my big issues…so my big challenges. They're the most helpful things for me…the handout resources.

For Julie, the discussions coupled with the resource materials that the staff provided were a critical aspect of the program. She explained,

The best thing is the resources. The discussion topics…the articles to back it up. Joyce is like a walking library. If you have an issue she can rattle off a book for you. The staff is a wealth of information and if they don't have the answers they can direct me to a variety of resources.

Michelle discussed the notebook that the staff gives them at the beginning of the year as being particularly helpful. She said,

We get a notebook, they give us a notebook. Each year we get a binder and we get to fill it with… the papers that we talked about, the topics. And then we get to keep the stuff at the end of the year. And we transfer it out of the binder. We keep it so we can have it to fall back on if we ever want to re-look that topic up.

Parenting magazines and handouts provided by the staff were also discussed as being beneficial for Star and Chastity. As Star said, “Like the Parenting Magazine.
There's a lot of information in there. I would not buy the magazines so it's good that they give it out for free.”

Lisa and Amy also liked the fact that the staff shared different ideas that they could do at home with their children. Lisa described some of these resources that she found as valuable. She said, “They give a lot of information as far as activities to do with the kids. There are some songs that they print for different holidays that you can sing with the children.” Amy wrote about the importance of this in her journal as well,

I love the ideas that the staff send(s) home with us. Different crafts to try etc. One day last year we put together different shaped/colored pieces of paper and stuck magnets on the back. So, at home, we could work with our children on counting, colors, matching, shapes etc. My daughter plays with them everyday.

The resourcefulness of the staff was perceived as beneficial to many program participants. They found many of the materials to be useful and helpful. Parents discussed how they were able to utilize these materials to support them in their parenting roles.

Parents' views about how the staff was both caring and connected were revealed through their stories. The staff's ability to make them and their children feel comfortable and at ease in the program was perceived as important. Participants believed that the staff also fostered positive communication and helped them to feel that they could talk to them about anything without judgment or reproach. Staff members also demonstrated that they cared about the parents and their children through expressions of concern and support. Some parents also felt that it was crucial that the staff had children of their own in order to be able to understand them as parents, and what they were going through with raising their children. The staff's ability to answer questions, to listen to parents, to be flexible, to
help them solve problems, and to provide needed resources and materials was also noted as essential in helping them to fulfill their parenting roles.

**Summary**

As analysis of the data revealed the program and staff created a strong sense of community within the larger community for participants in this study. By offering an extension of the home environment, cultivating support for the parent-child relationship, creating a healthy environment for children, and providing a caring and connected staff, the program provided deep connections among staff, parents, and children in a supportive community setting.

Attributes of the environment as discussed by participants as being important included the fact that locations of sites were embedded within the larger community context, which made it both comfortable and convenient for families. Since the atmospheres of these sites were homelike in their design and overall feeling of warmth, participants experienced even more of a sense of security within the environments.

Parent participants in the study also appreciated the program's ability to cultivate support for the parent-child relationship within the context of a supportive community environment. They valued opportunities to hear and share parenting viewpoints and stories, and to receive validation and reassurance in their roles as parents from others in the program. The program also helped them and their children in dealing with separation anxiety, and assisted them in learning to become better parents, as they so desired. In addition, the program also fostered opportunities for parent-child interaction by offering something for both parents and children, which was further seen as valuable.
Furthermore, another asset of the program was its strength in creating a healthy environment for their children within a community setting. Parents revealed that the program fostered support for children in making social connections with other children, and offered activities for them in a structured environment.

Lastly, the staff was perceived as being caring towards and connected to families within the program's community environment. The staff was welcoming and accepting of families, and was nurturing to both parents and children. The fact too that the staff provided a wealth of knowledge and information related to parenting issues within a supportive contextual setting assisted parents in becoming strengthened in their parenting roles.

It was strongly evident that the program fostered a sense of community within the larger community by building and maintaining an environment that was connected, caring, and supportive of families. Sensitivity to parents needs for connection within their own neighborhood communities in homelike environments was a definite asset that contributed to parents' motivation to participate. The fact too that the program and staff nurtured both parents and children in a supportive and encouraging environment was a strong motive for parents to be intricately involved in the program as well.
Attentiveness to Issues Involving Gender, Class, Culture, and Ability

In this third and final section, the program and staff's ability to address issues involving gender, class, culture and ability and how this further influenced parents' participation in the program will be described. Analysis of the data revealed four major areas. The program: 1) Assists women in moving within and beyond the caretaker/mother role, 2) Addresses needs of lower income families, 3) Is culturally sensitive to individual and collective needs in practice, and 4) Promotes understanding and support for those with special needs. Themes that emerged within each of these areas will now be discussed.

Assists Women in Moving within and Beyond the Caretaker/Mother Role

Identifying the marginalization of the stay at home mother was described by some participants as a distressful issue that they had become cognizant of in their lives. Many of the women in the study further discussed the program's ability to successfully meet their needs for connection with others; and also expressed how the program helped them to create a sense of self worth and importance. In addition, participation in the program assisted many of the women in dealing with their own unrealistic self-expectations of being the perfect mother, or "super mom," and in having to try to do everything as a parent by themselves. Each of these areas will now be discussed.

Identifying marginalization of stay at home mothers. Almost all of the participants in this study used the term "stay at home mother" to describe themselves. Many of the women also shared that they felt "stuck" in the house, or that they felt "alone" or "isolated." In addition, a few of the participants described how people within the context of society perceive women who are "stay at home mothers" in a negative light. The
program's ability to assist these mothers in dealing with being women who stayed home with their children was made known through their stories as well.

The majority of the women all identified themselves as stay at home mothers, or as being women who often felt very alone. Their descriptions of being in this role in life did not portray a sense of comfort or contentment. For many of the women, it was an experience of being, "isolated," "stuck," or "trapped." Their feelings of being marginalized from society, by being on its outskirts, were also revealed in their stories.

Samantha described her feelings about being in this position. As a stay at home mom, she experienced feelings of being isolated, and as she explained, she began to "fold in" on herself. She explained how coming to the program helped her to express herself in new ways. She said,

We were a one-car family and that car went to work…so for the most part…I didn't really have a choice but to stay home. I started to fold in on myself…being a stay at home mom you tend to become extremely isolated and an introvert. And coming (to the program), I was able to express myself. Not that I wasn't able to at home, but it was just different because you see different people and on all different levels…I was just able to…see things I wasn't able to see. You become isolated…I was becoming…I wasn't becoming a well-rounded person. I was becoming one sided.

In her journal, Julie also described the loneliness she felt and the sense of being "trapped." She too discussed how being in the program helped her to deal with these feelings. She wrote,
Sometimes parenthood can be very lonely. Especially being a young mother. When we had our first child, at 21, most of our friends were just graduating from college or beginning their careers. We were the only ones of our group to have kids. Likewise, all of my close friends were at work all day while I was suddenly at home with a baby. Then I had two babies within 15 months of each other causing me to feel even more isolated, at times, trapped. I joined the program when my youngest was about 10 months old and I was pregnant with my third. Right away I felt welcomed. I was with other parents who were in the same boat I was…the gap with my old friends kept growing wider, but I was forming bonds with these other women.

Karen too shared her feelings of being, "stuck" and of how the program helped her also. She stated,

I never got out and met anybody because I was always in the house with the kids. I felt like I was the only person in the whole wide world that got stuck at home with two or three kids (Laughs). My husband worked all the time plus being new to the area… having no family here whatsoever…to get out and meet somebody was wonderful. To meet people and get out in the world…just people to talk to and just to be overall happy…and to get out of the house and to learn you know, how to deal with things, it just meant…it made me happier. It (the program) got me out of the house once a week being a stay at home mom. Then finding out I wasn't the only one…there was other mothers that were stay at home mothers that lived here all their lives, still had friends but still were stuck in their house(s) with their children. I thought there had to be more to having children then just staying
in the house and changing diapers and feeding and making sure they're not
touchin' this and doin' that. I just thought you know...there's got to be more…

Amy too shared her feelings of isolation. She wrote in her journal,

I felt very isolated until we started going to (program). I had other moms and
grand moms to talk to and ask for advice, but none were my own age. Or, dealing
with similar issues like how to survive on one income, and how to discipline
without hitting. It makes me feel so much better to be around other parents like
myself.

She also talked about the feeling of being "stuck" and of how she resented not
being out in the work world. She said,

We were kinda stuck in the apartment. That was it. All day. You would feel, "I'm
sick of looking at you." Stuck in the apartment, you know...it was insane...and by
the end of the day I'd be pulling my hair out. I don't get a break during the
day...with my husband working wacky hours, some days I'm all by myself, all
day...sometimes when my husband's not going to be home until 11 o'clock at
night from work, we've had a long day. I just want to get out of here...(then) I
found a flyer about the program...and then we started coming here and I was -
"Hallelujah!" It's a big difference since we started the program about a year
ago...it's a whole new world. Before we started coming...I kind of think in a way
I was kind of resenting for awhile that I couldn't go to work...I had to stay home
with the kid all day...now I'm like a goddess of domesticity...but I'm happy. She's
happy, I'm happy and I think we're happier for having the center.
And for Masa, she too felt the same, “(When I come to the program) at least I'm outta the house…to be with other people for a change.” Chastity also felt a sense of isolation. She shared,

(I was) isolated in the aspect that I was home alone…I can remember feeling because I was a stay at home mom…I wasn't working…not only that but I had just moved here and I really didn't know the area. I wasn't getting on the buses or anything like that. I was really literally home with just the family and during the day…home and alone.

Lee also described her feelings that were similar. She stated,

It can be isolating, especially being a parent that doesn't work. A lot of moms work outside the home now and they get that social interaction when they go to work. And I worked from the time I was 15, so being a stay at home mom was a big change. It feels very isolating at times for me. It's relieving (to be in the program) because as a stay at home mom, you know you don't work all day. We're stuck in the house and there's nobody to talk to. Your husband works all day and he's got his own problems. And you try to squeeze in a little time to talk while the kids are screaming and throwing toys. And it's nice to be able to go with the kids, to talk to other people who are moms or dads, and they understand what you are talking about…you can have some growth conversations.

And Yuki too felt similarly, “Program a lot of help in feeling less alone…a lot of help for me - talking to parents…this program a lot of help.”
Cassie also stated, “Sometimes I'm stuck at home by myself…(I like the program) because I can get out of the house. I'm stuck with my kids and they drive me crazy. I like getting around and doing things. At home there's nothing to do.”

In addition to experiencing this sense of being on the outskirts of the world, or not feeling a part of the larger context of society, as many of the participants described, two of the women made powerful statements about how they believed society marginalizes the stay at home mom. Samantha and Lee strongly described their perceptions about this experience.

Samantha discussed how stay at home moms are, "looked down upon," and that it is men who are often the ones who reinforced this notion. She said,

Well I, being an isolated mom or a single mom or a parent staying at home, you don't always know what's out there…so it's hard to connect. Especially since in this day an age you're looked down upon if you're staying at home. It used to be you were looked down upon if you were working. Now you're looked down upon if you are able to stay home or that you just don't have the choice. So I think that makes it very isolated. So having a program like this starts to break some of that down…because a lot of the people thought you were sitting at home doing nothing. But that's not the case. When you are home you are cooking, cleaning, you have the kids to watch- you are doing other things. But it's not considered a job, because you're not bringing in a check…the fact that we were sitting home eating Bon-Bons kind of thing…it was more (from) men than it was women. Some of it…was joking…other times it was from anger.
Lee also shared how she feels "like the minority" as a stay at home mom, and that she too felt women in this role were "looked down upon." She said,

It seems like there's a lot of disagreement out there whether moms should stay home...sometimes you kind of feel like the minority when you stay home. It kind of seems like it's kind of looked down upon. There's so many working women out there...it can make you feel kind of isolated. I think it's just society in general...I think it's just the way things have become you know. Some of us who choose to stay home might not have the nicer house or the nicer car but...it's a matter of choices. And it just seems like society is kind of starting to look down on the choice to stay home...it just seems like that's the general attitude. You know it's tough not feeling you have respect you know, being at home and not having anyone. (And to) have an adult conversation (in the program) every once in awhile is nice.

Many participants experienced a feeling of being on the margins of society and identified what it felt like to be in this position. Being stay-at-home mothers gave them a sense of being isolated from the world. The program helped them to deal with this issue by providing opportunities for them to reconnect with others. A deeper issue regarding the concept of marginalization also surfaced from two participants' stories. These women articulated the negative perception which society places on women who stay at home and care for their children. These women were able to share this sense of being looked down upon and the feeling of being viewed as less important in society.
Meeting needs for connection. Many of the women talked about the opportunities they had acquired through the program to make connections with others, and to establish either temporary or permanent friendships.

Julie, Amy, Tonya, Lee, Chastity, Karen, Samantha, Michelle, Yuki, Kasey, Star, and Jessica all shared the importance for them in making these needed connections. For Julie, the fact that she made lasting friendships with two of the other women in the program was highly significant. She shared,

We started in the summer and then the first fall group that I was in I formed a bond with the other mothers in the group. I'm still friends today even though they're not in the group…we meet occasionally to let the kids play and occasionally without any children. It's nice to have a relationship we can be completely open and honest about what's going on…boost each other up…in this setting it's easy to make friends with other women with similar interests, similar issues they're dealing with.

Amy described the importance of getting out to meet friends, and making lasting friendships as well. She said,

And then you know, us moms (in program) clicked…every week we'd go over to the park, to the mall, go to their house for lunch or they'd come over. Like we're going away next month, and they're going to watch our goldfish while we're gone. (laughs). The best experience is the friends. Just to talk to, or get out of the house. She (child) has the other kids, and we have friends, you know. We have made friends that I think we are going to last awhile, and I think that's important.
For Lee, the connections she made with others in the group were a welcomed surprise. She said,

I don't know…well, maybe I didn't know that I needed the social interaction as much until I got out. You know, I, in the beginning it was all about Seth, taking Seth to meet other kids and getting used to other kids before he went to school. And then when I got there, it was "Whoooh! It's good for me too." It's good to talk to other moms. It wasn't something I thought I needed until I got it. (Laughs).

Chastity valued the temporary connections she made with another parent in the program, and felt that this was what best met her needs. She shared,

I don't really talk to her too much right now, only because life is just so crazy. But… I had a parent that we talked outside of the group. We called each other and we would try to get together every now and then. Now we just moved to different ways. I don't socialize much in my neighborhood. I have always been like that, to myself. So I don't have friends that I go to their houses and things like that. I got to meet other parents (through the program) and could socialize for that time and go home. If you wanted to extend it from there you could, and some people do.

Samantha spoke of the re-connection she made with others from her past. She stated,

Well, actually, when I got here, I found some people that I'd gone to high school with so I was able to um, bring back some friendships. And there was a couple that I stayed close to for awhile. It hasn't lasted because our lives have just kind of moved in different directions. But… there was a start of friendships, and that kind of helped keep things going.
Having the opportunity to get out and just talk with others was important for Yuki, Kasey and Star. As Yuki shared, “I home a lot. Like to come here for children to play and people to talk.” Kasey said too,

It gives me a chance to talk to other parents… yeah…I talk to all of ’em. I used to meet ’em (parents in program) at the playground and the kids played together. I used to before I moved, last year I did.

Star also commented, “I have no friends around here and I'm with my kids all day. So it's nice to talk to other parents, and to Joyce and Ms. Barbara, so (I) can talk about my problems and not listen to the kids all day.”

And for Jessica, finding "social interaction" with other adults who had children who were the same age as her children was important for her. She explained,

I'm an apprehensive person, and I'm more withdrawn and shy, so it takes me awhile. So, it's like the first, probably the first couple of months, then after that it was just easy. You just come in and you just talk to people. Social interaction…I liked talking to the adults that were there…and for me it was that I had other adults to talk with children my own age, my own children's age.

Many participants' thoughts about the importance of connection with others ranged from making close and permanent friendships, to having the chance to just socialize with others. It was evident that this need was addressed for these women through the program.

*Creating a sense of self-worth and importance.* Some of the women spoke strongly of the program's discussions, and other parents' in the program's influence in
helping them to realize the importance of taking time for themselves, and to attend to their own self care and needs. For Jessica, Lee, and Amy this was highly significant.

Jessica shared that since she is the type of person who is always doing for others that it was important that she learned, through discussions within the program, that she needed to make time for herself. She said,

Well, for any mom, mom is the last person on your list. There was one of the parent group discussions one time that you have to take "me" time. Because I never really thought about that. It opened my eyes. I'm more giving than I should be…because I don't know how to say "No." If somebody asks me to do something, do them a favor or whatever, I don't know how to say "No." (Laughs). And then it all falls back on the thing where I don't like to ask people for help. So it often makes it look like I'm always doing for other people and nobody does for me. They (parents in program) would always talk about how they and their husbands would go away for weekends at a time without their kids. I would never dream of doing something like that. (Laughs)…and I never realized how many people actually do go away without the children for a whole weekend. And then I think someone there actually mentioned a girls' weekend or a girls' day or something like that and then a few years later my friends and I started doing girls' weekends. It was all girls, no husbands, no children. Like I can get him (husband) to get home on a weekend and I can go away, just me. So we started doing that and I do…I just try to make sure that I have me time everyday… if you take care of yourself you become a better parent. It makes me realize…you have to take care of yourself because you're a person aside from all that…I get my hair done
now…I never used to. So…I try to take time out for *me* everyday and it's even more important now that my husband's away.

Similarly, Lee also explained,

It's (program) influenced the way I think about taking care of myself. I might not have thought about spending time on my own if I hadn't got around a bunch of other mothers and realized it was the same way that they felt. It's hard to find time for yourself but I think you've got to make a point to do it.

And Amy too, talked about the significance of learning to "set priorities" for herself, since she has been a part of the program. She described,

I'm actually trying to kind of find myself more, since we started coming (to the program) I'd gotten in the role of, "Mommy", you know. Like I'd sit around in my pajamas all day…if we didn't have to leave the house, I wouldn't even get dressed. I might even brush my teeth; I may not. I was like - I'm not going anywhere…do I need to? But …I was depressed…I'm not sure what happened, but I got motivated. I've lost weight; I got down 2 jeans' sizes. I've been going and buying myself girlie clothes…even my husband's like…”What's with you?” He's even noticing so that's a big thing. And I think just seeing the other moms were all different. Like one of the moms always comes, you know, she's dressed up nice. Her hair's done and most of us are coming in like…”COFFEE!” (Laughing). And I'm like actually giving myself time now…I actually went out and bought mascara again. I can be one of those moms that, you know looks decent at 9 o'clock in the morning. So, I'm trying, you know, even just that… I give myself just a little bit more for me. For me, as a woman (whispering) I can even take a bubble bath
now, you know? I can lock her (child) out of the bathroom…my husband too. I can take a bubble bath, even if it's only for 10 minutes. (Laughs). You know, its just things like that I'm starting to do for myself. And I've got a diary again. I can actually read a book again now, which I hadn't done for so long and I love to read. And so that was really important. Things are a lot better now. So I've learned how to set priorities.

Furthermore, three of the four parent participants in this study who have also now been hired as assistants in the program, shared how the program gave them an opportunity to feel better about themselves by working in the program. For each of them, this experience strengthened them in different ways, and helped to enhance their feelings of being more valued. The program purposely asks parents to become involved as paid parent assistants when the need arises.

Samantha, who started as a part time paid parent helper, has now moved into a full time position as an Instructional Assistant. For Samantha, getting the job changed her relationship with her male partner, and also helped her to see the world differently -to start "kicking my walls down." She said,

He was the kind of person that you know, once he came into the house everything closed in…like there was no more outside…no more openings. You know the blinds went down, the door was shut, and everyone kind of stayed in. So me working, I wasn't always where he wanted, where he could always find me type of thing. He lost a lot of ground…and I think he had some issues with that. When I started working here it kind of helped bring me out and expose me to a lot of things that were out there. Opening my mind, going back to work, you know not
having to stay home…just allowed me to see that things were better on the outside
then they were on the inside…I kind of started kicking my walls down.
Samantha further shared how if it weren't for the program she wouldn't be where
she is today. She said,
Without this program I wouldn't be on this path. They were there before when I
was just a parent. Had they not been there I wouldn't have this job. Had they not
been looking out for me…I wouldn't be where I am today…I mean we are family.
They're there for me ups and downs…everything.
And she further shared, “As a woman, it (the program) makes me feel really good
because I can be who I am. I don't have to change anything…maybe adjust once in
awhile…but I don't have to change and be something I'm not.”
Karen further shared that she felt she now had a purpose. She said,
Like I told everybody, I'm a person with a purpose. I've got a job. That's what I
told my husband. He was happy for me. His first thing was, "Well, how much you
getting paid?" I said, "It doesn't matter. I don't care if they pay me five cents an
hour. It's a job…I'm out of the house!"
Jessica described how coming to work was "a break" and a chance to feel that she
could now earn some money. She stated,
It's made me feel better because I have my own money now. I don't have to feel
guilty if I'm going into our checking account, because I'm doing something for
me. All of my money is going in there now too. It makes you feel good about
yourself. It's been a positive thing definitely. I like coming here because it gives
me a break. Like when husbands go to work and the mothers are at home…they
get a break. They get to go to work. (So coming to work), that's my break. (Laughs).

For these participants, it was strongly evident that their involvement in the program influenced the way they thought about themselves in moving beyond the caretaker/mother role. Their discussions with, or observations of, other women in the program strongly encouraged their own understanding of their self-worth and importance. These women were able to confront the need for their own self-care as women who are deeply entrenched in their dual roles as mothers. Additionally, most of the women who were eventually hired by the program to be assistants also found that this opportunity that the program offered them gave them a sense of self-worth and importance as well.

*Dealing With the "Super-Mom Syndrome."* Some of the women voiced powerful messages in which they described motherhood as a role in which they felt they needed to be perfect, and to be able to "do it all." They discussed the significance of the program's ability to help them to recognize that they were human, and that they were not always going to be perfect parents. Being able to share this concern in the discussion group with other mothers who felt similarly, and to receive support from each other and the staff in recognizing that it's okay to make mistakes was a crucial beneficial experience for them of being in the program.

Julie described herself as a perfectionist who places a great deal of guilt on herself. She further discussed how the program helped her to address these feelings. She said,

I think it's the "super mom syndrome" where I try to do it all myself. I have my resources in place that can be used, but I hate to use it. (The program makes me
feel) it's okay to let something go without the guilt. I think that women tend to hold themselves to a higher standard and place a lot on themselves. I think that the program helped me to realize it's okay not to be perfect. That's the big thing. It's okay to make mistakes in parenting. Like I said before, if I tell Joyce this is what happened, and this is how I handled it…I'm not sure this is the right way. Joyce will say, "I'm sure that you handled it the correct way that you felt you should have handled it. But, maybe in the future you may want to think about handling it like this." So at the same time she's giving you alternatives, she's saying the decision you made wasn't necessarily a bad one. You know, at times with your children you make a split second decision or you react in such a way that later on you feel bad about it. Maybe I shouldn't have acted that way or done that…should have been more laid back. Joyce reinforces that it's okay to sometimes make a mistake or handle it in a less than perfect manner. Maybe next time this is what you'd want to think about. So, that goes with the super mom…you want to be perfect. You want to be the perfect mother to your kid. You want your children to remember the wonderful, happy, free childhood. But, at the same time, you don't want to raise them to have no boundaries, no limits, whatever. So that's the issue. It (the program) has helped me not to be so hard on myself. And that I'm a better parent than I give myself credit for.

For Amy, feeling that she had to "do it all" was an intense issue in her life. She described,

You can not do it all. Anyone who thinks they can do it all is a fool. I spent a couple of months since I had so much time on my hands last year without a car- I
cleaned the bathroom everyday. Who does that? I was vacuuming twice a day. You know… it was… why am I doing this? I was doing laundry three times a week… oh, I'll just pack the freezer with home cooked meals and we'll just re-heat them. We never ate any of the stuff. I was trying to over-compensate for everything else that was lacking… and it was… oh, I have to spend all my time with her… everything was scheduled… it was insane… I kinda packed the whole day… it was overload. Then I just stopped and didn't do anything. I've just gotten (from the program) nobody's perfect. Don't pretend to be perfect. I have no problem sitting at the table, probably later during the discussion saying, "Monday night I wanted to pick up my kid and throw her out the damn window." You know, I didn't… but you know? It's just when you're the super mom then the kids tell everybody that and you're not super mom. You can't admit that you have any faults and you're not happy. You don't like what you're doing. You don't like where you are. Your kid's a pain in the ass. Everything is perfect! Everything is wonderful! Now… my kid is a freaking lunatic… she throws food on the floor and purposely, I swear to God, squishes it into the carpet, just to piss me off, cause she knows it does… I'll tell you anything you want to know, but I'm not perfect. I know I'm not the best Mom in the world, but I'm doing the best I can. I'm doing better than I thought I would, which is a good thing for me. And that you have other parents to vent to and learn from… you know, someone saying, "I tried this and it worked" and "I tried this, it didn't work." You just have other people to talk to and learn they're just like you. I think we're all the same.
Lee further discussed her feelings about having to be the perfect mother as well. She shared,

(Trying to be perfect) it's definitely, definitely there. It's 'cause you feel like it's expected of you and then you kind of expect it from yourself. And you make a mistake, you feel like you should have known better. It's hard, it's hard being a mom and I think it comes more from yourself than it does from society. But when it comes to your kids then you realize this is a lifelong job, you know? What you do with them now…extends into the future…then you kind of feel like you make sure you have to do it right. You know, then you feel a need to be involved in everything…do the PTA, you know, be a stay at home mom, and it's…a lot of pressure. I think that the big part is just being with the other moms (in program) and realizing that you know, they do it too. I'm like, okay, well I messed up…and everybody makes mistakes. You know everybody's stressed out and everybody's trying to do too much. You know, try to keep the house clean on top of taking the kids back and forth to school, and making sure everybody has clean clothes. You know…the whole thing.

Star, Jessica, and Samantha specifically discussed how the program addressed for either them or for others that you don't have to be the perfect mother, and that you don't have to be the one to do it all. As Star shared,”… in the program they tell you to try this way, or try that way. But if it don't work, don't push them. They tell you - you don't have to be perfect.”

Jessica, who has a difficult time relying on others, described how she believes that the program helped her and others to think about potential support systems. She said,
I think if somebody came in and said they were having an issue they're (staff) really good at helping you break it apart and have you see what you can do first. Instead of trying to do it all at one time. Making you realize you have a support system elsewhere. Where a lot of people think, "It's just me and nobody's here to help me." And to rely on other people, which is hard for me. I'm not that kind of person.

Samantha too shared a similar thought,

That is something that is talked about in parent discussion - letting the moms realize that they don't have to do it all. It's okay to let Dad put the dishes in the dishwasher. He might not do it right, but at least he'd do it. You know, let your older son cook dinner. He might want to make scrambled eggs…but at least you're not cooking.

For these participants, dealing with the "Super Mom Syndrome" within the context of the program was meaningful for them. Being encouraged to let go of the feeling that you must be the one to fulfill everyone's needs, or to be perfect in the motherhood role was a significant issue that the program addressed, and caused these participants to think in new and different ways.

In sum, many participants in the study indicated that as women and as mothers that they were in need of fulfillment in certain areas of their lives. Many of the women identified and discussed the marginalization of women as stay at home mothers within the context of their own lives and within society as a whole. They learned that they needed to take better care of themselves by fostering social connections, nurturing themselves as persons, and by not being so hard on themselves in their parenting roles;
these issues were addressed either implicitly or explicitly through the program. These women recognized that they had needs that must be met outside of the motherhood role and that they were not perfect parents, as they often thought they should be. Their interconnections with other mothers in the parent discussion group helped them to acknowledge and address these issues that had surfaced in their lives.

Addresses Needs of Lower Income Families

Several participants discussed how the program addresses their needs as parents who are of lower income. The program's ability to provide services that were at no cost or at low cost was seen as highly beneficial. Furthermore, for some of the parents, the program was more than a service that provided parent education. They were exposed to various persons, as well as to other resource and support systems to help them as family providers in meeting basic needs for food, shelter, and clothing for themselves and their children. These issues that were discussed by participants will now be addressed.

Providing services at no or low-cost. Several participants spoke of the importance of not having to pay a fee to attend the program as being a significant factor that influenced their participation. They were also appreciative of the field trips and activities the program provided at no cost or low cost. Furthermore, having transportation service provided by way of vans or cabs was also seen as beneficial. As Amy described, regarding program cost,

You know, some of it (other programs) involved money and it was like professional… like Gymboree has, like "Mommy and Me" groups. But I don't have that money though, to shell out $40.00 a week to spend time with my kid; when we can do this for free. Because we are broke. My husband gets paid on
Friday and we have $60.00 until next Friday for food, diapers, pull-ups, gas to (work place), you name it. If we had to pay I don't know if we'd be able to come…I mean right now I need two front tires on my car, and that's not happening any time soon. So you know, we're trying to…my husband pays child support for another daughter in West Virginia, who he's never seen. And we have to have health insurance for her, and child support.

Star, Yuki, and Michelle also felt that by not having to pay a fee that it was helpful. As Star commented, “I could not afford to pay for any program, so it's very good that it's free.”

Tonya discussed that the program’s affordability and the activities it provides are extremely helpful as well. She said,

The most important thing in the program, I think I would probably say, it's their parents meeting, that its available, especially for those who are low income, you know what I mean? A lot of times we're not able to do a lot of the things that other parents with a little bit higher income bracket are able to do…I wouldn't be able to afford it…I mean I have three children myself. I think that's good, they have field trips and activities and things like that… and it helps the children get out and see how different people live in different circles. They went to the pumpkin patch, they went to some kind of museum in Columbia, like, it's a big warehouse where they have painting and sand and the little fake grocery stores, the shopping carts and things like that. They (the program) gave us donated Oriole tickets, and that was good cause I wouldn't have been able to see the Orioles.
 Whoever wanted them, they wrote a list, they had a certain amount, and whoever wanted them…yes, they (her family) were happy.

 Julie commented on the program's willingness to "work with you." She said, “I've never seen them bar anybody because of a fee or from a field trip because they couldn't afford to pay. They're always willing to work with you.”

 Karen also commented on the field trips and the value of buses that are provided to attend them. She stated, “It's not just coming here, it's getting out. I mean they provide buses to go on field trips. You can go out and find other things to do. That's how I found out about stuff, was going on field trips.”

 For Cassie, Chastity, Masa, Lee and Samantha the transportation service that was provided to and from the program itself was seen as beneficial as well. As Chastity shared,

 There are a lot of parents that come in a cab and sometimes they come with more than one child. Or they can't walk to the program. The Infants and Toddlers Program, I think it's paid for through them. Because without this there are a lot of people that don't drive. Or there's only one car available and your husband takes it so you can't, you know then, the program is not effective. (It's helpful) because without that I wasn't driving at the time.

 Masa also added, “We don't have a car right now…we don't have money to purchase a car. He (husband) take the bus (to work). We get here by cab.” And Samantha commented, “(Name of one program site) had a van. So they would come and pick us up. Then, when I started working my second year, if they didn't, Diana came and got me.”
The fact that the program is sensitive to lower income parents' financial needs by providing services at no or low-cost for families was discussed as valuable by several of the participants in the study. These services assisted parents in participating in a program that they may otherwise not have been able to attend.

*Extending assistance beyond parent education.* Some parents discussed the assistance they received in other ways besides parent education from the staff and persons affiliated with the program, or from other programs that had connections with this program (i.e. Healthy Families) as being important. One parent also felt that she not only was able to receive help, but that she could give help, through the program as well.

Tonya described how one staff member in particular was of great assistance in meeting parents' needs. She shared,

I think that she Joyce is not only helping to educate us as parents and educate our children, but she's also there for us. You know, for other things that we need. Sometimes we're not able to do it all on our own. I mean its people who haven't had food and clothing and needed places to go and things like that and she's made sure they're taken care of. She needs a big fat award, a big fat award, because that shows she has a lot of character.

Michelle also discussed how she was given assistance through the program, and through another organization that the program sometimes connects with. She said,

(Through this program)... throughout the year they give you stuff, like if she goes to donation places...actually when I was pregnant with Ronnie I was really worried, cause I didn't have no clothes. Miss Paula...she got things for me...I didn't have to worry about no clothes for the baby. And they help you out with,
sometimes they give you like… sometimes Miss Paula has donations and she
gives those out, like food, lamb, she gave us one year…they give us stuff, like
they gave us chicken and something else. So they each try to help us out with
stuff. (And through) Healthy Families…it's a lady, she comes out every two
weeks, but she knows I'm having a rough time so she comes out once a week
now. And they help you, like guide you through your pregnancy and they do stuff
with you and they do stuff with the babies…like…during the holidays each year
they get, gather a basket and give it to each family.

Kasey also described how someone in particular who is affiliated with the
program was helpful to her and her family in finding a place to live. She stated,

She (person affiliated with program) was just there when I needed help. When I
used to go over there. When I needed help. When we used to live over here. We
were occupied with this apartment we were in and we had to move out by a
certain date. She helped me find somewhere else to go. She talked to rental people
when we moved from the apartment to a townhouse. She's a good friend. She
looks out for people. She can help you, in any way she can, she will.

Star, being a parent in the program, said that she too could also go to the program
for help, but that she herself felt that she could provide assistance to someone who also
needed help. She explained,

For me, it was that I am comfortable to come to them (staff), whatever was my
need. (But) I give everything away. Ms. Joyce knows me. The mothers from last
year, the one we have here now, she got all my son's baby clothes. Whatever I
don't need, there's somebody who needs it. For me it's myself, if um, I can help.
I'm getting help from the program, but I also can help the individual mother. So it makes, I get a good feeling coming here, but I get a better feeling when I see I can help somebody. Because, why throw my son's new clothes out you know, when there's a mother who is expecting a baby or have a baby? Yeah, I believe so because they remember. They give you back in another way.

The fact that the staff and other program affiliates, were able to offer extended help to parents in meeting basic survival needs was seen as beneficial to some of the program's participants. Moving beyond parent education, and being attentive to families' other needs was perceived as being valuable.

It was evident that several participants felt that the program addressed their needs as lower income families by providing services that were free or affordable, and by offering them extended assistance when the need arose.

*Is Culturally Sensitive to Individual and Collective Needs in Practice*

Participants of various cultures (African, Japanese, and Hispanic), as well as other parents of European descent, discussed some of the ways in which the staff was attentive to cultural issues by being supportive listeners, and by being persistent in making an effort to foster communication with families who primarily spoke other languages besides English. The staff also adjusted program practices as needed to acknowledge the beliefs and needs of those from various cultural groups. They took into consideration parents' belief systems and desires in making their own decisions about parenting without pushing parents to conform to curriculum recommendations.

Masa, who is from Africa, shared how the staff showed respect for her culture, and listened to her stories about her background and life in Liberia. She shared,
They respect my culture. They want to learn…eager to learn about my stories and 
background. All of them, everything they do is wonderful. All of them respect 
me. They take everybody in. They love the kids. They take all of us in.
Chastity, whose cultural heritage is Hispanic, felt that the staff was sensitive, in 
that they didn't "step on anybody's culture." She explained,
I feel like…they almost don't even address it. It's never anything out there. The 
only thing that they like try to… the only way I see that it's even addressed or 
discussed is when they try to make sure that they don't step on anybody's culture. 
You know, sometimes when you're from a different place you parent differently. 
Like…there might be one from Africa who believes in doing something a certain 
way. And while you try to give them the same advice you give everybody else 
you also have to take in what they feel is their cultural background. This is the 
way they do things. It's not them as a parent themselves. It's the way they do 
things. And I feel that's the only way they try to address your culture, other than 
that, it's like you're Black, you're white, your Hispanic, you sit in the room and it 
doesn't matter. At least that's the way I felt. It never felt like it was an issue. I 
ever felt when I was in the program that anything I asked was looked down upon 
or anything like that. They acknowledge cultures by respecting cultural 
differences while still making a variety of suggestions on parenting.
Yuki, who is from Japan, and who asked the staff for advice on parenting, was 
appreciative of the fact that they discussed alternatives in helping her make decisions.
She said,
(Staff are) very polite. They always listen if I'm confused. She listens about me, and give me good advice about working with my children. They are helpful in talking about when (my) kids fussy and things stressful. I ask, "What should I do?" and they give me answer. They have lot of answer. I can learn what to do. They say, "Do it this way or this way." Then I can decide, "Okay, this way."

Star, whose children are bi-racial, noted that one staff member helped her to solve a problem regarding her children through a story that she told. She shared,

There was one discussion that we had about teasing. My kids (are) bi-racial so it will come someday. So, Joyce told a story about a little girl, where you have to (teach) the kids to be independent. So the mother let the girl put on whatever she wants to put on but then the girl looked like a clown. So the mother say yeah, she feels good about herself and she learned to be independent. So then I say what happens when she goes to school, and they tease her because she looks like a clown? Then her independence is crushed; her self-esteem is crushed. So I learned to try with my kids. I told my kids last week… I say, "There comes a time when the kids are going to call you Oreo. I say don't cry, don't fuss, that's okay. Everybody loves Oreos." So I try to tell them it's going to happen but don't react to it. Don't let it get to you. Try to make it a fun way, and then they leave you alone.

Lisa, who is European-American and Chastity whose cultural background is Hispanic, also told stories of how they saw the staff as being particularly helpful or sensitive to parents and families from other cultural backgrounds. She shared,
I don't know if they were Chinese or Korean in the last group and you know they were treated fine...same as everybody else. I think there was a little bit of a communication problem, but one time when we were going to go on a field trip as far as that, they (staff) made sure they had transportation to the program or to the bus to go on the field trip. I think it was maybe broken English, but they got across to her that they would come and pick her up and take her to the bus.

Chastity told another story of how the staff was sensitive and never forced their ideas on parents. She stated,

We had a parent from...oh, I can't remember...they speak like Arabic...and their children don't play with toys... you know, he's (child) going crazy at home. You know he is just into everything. And you say, well what does he get to do at home? What does he play with? Well, we don't play with toys. They don't know the concept of playing with toys. So, what if you bought him some, even an educational toy or what if we give you some coloring paper that he can do and some crayons? You know, and see if they are open to that. But in her culture the children just don't play with toys. So she's afraid to go outside so the child was not getting outside and the child is not playing with anything at home so he plays with your pots and pans. And she doesn't take him to the park because she's afraid. She's in this country illegally. And he runs in your house because he has no place to run. But that's maybe why he's going insane at home! So you know they (staff) try to do it more casual like. Maybe try this, or how about this? But never, "You should, or you have to." They never forced the issue
Samantha, who is European-American, also shared two of her observations from working within the program. She said,

Actually, Diana had an Arabic family that I was really surprised that pictures were not allowed. So we (staff) had to, instead of doing his (child's) cubby tag with his picture and his name, we found matching stickers so that his name tag and his cubby tag, he found them both and they had his name on them. We (staff) had to adapt to that.

Cultural attentiveness and sensitivity towards families from various backgrounds and traditions was made evident through the stories that these several participants shared. These experiences within the context of the program were meaningful and important to parents in creating an environment that accepted and supported those from other cultures.

*Promotes Understanding and Support for Those with Special Needs*

Since several of the parents in the program had children with special needs, the program's environment created an atmosphere of acceptance and support. Parents whose children were challenged, also spoke of the significance of the program's assistance in giving them encouragement in dealing with the uncertainties and struggles they faced. Being parents of children who were having difficulties was often a frightening and overwhelming experience. Participants' stories told of how they received extended support through the program in helping them to cope with the challenges they faced, and in supporting them in order to deal more effectively with issues involving their children's and families' needs. Often too, just being with others whose children had special needs was reassuring to parents in feeling that they weren't alone. Furthermore, for one parent participant in the program who attended the school's special education facility herself as a
child, the program gave her a sense of feeling accepted and comfortable as well. These issues that participants discussed will now be addressed.

Creating an environment of acceptance and support. For many participants in the study who had children with special needs, the program and staff were highly accepting and extremely supportive of them. Some parents discussed how the staff assisted them in discussing and learning about various issues and concerns that were involved with having a child who was challenged. For others, the program offered their children the chance to make needed connections and communications with other children and families in order to improve such problems as speech delays.

For Julie, the program was supportive in helping her to deal with critical comments and judgmental statements from the public. She shared,

The issues of having a child with difficulties and the feeling you get from the general public who don't know what the problem is. They have not a clue about the issues with your child but they feel it's okay to make a judgment. We discussed that a lot. We had a woman, I don't know if her child was diagnosed with autism, or they were talking about he may have autism, but people think there's a behavior issue. My son is speech impaired and I get, "Can't you make him talk?" Not so much now, because he's almost six. I think everybody recognizes the problem, but when he was two they'd say, "Well, you probably can talk for him," or "Why don't you make him talk?" It's nice to talk about that, and the judgment you get from the general public.

Julie also discussed how through the program she was able to obtain support in learning various skills to help her to deal more effectively with her child. She said,
He's (child) made a lot of progress. He's been in therapy, occupational and speech for four years. He's made progress. We had a lot of help in the beginning (through program) with potty training a child who's speech impaired. That was one of the first things I remember from Diana was the sign for potty, because I had concerns about potty training a child who's speech impaired. That was one of the first things she taught me our very first summer and that helped.

Lastly, Julie further described how the program assisted her in learning "her rights" as a parent of a child with special needs. She explained,

I have a lot of issues with my first son. He has some developmental delays. We addressed a lot towards the end of last year dealing with IEP's (Individualized Educational Plans) and the team, things of that nature. That was extremely helpful because when you're thrown into a child with an issue and you have no clue, you don't know where your boundaries are. You don't know your rights as a parent. They helped me define that. What it is I can ask for and what to shoot for in my son's IEP's. That was extremely helpful.

Cassie also explained that the program has helped her to deal with multiple issues that she has faced with her child. She said,

I would say it (program) would help your child learn…speech delay, fine motor skills, anything like that or any other help. Help your child on things it has-fine motor skills or anything. Talking if they can't. He's speech delayed and O.T. delayed…his feet. He gets more social. I see more progress. He talks more. He used to not talk at all. He talks more than he used to. (Also) I have a hyperactive son that has a lot of emotional problems. I asked them how to deal with him and
correct him the right way. They gave me plenty of help with that. After I asked them they said to keep on trying to encourage him more to help him out. The more you encourage them and help them out…he's doing very well.

The staff's help in recognizing her child's needs was pointed out by Michelle as being important as well. She stated,

He (child) has a speech problem but they're working on that, getting him back a little bit. That's something that Joyce has really helped us accomplish because she noticed that his speech is not able, his speech is still not clearly. So I had to get back in contact and start it back over again.

Masa valued the chance her son had to be around other children in order to help improve his speech. She said, “My son was delayed in his speech and since there are other kids here he can now identify a lot of words…he's improving in his speech.”

Samantha also appreciated the fact that her child was around other children in helping to enhance his speech. The teaching of sign language by the staff was also helpful. She shared,

He was speech delayed, so it was good to have him around other children being able to talk. And it was also nice to find out that there were other children who had different types of delays, or at least delays that were similar to his. It got him around other children and he was able to see typical development at work.

Repetition and use of sign language and everything that Diana did was really good.

Karen also mentioned the sign language and the staff’s reinforcement of speech as being of assistance. She said,
It helped as far as reiterating the sign language. They would do sign language and stuff like that. He still didn't talk but he would play with other kids he got close to and would talk to several of the staff. So, I guess it did help. It didn't fix his speech but he did say more. He did say more as he got comfortable. They'd always ingrain and speak to him and identify things, reading the books and doing art projects.

Lisa described her son's premature birth and the challenges it presented for him. She also said that being with other children in the program, as well as the staff's support in reassuring her and allowing her to "vent" was helpful. She discussed,

Well, he was premature. He was 11 weeks early. He only weighed 1 lb. 15 oz. When he was born. So the sucking and everything came later. He had low muscle tone…in his mouth and oral motor problems… I just wanted him to interact with other children (in this program) and I was hoping that with seeing other children talking and doing other activities, he would kind of model them and mock them and that has helped in a lot of ways. I would say that expressively he's behind a great deal, but other than the expressive language, I think he is just maybe a little bit behind. And within the last months he has really progressed a lot…I think speech wise he has progressed. Just being around other children and them speaking, and even with the sign language… which I also think has helped. And they also do that here. (The staff of this program helps) just by asking how he is doing and I'm able to vent and tell them what's going on with him… I know at one point I was concerned about (what) the O.T. was saying that he had sensory integration disorder. And you know Diana was kinda easing my concerns and
telling me that you know, she had been watching him doing different activities
and that… he's not like tactile defensive. (Also) I think it's good for my son,
especially when he gets older to be around children who are handicapped and
know that they are just like he is, no different. I think that's good for him.

Rebecca also described her daughter's difficulties, and was grateful that through
the program that she too found reassurance. She said,

I was really concerned when we first went to Infants and Toddlers because she
was delayed and I didn't know anything. I didn't know if she was going to have
some kind of problem. They (medical staff) said they were sending a high-risk
infant nurse. She had all these tests done and they haven't found anything. I guess
she's just delayed. I don't know if it's going to be anything serious or they would
have probably found something. (In the program) I think one person said that her
son went through tests and it made me feel better that there was more people that
had tests done, that I wasn't alone. They've (the staff) been saying that it's good
they haven't found anything.

Star focused on the social interactions the program gave her daughter. She shared,

And my daughter, she was disabled at that time so it was a good program to help
her play with other kids, maybe learn the motor skills and all that. She lost all her
motor skills and speech, had seizures. She was 14 months and she went back to 6
month stage, where she had to relearn everything. She got used to listening to
other people…strange people (in program). And to play with other kids because
she was, it was hard at home. There were no other kids to play with so, there she
has a chance to learn and share and follow the rules, cleanup. It helped with motor skills and her speech…and to learn stuff.

Samantha also shared how the program fostered in her a sense of acceptance for, and a chance to learn about others. She said,

I was really exposed to a Down's syndrome child. Not that I hadn't been exposed to it before, but it was more, you know, on the outside. This was actually on the inside…you know? I was able to talk to…deal with…and there were children with varying degrees of special needs that I was able to learn about…I was able to learn and grow a little bit.

Lee also implied how she appreciated the diversity of the program, “There's a lot of different kinds of parents and different kinds of children with disabilities (here). I can't think of anybody who wouldn't get some kind of experience…enjoyable experience out of it.”

Cassie, who was a student at one time in the special education school where one of this program's sites is now held, felt that the environment provided a unique sense of security for her. She shared, “I used to go to this school…I'm comfortable here. I'm used to being here. It's like family…another family. (It's been a part of my life) a long time…I remember old memories (smiles).”

It was evident from several of the participants' stories that they received extra support and encouragement from the staff, and from the structure of the program itself, in helping them to deal with issues involving their children's special needs. Parents felt that they could discuss issues and concerns, obtain increased assistance, and acquire needed reassurance as well. The program also fostered a sense of acceptance for those who are
dealing with challenges, and exposed families to others who may be different from them. For the parent who attended the school as a child, she found the environment to be comforting and familiar. For this parent, the staff and school's personnel were like a family to her as well.

*Making needed connections with extended services.* Several parents further described the program's ability to establish important needed connections with regard to children who have special needs. Collaborations with other programs and services were seen as helpful to parents so that they could make connections with appropriate providers or programs. Some of these services also made referrals to this program as well.

The program mentioned most often by participants was The Infants and Toddlers program which often referred many families who have children with developmental delays or special needs to this program for socialization and family support.

Chastity talked about the beauty of the interconnections that were made between this program and other services that were needed for her child. She described the networking process that was made available to her through these collaborations,

He wasn't speaking at all and my sister told me that she heard of a program. I believe I found out the name of it like that and when I went looking for numbers I came up with the number for the Infants and Toddlers program, and through the Infant and Toddlers program I was referred (to this program). They work in conjunction with the therapists. They work with Infants and Toddlers, and Infants and Toddlers sends out a therapist and they refer you to Maryland Therapy Network who also sends you out a therapist and those two things really help.

That's beautiful! I have enjoyed seeing the transformation from before he was in
Infants and Toddlers, then (this program), and with the specialists…it didn't say a word, not a word. He didn't even address us as Mom and Dad. So to see all the growing he has done in that time is just like, "Wow!" Tremendous! I'd like to shut him up sometime (Laugh). And he has come so far in that time with all the help of those programs together, that watching that… for him in particular, has been the best thing for me.

Jessica, Lisa and Karen also mentioned that it was helpful that the program made referrals to other programs that might be valuable. Jessica said, “(They lead people to) Infants and Toddlers, some parents will come in here with questions for their child's development or whatever…Infants and Toddlers.”

Lisa added that one of the staff members spoke with her about another program that might be helpful for her child,

They (program staff) did say something about Tiny Tots because I was talking to Diana about when he turns 3, if there's a 25% delay then he would receive school services and we were talking about that and she was telling me that she would give me information on which program would be better than others. And she was talking about the Tiny Tots Program. I think I get a great deal of support.

Star described how she felt it was important that the staff members from different programs knew each other and that they also knew her, so that they could discuss together how problems could be addressed,

She (child) was in Infants and Toddlers. I don't know if Infants and Toddlers reported me to this program or…the teachers know each other. They go to the
same school. So it was nice, you can talk to the one person and then they talk to each other, and then you figure out something if you have a problem.

For Rebecca, the fact that someone from Infants and Toddlers came with her to this program for the first time was helpful. The fact that the two programs intersected in assisting her in making a transition was important to her participation,

The first time we came (to this program), Janet (from Infants and Toddlers) came with us. I guess because I'm shy and she's somebody familiar that I know. She met me there. We've been going ever since (to this program).

Parents' revealed in their comments that the program's ability to make needed connections with other programs and services was important to them. These connections fostered a sense of connection to a wider network of beneficial resources for them and their children.

The creation of an environment of acceptance and support, and the provision of opportunities for needed connections, was valuable to many participants in this study. It was evident that these strengths of both the program and staff further contributed to parents' desires to participate in the program.

In sum, issues involving gender, class, culture and ability were addressed in this section. In relation to gender, many participants described several issues. Some discussed their own marginalization as stay at home mothers, and described this phenomenon as an existing factor in society as well. They described how being involved in the program assisted them in dealing with this issue. Furthermore, many of the women discussed their own needs for connection with others, as women who felt isolated in their roles as stay at home mothers. In addition, some participants discussed how the program encouraged
them in attending to their own needs, and thus creating a sense of their own self worth and importance. Several of the participants also felt internally compelled to be "super moms" by being perfect in their motherhood roles; the program also helped them to confront this issue.

Next, involving the socioeconomic status of families, parents' stories revealed that the program helped them to address their financial needs as lower-income parents. The program offers services at no or low cost, and extends assistance to families beyond just parent education by offering help related to food, shelter, and clothing if needed as well.

Analysis of the data further revealed that parents who were of various cultural backgrounds were supported; and the program and staff were attentive to both their individual and collective needs in practice.

Finally, since one-third of the program's children have special needs, and one of its sites is housed in a school that is a special education facility, the program and staff were seen as strong in creating an environment of acceptance, and in fostering support for both parent and child. The program's ability to make connections with other needed support services for families was also valued by many participants.

Summary

This chapter presented the major findings on what motivated a group of lower-income mothers to participate in a voluntary parent education and family support program. Participants' stories encompassed three major areas: 1) the socio-contextual influences of participants' families and neighborhood/community, 2) program creates community within community, and 3) attentiveness to issues involving gender, class,
culture, and ability. Within each of these sections the findings and corresponding themes were presented and supported through the narrative process.
CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

In this chapter the following purposes will be accomplished. First, a summary of the study’s findings will be provided. Secondly, the major conclusions of the study will be highlighted and discussed relevant to the findings and in connection to the literature; assumptions and limitations of the study will also be examined in relation to this discussion. Finally, implications for future practice in adult education and research as well as in parenting education and research will be addressed.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to examine the meaning that a group of lower-income parents gave to their experiences that contributed to their voluntary participation in a parenting educational and family support program. This study's theoretical perspective was both psychological and sociocultural in nature. From a psychological lens the question that was explored was, what individualistic perspectives and motivations do parents possess that influence their participation in this parenting program? From a sociocultural perspective, the following questions were addressed: How do their immediate and extended family relationships, as well as their attendance with their children in the program contribute to their decisions to participate? How do their experiences in their neighborhood/community affect their participation? How has the staff or the program itself influenced their motivations to participate? And how have the sociocultural considerations of gender, class, culture and ability and these positions within society influenced parents' participation in the program?
As the participant Samantha shared, the program could be compared to a circle, where all the segments of who or what it is all about, came together as a unifying whole. As she explained,

You can't have, you know, the beginning of this (the program) without the end or the end without the beginning, because without all of its parts it's not going to work. It's more of a circle…it's where everything's…working together.

The findings of this study indicate that there is also the creation of a circle. There is a coming together of the individual needs of parents (all mothers) that were met, as well as the wider sociocultural influences in their lives that motivated them to participate in the program. Thus, there became the formation of the mother's circle: the lived experiences of culture, community, and care that the women experienced by being involved in this program. Many facets joined together to create this connected whole.

From a sociocultural standpoint, it is evident that the findings of this study support the assumption in parenting education, that parents’ wider social contextual environments, that encompass family and neighborhood/community, influence participation (McCurdy & Daro, 2001). Due to the fact that parents had support and encouragement from significant others and extended family members, it contributed to their motivations to participate in the program. Problems discussed within their neighborhood/community environments also affected their decisions to participate.

Furthermore, through this study it was also found that positive program and staff attributes in creating community within community for parents and their children contributed to parents’ desires to participate. As it has been discussed in both the adult education and parenting education literature that programs and staff members must be
responsive to, and supportive of participants’ needs in order to encourage their participation (Keddie, 1980; Ross-Gordon, 1990; Lewis, 1992; Sheared, 1995; Wood & Baker, 1999; Keller & McDade, 2000; Lea, 2001).

In addition, this study revealed that women as mothers were also supported in identifying and confronting issues that were gender related within the context of this program. However, the literature in the parenting education field has not addressed this facet of women's development within most parenting programs, with the exception of Belenky (1996) who in her discussion of "public homeplaces" describes two grass roots organizations that were intended for mothers. These included: The Mothers' Centers movements that were developed in Germany and the United States and programs that were established for rural mothers living in poverty identified as the "Invisible Colleges." Within the Mothers' Centers, women joined together "to do something about the isolation and devaluation they were experiencing as mothers" (p. 404). The "Invisible Colleges" were led by women for poor mothers, and enabled "many marginalized women to gain a voice, claim the powers of their minds, and begin democratizing their families" (p. 395).

Furthermore, it can be noted that the findings from this study refute some of the previous findings and discussions in the adult education and parenting education fields. Many earlier studies indicate that those of lower-income and socioeconomic status, as well as people of Color are less likely to be involved in educational programs (Johnstone & Rivera, 1965; Anderson & Darkenwald, 1979; U.S. Department of Education, 1986; Aronson, 1996; Valentine, 1997; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Charlesworth, 2000; Gross, 2001). This study however, revealed that this program strongly addressed the needs of parents and their families who have been marginalized by the mainstream
dominant culture; thus motivating and encouraging them to participate in the program. Because this program and its staff are attentive to issues involving gender, class, culture and ability, and provided an environment that was community oriented in nature, parents felt accepted, validated, supported and welcomed and therefore found the program to be of great value. However, it should also be noted that most of the participants in this study were parents in two parent families, which likely contributed to their time and ability to participate.

Hence, the findings of this study were based on three major areas that created the mothers' circle of participation: 1) the social contextual influences of participants' families and neighborhood/community, 2) program and staff creates community within community, and 3) attentiveness to issues involving gender, class, culture, and ability. Each of these findings will now be summarized.

The Social Contextual Influences of Participants' Families and Neighborhood/Community

Participants' stories revealed that both their families and their neighborhood/community environments affected their participation in the program. These influential aspects were seen within the context of two major areas. First, it was found that variations in family support were experienced by participants in terms of what they received from both their male partners and extended families regarding assistance in caring for their children, and in supporting their attendance in the program. Overall, support from partners and families were moderate to strong for participants regarding both childcare and program participation. Secondly, it was discovered that concerns within the neighborhood/community environment were prevalent and influenced
participation in the program as well. A lack of other young families with children in their neighborhoods, negative environmental forces such as crime, and safety issues, and an experience of minimal connection with others in their neighborhood/community environments were all influential in motivating parents to participate in a program that assisted in counteracting these problems.

The Program and Staff’s Ability to Create Community within Community

The program's ability to become an extension of participants' home environments by being located within their community settings, and by creating an atmosphere that was comfortable and homelike, were positive characteristics that contributed to participants' desires to be involved in a program that created community within their community. In addition, the program's structure, in offering multiple opportunities for parents and staff to share the joys and concerns of parenting, further cultivated support for the parent-child relationship. Providing opportunities for parents to hear and share parenting viewpoints and stories, to receive validation and reassurance in their roles as parents, to help deal with separation anxiety, and to assist them in becoming better parents were all found to be significant contributors towards participation. Participants were also motivated to be involved in a program that created a healthy environment for their children that fostered social interaction and offered structured activities. Lastly, the staff was highly caring towards participants and their children, and was strongly connected to families' needs; thus they were cognizant of the importance of sharing valuable ideas and resources, which further enhanced parents' motivation to participate.
Staff's Ability to be Attentive to Issues Involving Gender, Class, Culture, and Ability

Participants in the study, who were all women, revealed through their stories that being involved in the program assisted them in moving within and beyond the caretaker/mother role. Experiencing and identifying their marginalization as stay at home mothers, finding opportunities to meet their needs for connection as women, creating a sense of their own self-worth and importance, and dealing with the compulsion to be perfect mothers (i.e. the "super mom syndrome") were all addressed through the program. These significant psychological concerns relative to gender, that were further embedded in the sociocultural context of the women's lives, contributed to their desires to participate in a program that helped them to confront and examine these issues.

Additionally, findings of the study revealed that the program addressed participants' needs as lower-income families by providing services at no or low cost, and through extending assistance beyond just parent education by helping parents to obtain food, shelter, and clothing if needed for themselves and their families; these factors positively influenced parents' participation as well. The program and staff were also culturally sensitive and responsive to participants' individual and collective needs in practice by being accepting and supportive of families from varied backgrounds. Finally, the strong presence of understanding and support for those with special needs within the context of the program was a significant contributor towards parents' participatory motivations.

Discussion of Conclusions

Several conclusions can be made from this study regarding what motivated the women in this study to participate in this program. It was the creation of the mothers' circle that joined together many individual reasons, as well as various sociocultural
elements in the women's lives that motivated them to participate. These conclusions will now be discussed relative to the findings from this research.

Conclusions Regarding the Social-Contextual Influences of Participants’ Neighborhood/Community

A major conclusion from this study is that the broader social contextual environment of participants’ families and neighborhood/community as posited by McCurdy and Daro’s (2001) conceptual framework for family support programs did affect parents’ participation in this program. Variations in family support and concerns within neighborhood/community environments were themes that emerged through participants’ stories.

Variations in family support: All of the parents in this study were women, and were the primary participants in the program with their children. All (with the exception of one) were married, engaged, or living with a male partner. Many of these women indicated that they received extensive to moderate support from their partners in assisting them with general family responsibilities and in caring for the children; many stated too that their male partners were supportive of their decisions to participate in the program. Several of the women also discussed that their extended families (if geographically available) were supportive to some extent as well in providing assistance with the children and in encouraging the women’s involvement in the program.

Consistent with the literature, is that the approval of important figures in a person’s life has been found to be a contributory factor that positively influences participation in educational and/or support programs (Luker & Chalmer, 1990; Fishbein, et al, 1997; McCurdy and Daro, 2001; King, 2002). Receiving support from within one's
home environment has also been found to be of importance (Sheared, 1995; Hall & Donaldson, 1997). Since the women in this study had support systems in place from partners and other family members their participation was therefore positively reinforced as well.

Furthermore, lack of time has consistently been discussed in both the adult education and parenting education literature as a deterrent to participation (Darkenwald & Valentine, 1985; Beder, 1990; Hall & Donaldson, 1997; Darkenwald, Kim, & Stowe, 1998; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Keller & McDade, 2000; Pena, 2000; King, 2002; Johnson, Harrison, Burnett, & Emerson, 2003). A conclusion from this study is that since many mothers perceived themselves as having support and assistance from partners and extended family members in their roles and responsibilities as parents, that they may therefore have more time to participate in the program. It should also be noted that almost all of the women (except for one) did not work outside of the home on a full time basis, whereas most of their partners provided this major support for them and the children. Therefore, it can be further concluded that almost all of the women in this study had more time available to participate in the program, since they did not work outside of the home on a full time basis. This too is consistent with an earlier finding which stated that when both parents work outside the home, participation in educational or support programs is less likely for either parent (Coleman, 1991). Furthermore, since dealing with conflicting work schedules is another deterrent to parent participation (Ascher, 1988; Leitch & Tangri, 1990; Charlesworth, 2000; Pena, 2000), many of the women in this study did not have to be concerned with this issue. Hence, most of the women in this study received
support from their partners involving outside work responsibilities, therefore contributing to their ability to participate.

Concerns within the neighborhood/community. Participants in this study described three major concerns within their neighborhood/community environments, a lack of other young families with children in their neighborhoods, negative environmental forces such as crime, or violent, aggressive, or negligent behavior of others, and an experience of minimal connection with people in their neighborhoods. It can therefore be concluded from this study that parents participated in the program in an attempt to counteract these concerns within their neighborhood/community environments.

First, it would seem highly likely that if parents lived in neighborhoods that had few children, that they would seek out programs that would be child and/or family oriented, which is what many participants in this study did. Furthermore, the very fact that this program includes a children’s program in conjunction with its parent education component is helpful in that it provides care for the children on site, and gives the children the opportunity to be with other children as well. This supports what others have also found in the literature that the provision of care for participants’ children increases their participation in parenting programs (Leon, et. al, 1984; Martinez, 1988; Liotos, 1992; Wood & Baker, 1999; Keller & McDade, 2000; Pena, 2000; Gross, 2001; Johnson, et. al, 2003). This is particularly true for parents of lower-income.

Next, with regard to concerns involving crime in neighborhoods, and problems involving violent, aggressive, or negligent behavior of others in the community context, parents described their participation in this program as offering a safe haven for them to
be with their children. This finding refutes a previous theory that has been posited in the family support program literature which states that problems involving crime and neighborhood instability would most likely hinder parent and family participation in support programs, since parents would be more guarded in their decisions to participate (McCurdy & Daro, 2001). It is concluded from this study, however, that parents focused on finding a community resource such as this program for themselves and their children that had a positive influence on their living conditions and environments and offered them a secure and safe atmosphere. Because of this program’s accepted reputation in the community, parents did not perceive it as a program in which they had to be “on guard.”

Parents also discussed the fact that they experienced a lack of connection with others in their neighborhoods. They viewed other people as being out on their own and doing their own thing; or they stated that their neighbors kept to themselves, and didn’t interact very much with others. Transitional neighborhoods were also noted as being problematic. Parents in this study were able to meet other people within their own neighborhood/community, who like themselves wanted to communicate with other people, thus enhancing their motivations to participate in the program. A previous finding that is discussed in both the adult education and parenting education literature is that social stimulation, wanting to meet new people, and/or making friends are contributing factors towards participation in programs (Henry & Basile, 1984; Powell & Zambrana, 1990; Livneh & Livneh, 1999; Caffarella & Merriam, 2000). A conclusion of this study is that this too was a motivating factor that influenced these parents’ participation. Furthermore, as Powell (2000) posits parent education programs may also be sought out by parents to "strengthen parents' social networks, social support, and community ties as
a buffer against stressful life circumstances and transitions" (p. 91). This appeared to be evident within parents' lives in this study as well.

**Conclusions Regarding the Program and Staff’s Creation of Community within Community**

Another major conclusion from this study is that the program and staff contributed greatly to parents’ motivations to be involved in the program. The creation of community within community within the constructs of the program enhanced participants’ experiences in several positive ways. Offering an extension of the home environment, cultivating support for the parent-child relationship, creating a healthy environment for children, and providing a caring and connected staff all fostered a strong sense of community connection and support for participants and their families. Each of these attributes was revealed through participants’ narratives.

*Offers an extension of the home environment.* Due to the fact that this program is embedded within parents’ community settings and provides an informal atmosphere that is comfortable and homelike, as opposed to a more formal institutional environment in which many educational programs are often housed, positively contributed to parents’ participation. It is consistently portrayed in both the adult education and parenting education literature that formal institutional settings are less desirable than more informal community based settings for programs, particularly for lower income persons, as well as for people of Color (Fingeret, 1983; Center for Literacy Studies. 1992; Quigley & Arrowsmith, 1997; Diamond, 1999; Nicholson, Brenner, & Fox, 1999; Wood & Baker, 1999; Issac, Guy, & Valentine, 2001). Even though one of the program’s sites included in this study was in a school building, parents spoke positively of the overall environment
and the set-up of the room inside of the school as being warm, comfortable, and inviting. The other three sites that were housed in apartment complexes were described similarly as well. It can therefore be concluded that these atmospheres assisted parents in feeling at ease, and further contributed to their desires to participate.

*Cultivates support for the parent child relationship.* Supporting the parent-child relationship is crucial in any parent involvement program (Goldberg, 1997; Powell, 2000). It can be concluded from this study that this type of encouragement was paramount in influencing parent participation in the program. Parents' stories portrayed the importance for them in being able to hear and share parenting viewpoints and stories, to receive validation and reassurance as parents, and to learn to become better parents through the program. These reasons for participation have been described by other parents of lower-income groups, and/or by people of Color as being essential as well (Floyd, 1998; Maruca, 2000; Gross, 2001).

Parents also described the experience of "separation anxiety" as difficult, and further discussed how the program and staff helped them to deal with this concern. This is a typical developmental issue that often occurs during the infant, toddler, and preschool years (Jaffe, 1997). Sometimes it is as challenging for the parent to separate from the child, as it is for the child to separate from the parent (McClelland, 1995; Brooks, 1999). Furthermore, it is a concern that varies among cultures (Trawick-Smith, 2000; Gonzalez-Mena, 2001) As stated by Edward T. Hall in the book *Beyond Culture*, "The world is divided into those cultures who cut the apron strings and those who do not" (p. 226).

It was made apparent through participants' stories in this study that the program and staff were generally responsive as well as culturally sensitive to both parents' and
children's needs regarding separation. Within the cultural context of the United States, parents promote and encourage children's independence at an earlier age; whereas, in many other cultures interdependence is more highly valued and promoted (Gonzalez-Mena, 2001). Parents in this study, regardless of their cultural background however, were appreciative of receiving support with regard to theirs and their children's feelings surrounding separation anxiety. It can therefore be concluded that this was a positive factor that further enhanced their motivations to participate.

*Creates a healthy environment for the children.* A critical consideration for any program that offers an early childhood education component is the quality of the children's environment (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Szanton, 1997; Douville-Watson, et. al, 2003). It was found through this study that parents perceived the program as being highly beneficial for their children. Parents described opportunities for social interaction, activities offered in a structured environment, and the encouragement of time for just the parent and child as being essential. Parents' stories powerfully revealed that these program characteristics were strong contributors towards wanting to participate in the program.

*Provides a caring and connected staff.* Staff attributes were perceived by parents in the program as extremely influential in their willingness to participate as well. Characteristics of staff can have either a positive (Lieblein, 1988; McCurdy & Daro, 2001) or negative (Sissel, 1997; 2000; Lea, 2001) influence on parent participation. In this study, it can be concluded that the staff maintained positive relationships with parents and children in their ability to relate effectively to them in a caring and connected manner. Their sensitivity in being non-judgmental, encouraging, and supportive were
particular traits that parents noted as valuable. Furthermore, it was found that parents were appreciative of the staff's ability and willingness to be of assistance by sharing a wealth of parenting ideas and resources. Flexibility in the presentation of curriculum topics, and the solicitation from parents of subjects and ideas to be discussed were also described as being crucial considerations that were offered by the staff to parents. As has been frequently discussed in the adult education literature, it is important to give those who have been marginalized in particular a "voice" in contributing to their educational experiences (Keddie, 1980; Giroux, 1985; 1987; Quigley, 1987; Martin, 1990).

Furthermore, avoiding the "banking concept" (Freire, 2000, p. 73) of education in which the instructor does all of the talking about what learners need to know and should learn, was deemed as essential for parents in this program.

Conclusions Regarding Attentiveness to Issues Involving Gender, Class, Culture, and Ability

Another major conclusion from this study is that this program addresses several women's issues within the context of the parent discussion group that have not been discussed in any of the parenting education literature to date, with the exception of two grass roots programs described by (Belenky, 1996). Women in this study, however, described the isolation and marginalization of stay-at-home mothers, their needs for connection as women, the recognition of their own self-worth and importance, and problems in relation to feeling that they needed to be perfect mothers. They further discussed how the program assisted them in identifying and coming to terms with these issues.
Furthermore, another primary conclusion of this study is that parents who are of lower-income and parents who are people of Color or immigrants do participate in programs if the program and staff are attentive to their and their families’ needs within a culturally responsive, community-oriented environment. This conclusion contradicts previous revelations in both the adult education and parenting education literature. Multiple research and theoretical perspectives indicate that those of lower-socioeconomic backgrounds, and people of Color, tend to avoid participating in educational programs (Johnstone & Rivera, 1965; Anderson & Darkenwald, 1979; Penland, 1979; U.S. Department of Education, 1986; Aronson, 1996; Valentine, 1997; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Charlesworth, 2000). However, in this study, parents from a lower-income status, as well as a proportionate number from the area's population of people of Color did choose to participate in this program.

In addition, it can be concluded that persons who are developmentally challenged are also strongly encouraged and supported through the program. The program and staff are responsive to creating an environment of care and acceptance, coupled with making connections for those who are in need of receiving additional services. This support is given primarily to children in the program, since approximately one-third have special needs. Furthermore, about two-thirds of the participants in this study had, either in the past or present, a child in the program who was developmentally delayed. In addition, there is also one parent in the program who is cognitively challenged and spoke of her positive experiences as well.
Parents' stories revealed the powerful influence of the program and staff's strengths in being attentive to these issues involving gender, class, culture and ability. Each of the themes that emerged through their narratives will now be addressed.

**Assists women in moving within and beyond the caretaker/mother role.** It can be concluded that there were four prevalent issues described by the women in this study related to gender, in which they told of the program's ability in helping them to move within and beyond the caretaker/mother role. Identifying the marginalization of stay-at-home mothers, meeting needs for connection, creating a sense of self-worth and importance, and dealing with the "super mom syndrome" were themes in which the women gave voice to their experiences.

First, concerning the marginalization of stay-at-home-mothers, participants discussed their feelings of being isolated and how they believed that they existed within the sidelines of society. Some of the women described this experience relative to what it felt like to be in this position; however two of the women were able to directly articulate how this role in life is frowned upon by society. Their words coincided with Belenky (1996) who asserts, "Mostly, it seems, mothers are ignored because they are seen as irrelevant to public life" (p. 407). The women in this study described how their jobs in the home were often not seen as valuable since they were not producing a paycheck and contributing to the functioning of the modern day work world, and to their families' fiscal survival. Consequently, "because the mother is seen as exerting no agency, her caring work is counted as doing nothing" (p. 415). Therefore too, the work of women as mother and nurturer is often conducted under oppressive conditions (Ruddick, 1999). Yet,
women's care for their children in the home should be at best more positively identified as "maternal leadership" (Belenky, 1996, p. 412).

Furthermore, one of the two women who overtly expressed these feelings of marginalization as a stay-at-home-mother, and who was the most educated of all the participants in the study (having a four-year college degree) also discussed how patriarchal criticism reinforced this deep feeling of alienation. As Samantha stated, "when you are home you are cooking, cleaning, you have kids to watch - you are doing other things. But it's not considered a job, because you're not bringing in a check…the fact that we were sitting home eating Bon-Bons kind of thing…it was more from men than it was women. Some of it…was joking…other times it was from anger."

Within the constructs of this society, being "productive" is a necessary consideration. This notion is perpetuated primarily by the European-American, male, dominant culture, who are also at the helm of government and leadership in the United States; for the US strongly supports values of autonomy, independence, and self-reliance (Bassuck, 1996; Hansan & Morris, 1999).

One strong example of this notion can be seen clearly within the last decade. Through the adoption of TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) women who are of low-income, and who had been receiving welfare, are being forced to re-enter the work world, regardless of the number of children they have. This policy was put into place so that these women could now "pull their own weight" and become "self-sufficient", and "productive" members of society. Recent presidential administrations and their predominantly European-American, male Cabinets have strongly supported this change (Cherlin, 2001). These beliefs of the importance of productivity, at the expense of
perceiving the care of children as important, are therefore filtered down from those in positions of leadership to the rest of society.

Hence, women in this study were aware of their isolation, and their experience of being marginalized as stay-at-home-mothers. In addition to the women who openly articulated their feelings about society's perception of the stay-at-home mother, the women who implicitly expressed these concerns shared what it felt like to be alone and alienated, and that they felt they often had no one to share life's experiences. Everyone that surrounded them had a purpose in the world of work, where many felt that they did not, and were therefore not as valued. They further discussed how being involved in the program assisted them in dealing with these negative perceptions, and helped them to identify this position that they held within society. Therefore, it can be concluded that their motivation to participate was further enhanced.

Secondly, it can be concluded too from this study that women's needs for connection through relationships and in the construction of knowledge (Gilligan, 1982; Belenky et. al, 1986; Flannery, 2000; Tisdell, 2000) was a motive for participation. Participants voiced the importance of being able to connect with others in a supportive and nurturing environment which the program and staff provided. Their stories further described how essential it was for them to learn with others in their parenting roles. For some of the women, permanent friendships were developed, nurtured, and continued; for others the opportunity to socialize in temporary relationships was sufficient. To be connected in supportive relationships, in which as Julie said, "we can be completely open and honest about what's going on… boost each other up" was an important contributor towards participation.
Thirdly, an additional conclusion from this study is that creating a sense of self-worth and importance was also enhanced through the women's participation in the program. It has been anticipated that involvement in parenting programs could increase participants' feelings of self-worth (Powell, 2000). Women participants in this study expressed the importance of realizing that they needed to take time for themselves from their demanding mothering roles. For these women who articulated this experience, "they were no longer willing to lose or curtail their own chances so that the fortunes of others might be enhanced" (Belenky et. al, 1997, p. 174).

Women's role, as selfless, particularly in the realm of motherhood, is highly prevalent. Often, however, women will strike a balance between caring for others and caring for their own well-being (Gilligan, 1982); which is what the women in this study realized they needed to do in order to act responsibly towards both their children and themselves. Participating in the program however, assisted them in recognizing that they must engage in their own self-care. Being in the presence of other women, who were attentive to their own needs, as well as discussing this important concept in the parenting group, was beneficial in motivating them to be involved in the program.

Lastly, it can be concluded that this program assisted mothers in dealing with the "super mom syndrome;" the drive to be totally attentive and perfect mothers to their children at all times. The desire to be the perfect parent to one's child is not uncommon particularly in the early years of a child's development, when the experience of parenting is new and the parent wants to do her absolute best. Parents often "build their images of parenthood around their own ideas of perfection, whatever their definition of perfection might be" (Galinsky, 1987, p. 20).
Women, in particular, who are not working outside of the home may feel that they must approach their mothering roles as if they were performing their careers, or job related responsibilities by highly structuring and organizing their children's lives. Yet motherhood is not something that is left behind at the office each day, but becomes a responsibility that mothers often go to the extremes to perform well 24/7. As Amy shared about the time she spent with her child, "It was from this time…we have to watch Sesame Street…then from this time to this time…everything was scheduled. Play-dough from 9:30 to 10:10 AM. It was insane…I kinda packed the whole day…it was overload."

As Amy and others became involved in the program they learned to look at their lives differently and realized they did not have to continually strive to create a perfectly scheduled and overly involved life with their children, day in and day out. They also discovered through sharing their stories with other mothers within the context of the program, that they didn't have to be perfect - that others were not perfect as well. Furthermore, these women stated that the program helped them to realize that they didn't have to be the ones to always "do it all," that others in their lives could be involved in sharing the workload.

*Addresses needs of lower-income families.* It can be further concluded from this study that the needs of families who are of lower-income are being addressed in this program. First, this occurred through the program's ability to provide services at either no cost or low cost. Secondly, the fact that the program and staff extended assistance to parents and their families beyond just parenting education was prevalent. Offering families food, shelter, and or clothing to meet their needs was something that was
provided either from those directly involved in this program, or from connections made by the program from other resources.

Furthermore, an institutional barrier to participation that effects those of lower-income includes unaffordable, high tuition costs (Lareau, 1989; Valentine & Darkenwald, 1990; Kagan, 1995). The fact too that persons who are of lower economic status have limited resources is a major participatory concern (McGivney, 1990; Long & Middleton, 2001; Gross, 2001). Problems involving lack of transportation have further been found to deter participation (Hayes & Darkenwald, 1988; Liontos, 1991; Charlesworth, 2000; Keller & McDade, 2000; Santarelli et. al, 2001). Parents in this study however, spoke of the ability of the program to address these needs. Tuition is free for these participants who lived within the Title I School district. This was perceived as extremely helpful since having limited financial resources, were also discussed by participants as being difficult. The program further provides transportation by way of cabs, vans, or the staff’s willingness to come and pick up parents themselves and bring them to the program if needed. Parents described these supportive measures as being of great importance, thus further contributing to their participation.

Another area that the program addressed in assisting parents of lower-income was in helping them obtain necessities such as food, clothing, or shelter as needed. Parents discussed how appreciative they were to the staff and those affiliated or connected to the program for making provisions for them within this capacity. This attribute was not found or discussed in any of the literature pertaining to participation in parenting education programs; yet it is essential for staff to be empathetic towards the difficulties that poorer parents and their families may face (Lewis, 1992).
However, in the adult education literature Long & Middleton, (2001) implied that, when facing urgent needs for survival, becoming involved in an educational program "may seem inconsequential" (p. 21). Therefore, it can be asserted that when living in poverty, or within the realm of a small income day after day, participating in adult education may not be a priority, when the need to obtain food, clothing, and shelter is a far greater necessity. Thus, it can be concluded from this study that the participants in the parenting program were getting these crucial needs met right within the context of the program, which further enhanced their motivations to participate.

*Culturally sensitive to individual and collective needs in practice.* Parents in this study who were people of Color or immigrants discussed ways in which the program and staff were highly sensitive to their needs. Parents who were of the mainstream culture also noted positive ways in which the staff was attentive and supportive to those from other cultures as well. Therefore, another conclusion of this research is that these positive experiences of parents influenced their desires to participate in the program. Cultural competence, sensitivity, and responsiveness are major considerations as necessary staff attributes within both the fields of adult and parenting education (Quigley, 1989; Lewis, 1992; Sheared, 1995; Wood & Baker, 1999; Keller & McDade, 2000; Lea, 2001; McCurdy & Daro, 2001; Santarelli et. al, 2001). It has been posited that staff must possess these traits so parents and families of diverse backgrounds will feel more comfortable and accepted in wanting to participate.

Sheared (1995) for example, found that the African-American participants in her study preferred to participate in a learning environment that acknowledged their cultural lived-experiences. In this study, Masa, who is from Liberia, spoke of the importance of
this influence on her own participation in the program. "They (the staff) respect my culture. They want to learn…eager to learn about my stories and background…all of them respect me…they take all of us in." The fear of not being understood or welcomed was also found to be a concern of people of Color (Pena, 2000). However, in addition to Masa, other parents from various cultures expressed feelings of being accepted, welcomed, and cared for by the program's staff.

Furthermore, parents were appreciative of being given suggestions or ideas about parenting, but were glad that these thoughts and beliefs were not being pushed on them. Yuki, who is from Japan, and Chastity who is Hispanic, both shared thoughts about this consideration. As Chastity commented, "they (the staff) try to make sure that they don't step on anybody's culture…you know, sometimes when you are from a different place you parent differently." As Norwood & Atkinson (1997) found the validation of participants "cultural frame of reference, values, and heritage" (p. 411) is further essential to participation of parents from diverse populations. Thus, it can be concluded that the cultural competence of the staff from this program was highly influential on the motivation to participate of those from varied backgrounds.

Promotes understanding and support for those with special needs. Another conclusion from this study is that parents were motivated to participate in the program due to the program and staff's strengths in supporting those who are developmentally challenged. Parents' stories revealed how the environment fostered a strong acceptance of persons with special needs, how the staff and program provided additional resources and needed connections to assist families, and how parents were given support in understanding and solving difficulties relative to their children's needs and concerns.
One-third of the program's children has been identified as having special needs, and approximately two-thirds of the participants in this study had a child with special needs in the program, either in the past or present.

Most parenting education programs do not make these considerations a major priority. In the general parenting education literature, families with special needs are rarely discussed, except within the context of programs that are therapeutic in nature, and specifically provide services for just special needs children, such as the Infants and Toddlers program that has been frequently mentioned by parents throughout this study.

This parenting education program, which is the focus of this study, is unique however, in that it involves families who need support through a program that is specifically designed for families with typically as well as atypically developing children. The program combines the parent discussion group simultaneously with the children's playgroup for all families. These are characteristics that the program possesses which other programs are unable to boast. Furthermore, the program's home base site is located in a school that is a special education facility for students from Pre-K to the age of 21. This environment further encourages the acceptance and support of persons who are challenged.

Parenting programs for parents themselves who have special needs within community contexts are rare; most programs are either housed in clinical settings or are conducted through visitation to parents' homes (Llewellyn, McConnell, Russo, Mayes, & Honey, 2002; Ackerson, 2003). In addition to supporting children with special needs, the program was also seen as highly beneficial to one parent who is also developmentally challenged. Cassie attended the special education facility where this program is now
housed when she was a child. She described the importance of being in this environment, and spoke of how she felt like she was with "family" when she came to the program. She also shared how the school held many wonderful memories for her.

Since I conducted many of the interviews in this particular school, and observed how the program operated within this context, it was my perception also that the environment was highly supportive to special needs participants. The setting generated warmth, comfort, and acceptance. Even though this was an institutional facility, it had an extremely relaxed atmosphere, more than in any other school where I have been a visitor. From parents' narratives and the experience of seeing the context myself, it can be concluded that this supportive environment contributed to parents' motivation to participate in the program.

In summary, findings from this study resulted in many conclusions concerning what motivated parents to participate in this program; thus creating a circle of community support and care for parent participants. In this research, some of the parents' reasons for participating had a psychological basis, however these individual motivations were deeply embedded within the social context of participants' family relationships, neighborhood/community, and the program's environment. Furthermore, the sociocultural complexities of issues involving gender, class, culture and ability were highly influential in contributing to parents' desires to be involved in the program. It can therefore be concluded that in isolation, individualistic, psychologically focused methods for examining participation are incomplete in determining motivation, whereas a more comprehensive addition of focusing on the sociocultural perspective as well is far more
accurate in unveiling the meaning of this experience. In this study, the creation and unification of the mothers' circle brought all of these entities together.

Discussion of Assumptions

Even though when I entered this study my assumptions were outlined in Chapter 1, it is important that I discuss them in relation to the findings of this study. I identified ten major areas pertaining to my beliefs in general about parents, families, and parenting education, as well as my perspectives relative to diverse beliefs and practices in family life. These assumptions will now be addressed:

First, parents learn "how to parent" from role models within their families or communities of origin. Parenting behaviors that have been modeled for them from these influential sources are deeply embedded in their own current belief and value systems. From conversations with parents in this study it was evident that this assumption was true. Parents often discussed ways in which they wanted to learn new ways of parenting from the program since they were not satisfied with some of the ways in which they were parented as children themselves. Parents described disciplining situations in which they acted as their own parents did, and wanted to change these behaviors.

Secondly, most parents want to be "good" parents. If they are unable to meet this goal, it is usually because of difficulties experienced in their own developmental life processes. Parents in this study portrayed a sense of wanting what was best for their children, and were highly attentive to their children's needs. Many parents in this study faced hardships such as poverty, medical illness within the family, experiences of isolation, and geographic separation from almost all of their extended family members. Yet, they moved beyond these concerns and became involved in a program that further
enhanced their children's lives, as well as supported their relationships with them. It was evident that being "good" parents to their children, was a strong priority.

Thirdly, parents from all walks of life usually need some type of support whether it may be informally from family, friends, acquaintances or community, or from formalized programs. Participants in this study recognized the need for support and described various ways in which they found it from this program, as well as from other sources. Although the parents in this study were of lower economic status, the family support movement that was launched in the 1980's, and still thrives, continues to posit that parents need support no matter what their economic status may be (Powell, 2000).

Fourthly, not only professionals share expertise about parenting, parents are experts as well. Parents in this study shared many stories about their child rearing beliefs, capabilities and struggles. It was made evident that these parents were the ones who knew their children best therefore they were the "experts" relative to their own parenting.

Fifthly, cultural beliefs and practices influence parents' decisions on how to parent their children as well as how and where they seek support. It was evident that the parents from various cultural backgrounds in this study each shared stories that demonstrated the importance of "family" in influencing the way they wanted to raise their children. Those who were immigrants and/or people of Color were separated from their extended families in some way. For Masa and Yuki who recently came to the United States, their extended families are still in their countries of origin (Africa and Japan, respectively). Star, who is a first generation immigrant to the United States, was in this position as well. For Chastity, her sister is close by, but her mother has passed away, and many of her extended family members still live out of state. Tonya, is separated from her family in
terms of their lack of support due to their problems with addiction, and lack of dependability, leaving her to be responsible for them in many ways. Since connections with extended family are important for many immigrants and/or people of Color, these parents looked towards other venues for support in their lives (i.e. through the program). Hence, their needs for family connection, which is an important cultural value, were met as they looked for support beyond the familial context.

Next, isolation from family, friends, and community support mechanisms can contribute to parents' needs to seek educational resources, support in their roles as parents, or social connections with others from formal programs and/or groups. Parents' stories of being "isolated," "trapped or stuck" at home, and being "alone" were revealed in this study as being strong motivational reasons for their desires to participate in this program.

In addition, challenges faced by parents that are difficult to manage alone (for example, having a child with special needs, raising a child alone, or having a child with behavior problems) can contribute to parents' decisions to seek assistance from formal education and support programs. Approximately two-thirds of the parents in this study had a child either in the past or present who attended the program. Many of these parents discussed these concerns that they were experiencing with their children, and described how the program assisted them in dealing with these issues. Hence, these challenges they faced greatly influenced their participation in the program.

Furthermore, parents who are less financially stable are often limited in their abilities to obtain parenting information from resources that are literature based or from technological venues, and may also experience difficulty in acquiring needed learning
materials for their children. Descriptions were given by parents of the importance of the program and staff's ability in providing them with needed resources and materials. Parents shared also that this was beneficial in light of their financial limitations.

Additionally, the majority of parent education and support programs are constructed based on the dominant culture's European-American, middle-class values. Within the constructs of this program, giving children "choices" in a democratic fashion that is more prevalent within European-American, middle-class families, was suggested to parent participants. Two of the parents struggled with this issue. Chastity, who is Hispanic, raised her older children in a more authoritarian household prior to coming to the program with her youngest child, who she is raising more democratically. For Chastity, raising her children in different ways has been both a positive and negative experience since these parenting styles conflict with each other. Tonya, who is African-American/European-American, said she did not really learn much from the parenting discussion group itself, since she had been parenting for a long time, and knew what she was doing. During my interview with her in her home, she also demonstrated more authoritarian discipline techniques with her children, and did not seem to be utilizing democratic alternatives.

Lastly, parents who receive strong support are empowered in their roles as parents, and are strengthened in managing their own lives, as well as their families' lives. Within the context of parents' stories in this study there was a deep sense of the experience of being empowered from their participation in the program. In particular, women as mothers were strengthened in acknowledging their own needs. Furthermore, they perceived their roles as parents as being enhanced through the support that they
received from the staff, the program, and from each other. It was evident that they saw themselves as benefiting from being involved in the program, and that a parent support network such as this strongly contributed to their personal and parenting development.

Discussion of Limitations

The sample studied, and issues relevant to power and positioning were the primary limitations in this study. A few major considerations must therefore be addressed.

First, the size of the sample limits the ability to make generalizations about the findings of this study to a larger population of parents who participate in educational and support programs. A total of 16 parents participated in this study. The findings reflect their stories and experiences and cannot necessarily be generalized to the greater population of all parents who are involved in parenting educational and support programs. However, readers of this study can determine what findings might be applied to other settings.

Secondly, my own positionality as a European-American, middle-class woman may have affected and limited the responses of the participants in this study, all who were of lower socioeconomic status. Furthermore, responses from participants of Color may have also been influenced as a result of my positionality. I was also acutely aware of my own differences throughout the study. I became cognizant of such considerations as my educational background, vocabulary, and mode of dress, as well as my own beliefs and values about parenting, family life, and education in general during this interview process. All of these entities could have created a power imbalance that may have negatively impacted the study. I attempted to deal with these issues however, by speaking
with parents in a respectful and supportive way. I avoided using educational jargon
during the interviews, and focused on making our discussions conversational. Whenever I
could, I dressed comfortably (versus professionally) in order to help parents feel more
relaxed. I further attempted to be accepting of participants and to see them as parents who
deeply love and care for their children, even though some of their beliefs about parenting
may have been different than my own.

Lastly, the environment in which this study was conducted must also be
considered in impacting participants' responses. All interviews with the exception of one
were held within the context of the program. Even though each interview was conducted
in a separate room not being used by others in the program during that time, just being
present within the program's environment could have inhibited participants' responses. In
addition, during approximately one-fifth of the interviews, parents' children were present.
During these interviews, participants were distracted at times, which could therefore limit
their responses as well. However, this also gave me a better understanding of how they
interacted with their children, and a better sense of what it was like to be in their daily
lives.

Implications for Future Research

Several implications can be made with regard to future research within the fields
of adult education and parenting education. Recommendations will now be made as to
how research involving the study of participation can be enhanced within each
educational domain.
Adult Education

Participants' stories in this study revealed that motivation to participate in a voluntary parenting education and family support program went far beyond psychological considerations. As was pointed out in Chapter 2, much of the early research on adult education participation has focused primarily on individualistic, psychological influences, while giving minimal attention to social contextual implications (Rubenson & Xu, 1997). Historically, the study of motivation has been widely focused on within the field of psychology, with an emphasis on examining individual needs, and self-focused reasons for behavior (O'Neil & Drillings, 1994). However, human behavior is far more complex and what must further be considered in examining motivation are the socialization processes of human beings as well as the cultural contexts of the human domain (Wlodkowski, 1999).

Even though within the past decade the pendulum has been swinging more towards placing social contextual considerations in the forefront, very few studies focus on considering both psychological and sociocultural motivational influences together when examining participation (Skilton-Sylvester, 2002). Continued research that examines both of these entities must be highlighted in order to provide a more holistic view of the complexities of participation within the adult education field (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Participants' positionality within society with regard to gender, class, culture and ability were also examined as influences on participation in this study. The stories of the women involved in this research revealed that the program and staff were attentive and sensitive to women’s unique concerns and needs as mothers, and to the issues families
who are of lower income face with regard to receiving assistance with basic needs. Furthermore, the program and staff were open to and accepting of diverse cultural backgrounds, and were highly supportive of those with special needs. Future research must continue to examine participation by focusing on these crucial sociocultural considerations, since few studies have done so in the past (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

In addition, it has been found that many persons outside of the mainstream also prefer programs that are more community based as opposed to those that are institutionally housed (Fingeret, 1983; Center for Literacy Studies, 1992; Quigley & Arrowsmith, 1997; Issac, Guy & Valentine, 2001). The program that was examined in this study was deeply situated within a community context. Continued research on adult education participation should highlight these types of environments as well, in order to discover more about the value that participants place on community settings.

However, even though concerns of marginalized groups were sensitively and responsibly addressed within the program, it should also be noted that only heterosexual participants were included in this study. Therefore, an additional recommendation would be to include those who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual in future research on adult education participation.

Finally, this study was a qualitative study that included the narratives of participants that brought forth an in-depth analysis of what motivated participants to participate in this program. Many studies on motivation and participation that have been completed within the field have been quantitative (Morstain & Smart, 1974; Aslanian & Brickell, 1980; Cross, 1981; Henry & Basile, 1994; Fujita-Starck, 1996; Livneh & Livneh, 1999). These quantitative studies provided more descriptive, limited explanations
for participation without examining the deeper meanings that participants give to their experiences.

Narrative is of particular importance however, in acquiring an "understanding of the 'textuality' of social and cultural research" (Gray, 1995, p. 156), and meaning making is central to this process. Furthermore, narrative provides an interrelationship between individual and cultural stories (Rossiter, 1999). Future research in adult education should attempt to uncover the study of participation from this more complex process that seeks to more widely explore the participation phenomenon.

*Parenting Education*

A major concern within the parenting education field is that the majority of theories and studies on participation of parents in parenting programs have emphasized barriers and deterrents (Danoff, Kemper, & Sherry, 1994; Dolan & Haxby, 1995; Wood & Baker, 1999; Keller & McDade, 2000; Lea, 2001; Johnson et al, 2003). Much less attention has been given to the motivational influences that draw parents to participate in programs (McCurdy & Daro, 2001). This study which focused on the influential factors that motivated parents to participate was useful to the parenting educational field by providing a model that described positive program and staff attributes that contributed to the success of a holistic and healthy program for both parents and their children. Future research within the field should also consider this focus in order to continue to discover what additional program and staff strengths may be drawing parents to educational and support programs.

This study also took into consideration participants' reasons for being involved in a parenting education program that emphasized inclusion of other family members (such
as participants' children). Although they were not a focus of this study, other caregivers who are members of participants' extended families (such as grandparents) are involved in this program as well. Most studies within the field examine participation in formal educational settings that operate solely within an adult-only focused context, or exclude programs that also include extended family members. Research has shown that persons who are immigrants and/or people of Color often prefer to be involved in programs that provide opportunities for the family as a whole within the parenting educational environment (Martinez, 1988; Powell & Zambrana, 1990; Diamond, 1999; Keller & McDade, 2000; McDermott, 2001; Santarelli et. al, 2001). More studies should be conducted within these more culturally specific settings.

Another crucial recommendation for future research is that additional studies need to be conducted solely with more people of Color and/or who are members of immigrant communities. This study’s population consisted of only four parents of Color. Future studies should include a larger sample of diverse parents so that a deeper and more complete understanding can be acquired with regard to their positioning within society, and how this positioning influences their participation experiences. In addition, this study included all women participants. Future research should also be conducted on father’s participation in parenting education in order to obtain their perspectives. Parents too, who are gay, lesbian or bisexual should be included in future studies in order to acquire an increased understanding of their participation experiences, as well as to learn about their unique concerns and needs as parents.

Furthermore, since this study did involve all female participants, future research should attempt to address the marginalization within society of stay-at-home mothers.
(Belenky, 1996). A major finding in this study was that women felt this stigma and discussed what it was like for them to be isolated, alone, and on the outskirts of life; however, only two women explicitly articulated their thoughts and feelings about this experience. More studies need to be conducted that will attempt to uncover the meaning of this phenomenon for more mothers who are staying at home with their children, and to further explore how parenting programs can assist mothers in confronting and dealing with this issue.

Additionally, there were other issues that surfaced within this study that were of particular concern to women as mothers. The need for connection (Belenky et. al, 1997; Flannery, 2000; Tisdell, 2000), taking more time for one’s self (Belenky et. al, 1997), and feeling that they must be perfect mothers (Galinsky, 1987) could each be the focus of future studies. Parenting educational programs would benefit from having more information about these concerns so that they can assist women in dealing with them more effectively, responsively, and sensitively.

Another area that should be a focus for future research would be to examine how parents obtain support after leaving parenting education and family support programs that provide services to those who have infants and young children, as the parents in this study did. To discover how, or if, parents maintain help and encouragement in their parenting roles as their children grow older would be valuable in understanding this phenomenon. Program planners may also be able to more effectively construct and implement programs to meet the needs of parents who have school aged children, and even teens, if they were made aware of parents’ concerns during these phases of life as well.
Implications for Practice

There are a number of implications that can be drawn from this study to enhance program practice within the fields of adult education and parenting education. Suggestions that are consistent with the literature can be taken into consideration for improving practice.

First, participants in this study described the importance of the staff’s flexibility when discussing topics that were of importance to them (versus always adhering to the curriculum). Staff, however, might want to consider making discussions even more open for participants so that they are in even greater control of discussion choices. Adult participants, who are given increased ownership of the curriculum and program, tend to be more interested in participating. As Sheared (1995) discovered participants' "cultural and historical realties" must be addressed in the curriculum in order to enhance participation. These essential considerations should therefore become a point of departure for parenting discussions.

Furthermore, even though the staff of this program provided a checklist at the beginning of the school year, in which participants rated and requested discussions of parenting topics that were of the greatest importance to them, a more open-ended response form could be distributed to solicit parents’ concerns. Instead of having a preconceived survey containing items in which participants automatically and systematically respond; a larger section on forms to provide additional narrative feedback could be incorporated.

Secondly, it should be noted that a major strength of the program and staff was that they were sensitive and attentive to diversity. By listening to parents’ stories about
their backgrounds and cultures, assisting them as needed in overcoming language barriers, and being helpful, but not forceful, in sharing diverse parenting ideas, as participants requested, contributed towards parents motivation to participate. However, it may also be helpful if the staff considered additional venues for parents to share their cultural beliefs and practices within the context of the parenting group. Increased opportunities for story telling, role-playing, and musically based activities have been found to be preferable modes for learning and sharing among people of Color, particularly for African-Americans (Glanville & Tiller, 1991; Holton, 1992).

Thirdly, even though it was mentioned that the staff provided opportunities for parents to make and create materials to be used at home with their children, the staff could increase the number of these activities within the constructs of the program. Not only were they described as beneficial by the parents who spoke of them in this study, but it has also been discussed within the literature as something that parents appreciate and enjoy in parenting programs that enhances their participation experiences (Floyd, 1998).

Fourthly, a program that is designed to assist parents in their parenting roles and that provides support to families should consider the notion of expansion. Meeting just two hours per week, one morning per week, does not seem to be enough in order to support families’ adequately and effectively. Participants in this study described an essential attribute of the program in its ability to create a sense of “family.” If this type of environment offers the benefit of family connection in such close and caring ways, then it is recommended that this opportunity should be increased in order to multiply and enhance participants’ experiences.
Furthermore, this notion of expansion should be carried even further to the suggestion of offering the program at different times of the day other than weekday, mornings. Many single parents or dual earner parents who work during the week often have difficulty in attending weekday sessions; thus scheduling needs of parents must be addressed (McLaughlin & Shields, 1987; Leitch & Tangri, 1990; Parcel & Menaghan, 1997; Wood & Baker, 1999; Pena, 2000; Gross, 2001). It is therefore suggested that evening meal-time groups or Saturday morning groups for parents who work be considered as an essential component when structuring future parenting programs; continued financial assistance for parents in being able to attend at no cost, as well as provision of transportation (Liontos, 1991; Keller & McDade, 2000; Santarelli et al, 2001) should also be included within expansion plans. For as this study, as well as other studies have revealed, these are essential assets of programs that contribute to lower income parents’ participation.

When programs seek to make expansions they should also consider the important notion of making environments that are institutionally situated more "homelike," since this was a positive attribute of this program that made parents feel more comfortable and at-ease in an educational environment. This is a crucial consideration in light of the fact that persons who have been marginalized by society tend to resist school environments where they have had previous negative experiences (Giroux, 1985; Quigley, 1989, 1990; 1992; 1997).

Fifthly, since a major finding of this study was that the program assisted women in moving within and beyond the caretaker/mother role, continued emphasis in parenting education programs needs to be placed on issues that fall within this domain. Exploring
ways to address increased needs for connection, taking time for self, dealing with isolation, and wanting to be perfect mothers should be considered as major topics to be addressed in parenting discussions.

Next, the important considerations of cultural competence of staff, and cultural reciprocity in programs should be examined and explored more extensively and thoroughly within the context of parenting education and family support programs. Cultural competence is defined as "an awareness of, sensitivity to, and responsiveness to the parent's cultural background and history" (McCurdy & Daro, 2001, p. 116). Although the staff of this program has developed this awareness, it is suggested that this mindfulness continue to be a focal point within staff development training.

Cultural reciprocity involves reflecting on one's own cultural beliefs and values in order to develop a greater acceptance of those from other cultures (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). Staff should be encouraged to extensively examine and identify their own cultural traditions, heritage, and values in order to further develop a deeper understanding of various persons' diverse beliefs and practices. Furthermore, cultural reciprocity urges the avoidance of the "othering" process, in which professionals focus on participants who have been marginalized as the "other," and therefore may cause greater separations and oppositions between persons (Fine, 1998). Staff members in parenting education programs are encouraged to continue to seek out opportunities to closely connect with parents and families as a team working together.

Lastly, practitioners in the field of parenting education should contemplate developing the socio-ecological model concerning child-rearing practices in different cultural contexts that has been posited by Bronfenbrenner (1986) in order to enhance
parent and family participation. Within this model, Bronfenbrenner (1986) challenges parent educators to consider four systems, the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem as all having significant influence on the developing child and his/her family. The microsystem contains the child and “the setting in which the child experiences direct interaction with others including, family, school, church etc.” (Bennett & Grimley, 2001, p. 104). The mesosystem is the interconnections that are made among these microsystems. The exosystem involves the child’s neighborhood/community and such entities as media influence and the world of work, all of which may not be directly experienced by the child, but influences the child none-the-less. Finally, the macrosystem is the larger cultural context in which all other systems are embedded. The macrosystem would include such considerations as customs and rituals of cultures, economic and educational systems and beliefs etc. since all of these have an impact on the child as well (Bennett & Grimley, 2001).

In connecting this model to parenting education, Bronfenbrenner’s socio-ecological perspective brings to the forefront the following considerations, as pointed out by Bennett and Grimley (2001):

A general, parent education program, no matter how expertly developed, needs adaptation if it is to fit different milieus. The homes in our cities and countryside are nested in larger, more powerful relationship systems which differ considerably, particularly at meso-system (neighborhood) and exosystem (socio-economic context) levels…the nesting of homes in neighborhood and socio-economic systems indicates that parent education cannot by itself solve the problems posed by poverty and demoralized communities. Parent education needs
to be supported by adequate health, social and public education services, caring schools, outreach to parents, as well as by pathways into the mainstream economy (p.107).

This study, which focused on the meaning that lower-income parents gave to their participation in a voluntary parenting educational and family support program, examined these issues involving neighborhood/community, and socio-economic impact on parents’ participation. It was revealed through this study that concerns within participants’ lower-income neighborhoods/community, such as crime, safety, and a lack of connection were addressed by parents’ through their participation in the program. Furthermore, the program and staff were attentive to parents and families of lower economic means by assisting them in obtaining food, shelter, and clothing as needed. These considerations are being brought to the forefront so parent educators can be made more aware of these issues that plague families’ lives, and so that parenting programs will consider ways in which they can do more for families than just provide parent education.

In addition, this program has already put in to place many of the needed connections as described by Bennet and Grimley (2001). Support is being sought through other collaborative venues within the community environment so that parent education is not being presented as an isolated entity. Other programs that seek to offer assistance to parents should consider these positive and supportive practices as well.

However, not only socio-economic considerations of families should be made in planning and implementing parent education programs. Various cultural beliefs, traditions, and practices that exist outside of the dominant European-American, mainstream culture must also be recognized as integral components of the macrosystem.
Needs and interests of these populations must be addressed as well under the umbrella of parenting education. Connections with resources within the wider community to support families of all cultures must be further developed as well.

Summary and Conclusion

Several areas have been identified in this chapter as being important considerations for future research and practice. As the metaphor of the circle suggests, there are many unifying facets involving individualistic as well as sociocultural influences that contributed to the parenting program participation of the mothers in this study. However, two main findings from this research should be further explored in even greater depth.

The context of the wider community, as well as community support networks, should continue to be placed in the forefront in parenting education. The fact that this program created a sense of strong community within the neighborhood environments of participants was profound. The program's staff found ways to enhance the intensity of connection for parents and their families. Furthermore, the program built community through cultural reciprocity, sensitivity, and responsiveness in considering the interests and needs of those from various backgrounds. This communal focus in programming should become a model for other family support programs in providing not only parenting education, but in offering services to families that meet many of their other basic needs.

Furthermore, this study revealed that many issues, particularly relevant to women, were addressed in this program. To date, women's issues have not been considered and
studied in the parenting education field. More research needs to be conducted in order to explore this phenomenon more thoroughly. Programs should also consider how they might make women's issues come to life within the context of parenting programs so that many more mothers' circles can be created. Women can become strengthened and empowered in their roles as women and as mothers by joining together through this unifying process in the sharing of common experiences.

Lastly, "The Mothers' Circle" has brought to a full circle this study of what motivates parents to participate in a voluntary parenting education and family support program. It has also led me to embrace the circle metaphor in my own life as a mother, researcher, and educator. Therefore, it is my hope that through this study other parenting and family support professionals may be strengthened and enlightened to serve others on the road that is traveled through the parenting process, and to form many more mothers' circles which seek to connect and unify.
APPENDIX A:

Script for Recruiting Research Participants

My name is Joan Ports and I am a Graduate Student at Penn State University.

As part of my course work at Penn State I would like to study why the parents in this program participate.

To be in this study you need to be 18 years of age or older. You also will need to be a participant in this program for at least 1 year. Your participation is voluntary, so you do not have to participate if you don't want to. You can also end your participation in the study at any time by just letting me know. You also do not have to answer any questions that you don't want to answer.

If you decide to be in the study you will be asked to complete (2) interviews that will last for up to approximately 1 1/2 hours each. Interviews can begin this summer, as soon as you would like. The interviews will be tape recorded. No one will know your identity except for me; and no one, but me, will listen to the tapes. The tapes will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and then destroyed after the study is finished. If the research is published, no information will be written that will identify you.

I will also be observing in your parent group sometime between September - December of this year (2003).

You will also have the choice to write about your participation experiences in a journal. If you write in the journal and bring it with you each week to the parent group, you can select a book for your child. No one but me will see the journals.

There are no risks to participating in this study, but you might feel slight discomfort at times since I will be asking some questions about you and your family.

If you participate in this study you might learn more about yourself as a parent. You could also help this program and other programs like it to further support more parents and families.

If you have any questions you can contact me, Joan Ports, at 410-704-4832 or my advisor, Dr. Tisdell at 704-948-6640.

Thank you!
INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH
The Pennsylvania State University

Title: A Study of Parents' Reasons for Participating in a Title I Family Support Program

Principal Investigator: Joan Ports, E-mail: jmp366@psu.edu, Phone: 410-704-4832
Penn State Harrisburg, 777 W. Harrisburg Pike, Harrisburg, PA 17057

Advisor: Dr. E. Tisdell, E-mail: ejt11@psu.edu, Phone: 717-948-6640
Penn State Harrisburg, 777 W. Harrisburg Pike, Harrisburg, PA 17057

1. Purpose: The purpose of this study is to discover why parents participate in a Title I family support program.

2. Procedures: Participation includes completion of (2) interviews. Parents can also choose to write about their participation in a journal. The researcher will also observe in the program.

3. Discomforts and Risks: There are no risks to participating in this study; however participants may experience slight discomfort in being asked questions about themselves and their families.

4. Benefits:
   a. You may learn more about yourself as a parent.
   b. This research could help this program and other programs to support more families.

5. Duration/Time: The interviews will last about 1 1/2 hours each and will be audio taped. If you keep a journal, you can write in it from September - December of 2003. The researcher will also observe for up to 2 hours in your group during these 4 months.

6. Statement of Confidentiality: Only the researcher will know who you are. If this research is published, no information that would identify you would be written. Only the researcher will read the journals. Audiotapes will be kept in a locked filing cabinet at the researcher's home until one year after the study is complete. Tapes will be destroyed by 2005.

7. Right to Ask Questions: You have the right to ask questions and have questions answered. Contact Joan Ports at 410-704-4832 or Dr. Tisdell 717-948-6640 if you have questions about this study. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, contact Penn State’s Office for Research Protections at (814) 865-1775.
8. Compensation: If you choose to write in a journal and bring it to the program each week, you may select a book for your child.

9. Voluntary Participation: You do not have to participate in this study. You can end your participation at any time by telling the person in charge. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer.

You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to participate in this study. If you consent to participate in this study and to the terms above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

______________________________________  _____________________  
Participant Signature     Date

I, the undersigned, verify that the above informed consent procedure has been followed.

______________________________________  _____________________  
Investigator Signature     Date
APPENDIX C

Interview Guide

1) You have been in this program for _______ years. Tell me what it is about this program that keeps you so interested in participating.

2) Tell me about your relationships with the staff in this program.

3) Describe your relationships with the other parents in the program.

4) What do you think are the (3) most important things the program offers? Why?

5) Describe how you feel about being in the program.

6) Tell me about your own personal goals and expectations for being in the program.

7) Tell me about how your partner and/or family feel(s) about your participation in the program.

8) Describe if and how you receive support as a parent from your immediate family and/or extended family.

9) Would you describe being a parent as an isolating experience or an experience in which you feel you get some or a great deal of support? Why?

10) Tell me about your participation experiences with your child in the program.

11) Do you have certain goals or expectations for your child in the program? If so, tell me about them.

12) What is it like to be the parent of a young child in your neighborhood?

13) Describe if and how parents support each other in your neighborhood?

14) What kinds of programs, groups, or activities are offered in your community to help and support parents? Do you participate in any of these groups? Why or why not?

15) What has the program done to acknowledge your culture or the culture of others?

16) What has being in this program taught you about yourself?
17) If you think of your life as a journey, what influence has this program had along your path?

18) Tell me about some specific experiences you've had in the parent discussion group?

19) What does the parent group do for you that keeps you coming back for more?

20) If the parent discussion group focused on just one topic, what would you like it to be?

21) What kinds of things have you learned about parenting from others in the program that surprised you?

22) What has been your best experience in the program? Tell me about it.

23) Comment on this statement: "It takes a village to raise a child."

24) Comment on this statement: "This program has something to offer every parent."

25) Tell me how does this program make you feel as a mother? As a woman?

26) Tell me about how your children's and family needs are taken care of. Who in your household and/or extended family is involved?

27) What is the most important part of this program? Why? Tell me more.

28) What message might you give another parent who is considering joining the program?

29) Do you think that if this program charged a fee that you would still attend? Why or why not?

30) On a scale of 1-5 please rate the following statements:
Learning how to parent comes from….
______ relatives
______ a parenting program such as this
______ church or community groups
______ friends or neighbors
______ your own gut feelings, trials, errors, and successes
APPENDIX D

Biographical Information

Name:

Birthdate:

Marital Status (circle those that apply): Single Married Divorced Separated Living with a significant other

Race/ethnicity:

Highest grade completed in school:

Occupation:

If you work outside of the home, is it part time or full time?

Number of children:

Ages of children:

How long have you been in this program?

Does your spouse, significant other, or any other relative attend the program with your child or children? If so, how often?
APPENDIX E

Guiding Questions for Journal Writing

1) When I come to this program I feel…
When I come to this program I like to…

2) What words best describe your relationships with the people in this program?
Which person do you relate best to in the program? Why?

3) Draw, sketch, or write about the feelings and thoughts you have about the program.

4) Write about the color that describes your experience in the program.

5) Being in this program is/was a time when I…

6) Write about the warmest, strongest experience you have had in the program.
REFERENCES


VITA

Joan Franklin Ports

Joan Franklin Ports has been an Instructor since 1995 in the Department of Early Childhood Education at Towson University, Towson, Maryland where she teaches courses primarily in parenting education, infant intervention and child growth and development. She also supervises early childhood student teaching interns in their field placements in public schools in Maryland. Prior to teaching at Towson, Dr. Ports worked as both the Education Director and Administrative Director of the Aliza Brandwine Center for Parent-Infant Development which was formerly at Towson University for several years. She has taught Pre-K and Kindergarten in private programs, and has served as the director of early childhood programs in the Maryland area as well.

In addition to earning this Doctoral degree in Adult Education from Penn State University - Harrisburg (2004), she holds a Bachelor's degree (1978) and a Master's degree (1986) in the field of Early Childhood Education from Towson University. Her research interests are in family and parenting education, women's issues relative to motherhood, experiences of incarcerated parents, infant bonding, and learning through play in early childhood education.