Disrupting Culture Bound Realities:

A Parent Perspective of Zaharis Elementary School

by

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study begins with the supposition that all schools have cultural biases and that even within the same school culture, people see things differently. Internal biases can negatively affect the approach to school improvement. To disrupt these culture bound realities, parent perspectives were sought out to provide an alternate view into Zaharis Elementary School. Two critical assumptions were built into this study. One, that the vast reservoir of cultural knowledge among parents could be tapped, and two, once that cultural knowledge was uncovered, they the schoolpeople (1986) of Zaharis Elementary could do something with it to make a difference in the lives of children.

A focus group framework was employed over a series of parent group interviews to explore the following research question: What are the multiple realities expressed by parents and what similarities and differences exist across these realities? Focus group discussions were transcribed, participant responses were coded, and a thorough and comprehensive analysis revealed that the majority of parent perceptions expressed fell within three emergent parent realities that were defined and presented. One, parents perceived that teaching and learning were social processes that support the development of student voice and nurture rich relationships. Two, parents perceived that learning through inquiry elevated class work to purposeful student learning, activates critical thinking, and fosters authentic real-world experience. And the third parent perception was teaching is teamwork and all members of the classroom community were teachers and learners.

DEDICATION

To my father who always saw me for who I could be, and a father-in-law who invested his all in my journey of becoming. To our children, Brittany, Colton, Jacob, and Rex who encouraged me and cheered me on while sacrificing dad to the labor. Most of all, I thank my wife, Trish. She believed me into the program, kept me on life support when I thought all was lost, and then believed me out of it, guiding me to the finish line with her unwavering example of faith and relentless and unconditional support. If *anything* of significance has occurred in my life, she has always been there to support and guide my efforts. My life is a testament to her eternal influence.

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My doctoral journey has been anything but typical, if there is such a thing in a doctoral program. For seven years, this dissertation study lay dormant in a box on a shelf in a cupboard in the conference room next to my office at Zaharis School. Many times, I almost tossed it out as refuge, but couldn't muster up the gumption. Without the intervening influence and rescue of Committee Chair Josephine Marsh and Andi Fourlis, Mesa Public Schools Superintendent, friend, and colleague, it would still be on that shelf. Dr. Karen Smith has served as my mentor of mentors. My path crossed hers 20 years ago. I have been in a healthy state of disequilibrium ever since. Not only did she alter my thinking about teaching and learning, but she changed the very essence of what I believe a school can and should be. Zaharis School is built upon her thinking and influence. Karen served as my first committee chair. Tom Barone, Sarah Hudelson, and Carol Christine took their place alongside Karen to form an initial dream team of dissertation committee supporters. A dissertation reincarnation was brought forth by longtime friend and mentor, Frank Serafini, and Lindsay Moses, yet another friend who has informed my thinking. Together, they complete a second committee who saw me through to the finish. Heidi Mills and Tim O'Keefe are professional kindred spirits who have altered my life beyond words. All of Zaharis School is perched on the broad shoulders of Ken and Yetta Goodman, forever part of the Zaharis Family. Jim Zaharis is more than a namesake. What started as a professional relation has morphed into a lasting and inseparable brotherhood. Kevin Skinner supported me on trial runs and picked me up when I fell down in many different ways. Kris-Ann Florence and Diann Christensen are the sisters I never had and thought partners that are always present. Office buddies and friends Jill Beeson and

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The study took place in 2011. The purpose was to uncover the parent perceptions, their perceived realities of what took place at the school and in the classrooms in which their children attended. As principal of the school, their perceptions were important to me and the faculty. While in early stages of data analysis, the study was suspended for an extended period of time, due to factors beyond my control. The school and me as a leader have changed since the study took place. We built upon the findings of my study. However, for the purpose of this dissertation document, I will not go into what happened since 2011, but only present demographic information and other details about the school as if it was still 2011. My intention is to present the findings of the 2011 study; no additional data has been collected or analyzed. Chapters 1-3 of this dissertation study were written right after data collection and have been left mostly intact with the exception of a few references to update the literature review. Chapter 4 reflects a more recent and deeper analysis and a required reorganization. Chapter 5 includes the conclusions, limitations and implications of the study that took place in 2011 and little information about how the study may have actually impacted my practice since the study officially ended.

In 2011, Zaharis Elementary School, the site of this research study, served students from grades K-6 with an enrollment of 883. It was one of 57 elementary schools within the Mesa Public Schools (MPS) district. Some 308 students attended on open enrollment in 2011, meaning they lived outside of the Zaharis School attendance area. The Zaharis population served students from seven different cities within the greater

Phoenix area in 2011. Many of our students came from home, charter, and private schools. There was a long waiting list to enroll in the school. Zaharis was unique to the Mesa Schools—while it was structured as a neighborhood school with a neighborhood geographical attendance area, it functioned similarly to a magnet school, drawing students from both near and far. I served as the founding principal at Zaharis School. A brief history leading up to the study follows.

In the year 2002, while serving as principal at another Northeast Mesa school, I was invited to open a new Mesa school, Zaharis Elementary, and build it from the ground up. I had previously inherited two school principalships, each equipped with a culture of tradition, history, and practice. Ten years of prior experience as an administrator taught me that it is very difficult to inherit a community of learners with a wide range of core convictions about teaching and learning and then move them toward a critical reflection of beliefs and practice. My own perspectives of teaching and learning were undergoing a major paradigm shift during this time—one anchored by a linear and transmission-based view of education to a constructivist theoretical frame (Vygotsky, 1978). My hope was that it would be easier to build a school faculty with shared beliefs than to transform one that had been in existence for many years. Building a new school would allow me to bring in teachers willing to work toward developing a shared vision of teaching and learning.

Not long after being named principal of Zaharis—the groundbreaking had not yet taken place—I began reading *Going Public: Priorities and Practice at the Manhattan New School*, by Shelley Harwayne (1999). This book chronicles the journey that Harwayne and her colleagues experienced in their efforts to develop a new school from

the ground-up. They set out to challenge the status quo and the conventional thinking of what a school should be—an undertaking that I too was about to take on with my colleagues. Only a few pages into the introduction of the book, I wrote in the margin, "Visit this school with teachers" and "Our beliefs and values will evolve as we do throughout the development of Zaharis—today is but one step in a 1,000 mile journey." I had not yet read the first chapter of the book and already my beliefs of what might be possible in developing a public school were being informed. Prior to the opening of Zaharis, I did visit this school, and took two teachers with me. We were beginning to see things with new eyes. I arranged for Sharon Taberski, a 2nd grade teacher at the Manhattan New School, to come join us in the days prior to the start of the school year to help us better understand what to do when you have lots of children but no prescribed curriculum to follow.

Like many other school districts, the dominant view of teaching and learning within the Mesa Public Schools (MPS) was anchored by the expert-novice model of transmission. Value judgments aside, this had been one of many constant cultural characteristics within Mesa through the years. The professional development offered to teachers and administrators, the teacher evaluation system used to assess performance, and existing prepackaged programs were all aligned with this theoretical perspective. To introduce a new school to the East Valley, one anchored by an alternative theoretical view of how we learn, called for professional development supports outside of what historically had been provided to schools within MPS. To give birth to a school grounded by constructivist learning theory required one to look at professional development and all other important decisions relative to curriculum and instruction and teaching and learning

with new eyes. Even the standard basic equipment list provided for new schools that identifies all tangible goods ranging from furniture items to computer software needed to be reconstructed. The idea that a school would question the historical purchasing practices for new schools created considerable tension with the purchasing department and the superintendent of business services. I starting to get a feel for just how challenging this undertaking would prove to be. Looking through new eyes at all things, big and small, had become an everyday way of being. It was now blatantly apparent: To create an unconventional school would require thinking in unconventional ways. Ownership of school development, improvement and reform would have to transfer from outside others to *within*.

The expert-novice model of transmission where learning is handed down from one to another is disrupted by the argument that a school can improve from within. Barth (1986) introduced an alternative to this common view—an alternative that anchors the learning climate at Zaharis School: constructivism. He explained, "In a community of learners, a different set of relationships prevail. Adults and youngsters often pose their own questions and enlist others as resources to help answer them" (p. 296). He suggested that the knowledge base for improving schools is fed not by one but by two tributaries: social science research and the craft knowledge of schoolpeople. All one word, no hyphen. Barth (1986) submitted an alternative way of utilizing research and national reports: "They are valuable not as lesson plans for schoolpeople but for the help they offer in clarifying practitioners' own visions of the way schools and classrooms should be and of how to make them that way" (p. 296).

More than a few of my principal colleagues within the MPS believed anchoring a new school with a constructivist learning theory to be a bold and courageous move—especially bold with the absence of a formal proposal to the governing board and superintendency seeking permission. I did not see it as such. My belief was that parents would line-up to enroll their children in a school that created opportunities for them to learn in an authentic, real-world environment, where critical thinking would be nurtured through a workshop approach with a premium placed on inquiry-based learning. It never occurred to me that we were taking a risk. Wouldn't all parents want their children immersed in a school where they do what real readers, writers, mathematicians, scientists, and social scientists do?

It did not take long for my colleagues and me to discover that much could be accomplished when common beliefs and theoretical perspectives ground a community of learning. After nine years, in 2011, there was much to be proud of. Children were developing as readers, writers, mathematicians, and social scientists. Teachers were taking their own learning seriously. A curriculum of caring abounded throughout the school. We had used our own understandings, realities, and noticings to reflect upon and examine our practice as we continuously examined what and how to teach. It was at that point, I wondered how parent perspectives could inform the continued examination of our practice. I recalled Barth's notion of schoolpeople and realized that parent voices were an underused resource at Zaharis. Sure, I had observed families and talked to them informally, but I had never systematically asked them about their perceptions of the school and their children's experiences as students at Zaharis. Thus, in 2011, I developed my dissertation study to take a systematic and intentional look at Zaharis Elementary

School through the eyes of the parents. To guide my study, my research question was: What are the multiple perceived realities expressed by parents at Zaharis and what similarities and differences exist across these realities?

Zaharis Vision and Aspirational Perspective

As we built Zaharis from 2002 through 2011, the staff and I, anchored our classroom communities of practice with Vygotsky's sociocultural model (1978) and strived to honor and nurture the multiple perspectives that develop through a shared learning experience and social interaction. We also strived to honor what John Dewey said about 100 years ago, "Education isn't preparation for future living. Education is life" (1897, p. 78). At Zaharis, we aimed for our students see themselves as democratic participants in the world whose voices and opinions count. In an authentic learning environment, we hoped that they would see themselves as mathematicians, historians, readers, writers, scientists, and social scientists.

We set out to nurture critical thinking through a workshop pedagogy where we placed a premium on inquiry-based, hands-on learning. We aspired for our children to develop independence as learners and the ability to work together to raise questions, investigate issues, and solve problems. Our classrooms strived to be communities alive with a passion and fire for learning. Children apprenticed themselves to their teachers and others more knowledgeable than themselves and they were encouraged to work side-by-side to make sense out of the world.

Zaharis placed a very heavy emphasis on literacy development. We helped children grow as readers by using children's literature versus textbooks. Literary discussions illuminated our classrooms as we challenged ourselves to look at the world

through new perspectives. At Zaharis, it was our hope for children to develop a love for reading and for reading to become a central part of their lives.

We attempted to nurture the inseparable relationship between reading and writing. Our students wrote to real audiences and for authentic purposes about matters of significance. Social studies was not taught out of context as an independent discipline. Zaharis students and teachers strived to see the world through the lens of social justice. In short, social studies was viewed as a part of the fabric of everything we do.

However, the teachers and I were also confronted with challenges—other perspectives that disrupted some of our taken for granted views of learning and teaching and caused us to look at our practice in different ways.

A New Reality: The District's Perspective

The most critical perspective about our school and our practice was generated in 2008 when the MPS District implemented a district-wide scripted reading program entitled, MesaReads. MesaReads called for "core fidelity" to the Harcourt reading series adopted by the district and is accompanied by very rigid and linear job descriptions for all—administrators, literacy coaches, basic skills specialists, and teachers. This program's underlying theory was the antithesis of how we came to define reading at Zaharis School. We were told, therefore, that if we were to receive an exemption from this program, the district superintendent would need to become better acquainted with the literacy practices at the school. To defend and support the autonomy issued to Zaharis, she needed to be more articulate about what we did to get the job done in the absence of MesaReads. The superintendent called upon a consultant who she felt could determine whether we should receive an exemption from MesaReads. After a month-long inquiry

into Zaharis, this consultant provided support to district leadership for our continued existence. His report, however, also documented an alternative reality about Zaharis School—a reality informed by a transmission view of learning and one at first glance, diametrically opposed to the one the faculty and I had been constructing over the past seven years.

One of the more striking differences emerged when we moved to the topic of writing as a form of literacy development. The reading and writing relationship at Zaharis was the core to our literacy climate and culture. It would have been most difficult to engage in a meaningful discussion relative to the Zaharis approach to reading instruction while ignoring this critical relationship. The report's alternative perspective, however, viewed reading as an isolated discipline, taught separately and out of context from other forms of literacy development. While the reading-writing relationship was nurtured on a continual basis at Zaharis, its significance had never been more distinct than when it was factored out. This report served as an impetus for much discussion, critical reflection, and many questions to frame future inquiries—all of which led to an increase in our individual and collective understandings about who we were and ultimately, who we wanted to become.

While we as a staff did not agree with everything the report disclosed, the experience of having an "outside other" living among us for three weeks investigating, critiquing, and questioning our beliefs, our practice, and the very nature of how we exist, gave us cause to do the same. Contrary to popular wisdom, DuFour (2006, p. 29) suggested the proper first response to a changing world is not to ask, "How should we change?" but rather, "What do we stand for and why do we exist?" DuFour encouraged

reflective dialogue and other questions to consider, such as, “What are we here to do together?” What exactly do we hope to accomplish?” “What is the business of our business?” Painted on the wall outside one of the classrooms at Zaharis is the quote, “To be on a quest is nothing more or less than to be an asker of questions.”

In the end, the consultant’s report proved to be what we perceived as fair. Perhaps the greatest value to come from the experience was the disruption in the day-to-day nature of how we examine our own way of being. A new question began to emerge—if outside others were going to investigate, critique, and question our school, would it not be wise for us to do the same? It has been previously noted that we have used our own understandings, realities, and noticings to reflect upon and examine our practice as we continuously examine what and how to teach. We began to wonder if our own understandings were in some way, clouding our perspective. If we were going to take charge of improving our school from within, we would have to work hard to keep our own understandings from getting in the way.

DuFour (2006) suggested that schools should engage in collective inquiry into both best practices in teaching and best practices in learning—an undertaking that we took on before we ever opened our doors to children. He further asserted that schools should inquire about their current reality—including their present practices and the levels of achievement of their students. He placed emphasis on an “honest assessment” of the current reality and insists there must be “a diligent effort to determine the truth” (p. 16). Educators will find it easier, he contended, to move forward to where they want to go if they first agree on where they are. Spradley (1980) argued that an honest assessment is not possible without a disruption to the culture bound existences that all organizations,

including schools, are imprisoned by. Spradley contended that one becomes culture bound by living inside a particular reality that is taken for granted as "the reality." DuFour (2006) declared the same belief in his own way, "Perhaps it is more accurate to say that educators *do not* have school cultures, but rather that the school cultures have *them*" (p. 16). A new question emerged as we examined our practice: In our effort to learn and grow professionally, were we deliberate in conducting an honest assessment of our school culture in our effort to determine truth? Without question, to improve a school from within, one would have to be true to these imperatives.

Further inquiry into Spradley's culture bound theoretical perspectives disrupted much more than my view of Zaharis School. I was awakened to the notion that all decision-making could be negatively impacted by internal biases that can hold us captive. The realization that inherent danger resides in being bound by one's own culture had come to light. For Zaharis to develop into the school we envisioned, it would be imperative to respect the dangers associated with culture bound perspectives. It had started to become clear: If we are going to improve this school from within, we had to take care of our own scholarship, be learners, askers of questions, and respect the existence of alternative ways of thinking, learning, and looking at a school. In short, improving a school from within requires a disruption to culture bound ways of thinking.

DuFour's (2006) charge to engage in "collective inquiry" to arrive at an honest assessment of current reality provided a new lens to examine our culture. The district appraisal provided one alternative perspective to see our school and practice from a different vantage point, and as a result, questions began to emerge that served as a catalyst for improving our school from within. For example, we had become very

comfortable with the language we used to define our practice—language that came about through our shared experience in reading professional books, engaging in conversations during faculty meetings, attending conferences and workshops, and taking university coursework. We contemplated: Might we use the district level critique to look more closely at our language to better understand how the same phenomena could be defined in such different ways? Might we find terms that would avoid setting us apart from others so much, yet maintain our core beliefs about language and learning?

The district critique also caused us to take a more critical look at our writing curriculum and the writing produced by our students. Their critique focused on writing conventions, or lack thereof, in our students' writing. At first, we were dismissive but upon further investigation, we discovered that powerful writing was often lost through a sloppy and careless use of conventions and a lack of polishing. Several faculty meetings were dedicated toward constructing a framework for mapping out the emphasis placed on conventions in the development of young writers. We began to look at student writing and the teaching of writing in new ways. We identified what we believed to be typical representations of student writing at each grade level and looked very closely at developmental characteristics of writing from grade to grade. This inquiry led to increased tension among the Zaharis staff. At least a few expressed their concern that this inquiry was a shift toward a linear view of teaching and learning and a major deviation from the core beliefs we are anchored by. We, however, worked through these initial fears and built a trust that remained grounded by our theoretical roots in constructivism. Through this experience, we moved from using the term *tension* to describe our discomfort, to *healthy disequilibrium*. We came to realize that we learn and grow

individually and as a faculty when we are knocked off-balance and begin to examine our practice in new ways.

As we began to look at writing instruction with new eyes while still maintaining our focus of writing as a way of learning and seeing the world, we noticed significant differences in the writing that students produced—it was much more polished. Interestingly, a byproduct of our inquiry was a significant spike in our standardized test scores. Without compromising the integrity of our core beliefs and values about teaching and learning, our writing scores were now found in the top tier of schools throughout the entire district.

The district critique turned our discussions toward assessment. We recognized that much of our data were lost at the end of the year. Students were taking their writing home with them—evidence that their writing was alive with meaning and value, but lost for the purpose of data collection. We began to recognize the need to preserve student writing in portfolios that would be kept as an alternative source of data to standardized test scores to support student growth in the area of writing.

The pattern of *outside others* examining our beliefs and practice with critical perspectives, became commonplace. While Zaharis was empowered to develop our own interpretation of MesaReads, we were asked to meet three times during the school year (the district expectation per MesaReads) with yet another consultant—a retired curriculum and instruction superintendent from a neighboring school district, brought in to oversee the implementation of our version of MesaReads. My first impulse was that this would be a waste of time for both parties. We would never become a MesaReads school, and I wasn't interested in trying to convert a retired superintendent into looking at

a different theoretical perspective of what it means to be a reader. With that said, meeting with anyone three times a year was a small price to pay for autonomy.

At the time of the study, we were several meetings into our relationship with the district specialist. The first of our meetings resembled more of a *feeling-out* round—neither party wanted to create an adversary. Subsequent meetings revealed that the specialist was well acquainted with a workshop pedagogy. Not only did she respect our work and core values of literacy development, she wanted to see them exported to other schools. To do this, she repeatedly emphasized, we would need reading test scores that would validate our approach to developing readers as best practice. While our school deemphasized MesaReads components such as DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) assessments and program-based instructional practices, we did offer-up targets for reading that were in line with our beliefs and supported by the district consultant.

The MesaReads consultant helped to suspend some of the developing hostilities with district curriculum and instruction leadership and helped disrupt the culture-bound manner of thinking that can stifle growth and development. While there are striking differences in many areas of thought concerning literacy development, her association with us led to a much deeper self-appraisal in the area of reading instruction. In short—she helped us remain true to DuFour's charge to arrive at truth through an honest assessment of school culture, an imperative for improving a school from within.

Barth (1986) asserted that schools have the capacity to improve themselves—from within, if the conditions are right, and when they are right, adults and students alike learn. He cited the need for communities of learners committed to discovering the

conditions that support human learning and to providing these conditions—exactly what I am seeking to accomplish through this dissertation study. Barth contended that what needs to be improved about schools is their culture, the quality of interpersonal relationships, and the nature and quality of learning experiences. And finally, school improvement is an effort to determine and provide, from without and within, conditions under which the adults and youngsters who inhabit schools will promote and sustain learning among themselves. Taking these assumptions seriously, Barth attested, may lead to some fresh thinking about the culture of schools and about what people do in them and to what Spradley (1980) might call an alternative perceived reality.

We began to see differing perceived realities as conversation starters and as ways to interrogate and examine our existing beliefs and practices. Fortunately, through district initiatives, we were privileged to receive other perspectives of Zaharis—perspectives offered by curriculum and instruction specialists with decades of collective experience in the field. With each perceived reality being served-up, however, it became more and more apparent to us that a very critical view of Zaharis was missing—the view of Zaharis parents. Thus, the purpose of my dissertation study was to uncover the multiple perceived realities of the parents about the school and their children's experiences in it and to understand the similarities and differences across these realities.

Another Reality: The Parents' Perspective

Another perspective about our school comes from a district survey that each year asked parents to rate their school with the grade of A+, A, B, C, D or F. Parents were given the opportunity to provide written comments and many do. The ranking of Zaharis School had been at the top of all schools surveyed each year since the school opened in

2002. The most recent data, the 2019 survey, revealed 72% A+ ratings, 23% As, 4% Bs, 1% Cs, 0% Ds and 0% Fs for Zaharis School. Most of our families appeared to be pleased with their school of choice. Why is this? What storyline could be uncovered here? Did some parents rate the school as A+ because we had high test scores? An affluent socioeconomics base? A beautiful building? These numerical ratings provide little data for us to explore and learn from**.** I began to wonder—what would result if I were to take a systematic and intentional look at the school through the eyes of the parents? Answering Eastmo's (2008) call for further research to illuminate how parents perceive their children's school, I wanted to examine the parents' perceptions of Zaharis school in order to inform our continual examination of the learning environment and our instructional practices.

Rationale for the Study: The Parents' Perspective

Through this study, it was my hope to reveal parent perspectives of Zaharis School and uncover the cultural meanings they used to make sense out of it. This study offered my associates and me an opportunity to step outside of our cultural backgrounds, set aside our socially inherited ethnocentrism, and apprehend our world at Zaharis from the viewpoint of other human beings (parents) who may live by different meaning systems (Spradley, 1980).

Many political undertones exist in a quest to maintain curricular autonomy and agency. In a district that hung its hat on a history of ultraconservative beliefs and practices, these undertones rang loud and clear. The political dynamics of such an undertaking seemed to become more complex day-by-day. I constantly lobbied,

politicked and strategized in an effort to maintain the culture of who we were. It became a part of daily living— a way of *being* for me.

One such strategy I devised resulted in the creation of an advocacy group comprised of parents who had an enhanced understanding of the depth of our curricular culture and beliefs—parents who were articulate in their description of the school. I learned something profound in our first meeting and that inspired the idea behind this study. I discovered what Zaharis School was like to parents who see the school through different filters. I felt as if I was looking into the school through *their* eyes. Each parent brought his or her own unique perspectives to the table—each had come to see, hear, speak, think, and act in ways that were different as they made sense out of our complex community of learning. I wasn't prepared for the outcome as we walked away from this initial meeting. I learned more about our school community than ever before by studying people (in this case, parents) and learning from them—by listening, observing, and providing a space for them to talk.

Several parents were selected because of their background in education and because they taught at the university level. Others were identified because they spent much time in the school and had taken a greater interest than most in the theoretical frame (they used the term philosophy) behind the practice that existed. Another discovery emerged from this experience; while a discourse of educational jargon can be compelling, some of the most stirring and revealing dynamics of a school culture are uncovered through the poetic, plain-and-simple, straightforward, and unmistakable language spoken from invested parents who speak from the heart—with passion. To take on the arduous task of improving a school from within, it was imperative to uncover the realities formed

by parents through an analysis of the plain and simple, straightforward, and unmistakable language they use to describe it.

Ultimately, a new question was brought to the surface: If one simple meeting, one that came about as an impulse, could offer so much insight, what could a full-blown study reveal about how others view our life at Zaharis? I had spent nine years observing families within the Zaharis community and forming hypotheses regarding how they interpreted and made sense out of their world. My attempts were nothing more and nothing less than cultural inferences—my best guesses based on what our parents say and do. In short—I skimmed the thin surface of a very deep lake. Hidden from my view was a vast reservoir of cultural knowledge that was waiting to be tapped. I surmised that a rich study awaited and a compelling story could to be told. While I had formed my best guess attempts to discern how the families within the Zaharis School community understood and make sense out of their world, the one true reality is simply this—*I did not really know.*

Research Question

This dissertation took a systematic and intentional look at James K. Zaharis Elementary School through the eyes of the parents and offered an opportunity to uncover the existence of perceived realities about the school—realities formed by parents. This dissertation addressed the following research question:

What are the multiple perceived realities expressed by parents and what similarities and differences exist across these realities?

Overview of the Dissertation

The remaining dissertation is organized in the following manner: Chapter 2 offers a literature review of the relevant theories, methods, and gaps in existing research. Chapter 3 presents the methodology and foreshadows the data analysis and concluding chapters. Chapter 4 provides the answers to the research question. The multiple perceived realities parents revealed during focus group interviews are presented and analyzed. Chapter 5 includes the conclusions, limitations, and implications of the study and a reflection of how the study may inform further practice and research.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Culture is not "fixed" but rather, is in a constant state of becoming. The evolution of the Zaharis Elementary School culture would certainly bear witness to this notion. The school changes shape as we continuously interrogate and examine our beliefs and practices. While one might reason that Zaharis School is certainly not static—the staff places a heavy premium on their own learning—Spradley (1979) might suggest that we are imprisoned by our own internal biases. For example, as previously noted, we were once so focused on providing authentic writing instruction that we were neglecting to teach the necessary conventions for students to polish their writing. When we began to look at writing instruction with new eyes, we noticed significant differences in the writing that students produced. Looking back, we can now clearly see that our thinking had become clouded by our own core convictions of best practice. Our own understandings had become obstacles. We had become imprisoned by internal biases. My study will be informed by a culture-bound theoretical perspective as proposed by Spradley (1979).

Schools have their own cultural systems, and even within the same institution people see things differently (Spradley, 1980). A culture-bound theoretical orientation can serve as a beacon to reveal the existence of possible internal biases that hinder growth and open the door to new understandings of how parents within Zaharis make sense out of their school experience.

Each culture provides people with a way of looking at or seeing the world. It categorizes, encodes, and otherwise defines the world in which people live. Culture includes assumptions about the nature of reality as well as specific information about that reality. It includes values that specify the good, true, and believable. Whenever people learn a culture, they are, to some extent, imprisoned without knowing it. Anthropologists speak of this as being "culture-bound," living inside a particular reality that is taken for granted as "the reality" (Spradley, 1979). Spradley (1974) suggested that most people take it for granted that reality is present in pretty much the same form to everyone and refers to this outlook as "naive realism," a view that carries with it the security of certain knowledge.

Ross and Ward (1996) submit that people never really fully develop a purely rational intellect that fully understands the implications of individual construal. Construal is a social psychological term that refers to the way in which people perceive, comprehend, and interpret the world around them. They contend that naive realism is predicated on the following characteristics and see adults as thinking:

1. I see reality, and my actions and beliefs are based on a rational interpretation of reality.
2. Other people would share my view and actions and opinions if they had access to the same information that I do and if they would process that information in a reasonable way like I do.
3. If others don't share my views, it's because: They have different information, and by sharing information we can reach an agreement. They are lazy or are not making rational decisions based on the information. They are biased by

ideology or self-interest, or some other distorting influence. (Naive Realism section)

Culture is learned as children grow up in society and discover how their parents and others around them interpret the world (Spradley & McCurdy, 1974). In our society, we learn to evaluate what is good and bad; and to judge when a novel act is appropriate or inappropriate. During socialization the child learns his culture, and because he learns it from others, he shares it with others. Spradley suggested culture thus becomes the meaning system by which people design their own actions and interpret the behavior of others.

Central to Spradley's position is that it is easy for people to feel that their own way of life is natural and God-given. One's culture is not like a suit of clothing that can be discarded easily or exchanged for each new lifestyle that comes along. It is rather like a security blanket, and though to some it may appear worn and tattered, outmoded and ridiculous, it has great meaning to its owner (Spradley & McCurdy, 1974). Culture, Spradley (1974) contended, is like a giant iceberg. Beneath the surface of rules, norms, and behavior patterns is a system of values. Some premises are easily stated by members of a society, although others are outside their awareness.

As one learns through imitation, identification, social interactions and instruction, values are internalized as part of his or her personality. They provide security and contribute to a sense of personal and social identity. For this reason, Spradley (1974) argued, individuals in every society cling tenaciously to the ideals they have acquired and feel threatened when confronted with others who live according to radically different conceptions of what is desirable.

Culture is not a list of characteristics for differentiating one set of people from another. Culture is not a fixed thing handed down from the past to be preserved by the present (Street, 1993). Issues of contestation, ambiguity, and contradiction have become the focus of ethnography (Bialostok, 1999). In summary, according to the social cognition learning model, culture teaches us both what to think and how to think (Vygotsky, 1929), and how ultimately one will come to form opinions of a school community of practice.

It was previously noted that schools have their own cultural systems, and even within the same institution people see things differently. Through nine years of working together as staff at Zaharis School, we have found this to be true many times over. But one could argue that culture bound perspectives within our community of learning are not limited to those within the Zaharis staff population alone. Might we also find that parents within Zaharis School are influenced by internal biases and culture bound perspectives formed through years of their own school experience and associations? Might these implications inform how we communicate our beliefs to parents? Perhaps culture bound perspectives exist in a reciprocal state or relation and our increased understanding of them could also move parents forward in their thinking and ways of seeing and defining teaching, learning, and the very essence of Zaharis School. Outliers exist within every cultural organization and system. School is no exception. Might we move our relationships with those who qualify as outliers within our school to higher ground with a better understanding of their existing realities? Might we nurture a higher level of communication, uncover common-ground phenomena and encourage a disruption to the culture bound perspectives of such outliers?

Nine years ago, the families of Zaharis School passed through the doorway of a new Mesa elementary school and into the world of an alternative theoretical perspective to teaching and learning that was unique in the district. In many ways, the constructivist theory that anchored Zaharis was imposed upon them. In short, they did not know what they were signing up for. While there was evidence to suggest that it worked out quite well, there was never an attempt to find out just how and why the families within the school community defined this world. It became increasing clear that our school culture was not homogeneous, that people who lived in modern, complex societies actually lived by many different cultural codes.

Literature Review

Much has been written to document the culture of public-school communities of learning. The vast majority of existing research describing schools is reported through the lens of educators and researchers focused on education. Studies identified within this review can best be categorized into two distinct groupings: studies where school cultures are described and defined, and studies where parent perspectives relative to some educationally related topic or issue were examined. This study attempted to add what appears to be a neglected but critical presence to the existing body of research on schools[1]—what are the multiple perceived realities expressed by parents relative to a school culture (Zaharis) and what similarities and differences exist across these realities?

Studies Where School Cultures are Described and Defined

[1] This study was based on literature reviewed prior to 2011 and is presented in Chapter 2. An updated literature review is included in Chapter 5.

Sullivan and Glanz (2006) offer a conceptual framework for the development of a collaborative learning community. The centerpiece of this framework is *modeling reflective practice* and tells the story of a district and school that created a learning community through the use of strategies and techniques for achieving strong academics and moral standards. The school and district description provide what they proclaim to be a success story. The culture of the school and district is described by the researchers. While the school description is offered-up through the lens of the researchers and does not draw upon parental perspectives, it informs this researcher's study be providing a landscape of a school community in vivid detail.

Barbour and Barbour (2001) examined two school communities that are struggling with collaborative efforts in their attempts to develop a family-school community partnership. They described typical problems that were encountered and evaluated the progress made. Rossman et al. (1988) related their stories of three schools to provide concrete cases for illuminating the connection between culture, change, and school effectiveness. Patterns of beliefs and practices that make up the status quo of each school are specified. Sacred norms are identified by the authors and described as inhibiting change and growth within the school communities. Patterns, beliefs, and the status quo of a school are all factors that may contribute toward an organization becoming culture bound or living inside of a particular reality that is taken for granted as the reality. These before mentioned studies identified pathways for school improvement drawn from the examination of existing school cultures, similar to the quest that I took on with Zaharis School in this study. The review of how these researchers gathered and

analyzed their data and described the school cultures that were explored informed my own research.

Studies Where Parent Perspectives Were Examined

Bialostok (1999) offered a systematic analysis of the meanings and implicit assumptions that lie behind what parents say when they talk about reading. What they have to say reveals a cultural model that emphasizes a literary literacy as a distinction of moral character and a mark of identification with the values and expectations of their idealized middle-class social status. Bialostok (1999) contended that teachers may bring their hopes, expectations, and enthusiasm to the classroom, but they also bring their deeply held cultural models, which they project as truth. Without greater personal awareness of these cultural models and their meanings, Bialostok contended, teachers will continue their mostly unconscious attempts to apprentice children to a particular discourse, a dominant discourse. Bialostok suggested that teachers develop a meta-level knowledge about their own cultural model, the nature of the model, its meaning and significance, whose interests are being served, whose interests are not being served, and how it relates to other models. Bialostok (1999) drew upon what was defined as the folk or common-sense understandings of parents within his body of work. It is the understanding of parents and their perceived realities of Zaharis School that will ultimately allow for a systematic and intentional look at the school through their perspective—their reality.

Parent Perspectives on Parent Involvement

Angion (2009) sought to determine the perceptions of marginally involved parents of academically low performing students for the purpose of increasing their involvement

in their children's' education. Focus groups and interviews were the primary methods of data collection. Most parents in the study said that they were very involved with their children's education, that their children were doing well in school, and that they felt very confident helping them with school work. In short, parents described a climate where all is well. However, reports from teachers and administrators were distinctly opposite in terms of parental involvement and student achievement. Teachers and administrators expressed a vigorous disapproval of the lack of parental involvement, the lack of parent confidence or ability to help their children in school, and the severe lack of home training—instilling purpose, pride, and values in their children. In summary, the conflict of opinion is clear—the parents in this study said that they were involved and that their children were performing well, while teachers and administrators said that many of the parents were not involved and students were doing poorly. Angion (2009) proclaimed "there is wide divide in the perceptions of parents versus teachers and administrators, as they relate to the academic performance and the level of involvement of marginally involved parents" (p. 173).

Angion (2009) suggested that it is "inconceivable that the key players in children's education, parents and teachers, would view student academic performance and the level of parent involvement so differently" (p. 173). At least two reasons were cited for these opposing views: first, "parents may be fearful and embarrassed to admit that they need help," and second, "it may be due to a cultural divide in the way these parents think" (p. 173). Angion later submitted that culture affects views of parental involvement and understanding its effect may help to understand why marginally involved parents view their involvement so differently than teachers.

My own study is anchored by the theoretical orientation that whenever people exist within a particular culture, they are, to some extent, imprisoned within that culture without knowing it. Anthropologists speak of this as being culture-bound, living inside a particular reality that is taken for granted as the reality (Spradley, 1979). Spradley suggested that most people take it for granted that reality is present in pretty much the same form with everyone and refers to this outlook as naive realism, a view that carries with it the security of certain knowledge (Spradley, 1975). Perhaps this is why Angion (2009) thought it to be inconceivable that parents and teachers could look at an issue—parent involvement—and form such conflicting perspectives.

Through a focus group research design, Rubinos (2007) examined the attitudes and beliefs of culturally diverse parents as related to their role in their children's education and how they shared responsibility with their children's teachers and administrators. A further purpose sought to comprehend intentional and unintentional behaviors of teachers and how they affected parental involvement. A random selection of six parents, four teachers, and four administrators comprised three focus groups within a pre-K through grade two public school multicultural community in Queens, New York City. Rubinos concluded that parental involvement benefited students' educational success and educators that work collaboratively with parents find students perform better academically.

In a study of social class differences that affect family-school relationships Lareau (1987) proposed that the understanding of parent involvement is affected by the concept of cultural capital as schools rely on certain social structures and authority patterns in their relationships with families. "The standards of schools are not neutral;

their requests for parental involvement may be laden with the social and cultural experiences of intellectual and economic elites" (Lareau, 1987, p. 74). Through observations and interviews, Lareau gathered data on family-school relationships in two schools; one in a predominantly working-class community and one in an upper-middle class community. Lareau's collection of data occurred through parent interviews with an emphasis on the school-family relationship. Findings emphasized that all social groups have cultural capital and that some forms are more valued by schools than others, a trap that I will be striving to avoid in this study and in future pursuits as a school leader.

Ramirez (2008) examined the perceptions of second and third-generation U.S.-born Latino parents in a high-poverty urban school district in Texas regarding their role in their children's schooling. Specifically, the intent was to understand what the selected Latino parents perceived as parent involvement, what expectations they had of the school and, conversely, what expectations the school personnel had of them, and finally, what perceptions the parents held about their role in school-parent activities. Ramirez explored the perceived gap in the alignment between the school and the home of the U.S.-born Latino family. Through participant interviews, Ramirez honored the voices of second- and third-generation U.S.-born Latino parents and brought them into the current discourse about parent involvement. Findings suggested that the perceived lack of participation in the sanctioned school activities by some U.S.-born Latino parents stems from an apparent failure on the part of school personnel to recognize the cultural capital and richness of the culturally diverse household. Specifically, through the theoretical framework of *funds of knowledge* (Moll, 1993) it was noted that Latino families have assets that contribute to the academic success of their children, yet they are often

dismissed by school personnel. Ramirez concluded that the participants' sentiments expressed tell a story—from the parents' reality. They clearly articulate how it is their perception that the school personnel's efforts to engage them in the schooling process are meaningless and rooted in a tendency toward deficit thinking about them and their children.

Parent Perspectives of Schools or School Systems

Edwards (2007) researched the demographic and educational characteristics of home school families in middle Tennessee, their perceptions of public schools in their communities, and their reasons for choosing home school as an educational alternative. The study also explored changes that could be made in public education to reclaim home school families' confidence in public education and to attract home school families to public schools. Data were collected through a survey and participant interviews. Edwards found that home school parents' perceptions of public schools were influenced by concerns related to academic performance, large class size, lack of discipline, safety concerns, and negative peer pressure in public schools. Results indicated that parents chose to home school for a myriad of reasons and could not pinpoint just one.

Eastmo (2008) examined parents' perceptions of the education provided by the Rapid City Catholic School System. A researcher developed survey instrument measured importance and levels of agreement of 57 survey items. Results indicated that parents expect a lot from their schools and are generally satisfied with the education they are receiving. Areas of concern were revealed, providing administrators with a focus to improve parent satisfaction.

The findings of this study were not nearly as significant to this researcher as was the following recommendation:

> A qualitative study should be conducted to learn more about the findings of this study. The survey articulated what parents' perceptions are, and further qualitative research would help to clarify why parents have these perceptions. Further research is warranted to perceive how other parents perceive their children's schools." (Eastmo (2008, p. 78)

Knowing what parent perceptions are in a numerical rating sense is not enough. This study validated the need to explore the why and to do exactly as Eastmo suggested—uncover their realities through a qualitative study.

Alvarez (1994) conducted participant interviews to examine students', teachers', and parents' beliefs about care in one school in south-western British Columbia. Specifically, teacher-student and parent-teacher relationships were highlighted. Findings revealed that current beliefs held by students, parents, and teachers related to care were largely shaped by their past experiences of care in school. Alvarez identified clear benefits to students when they believe teachers care about them and emphasized the importance of uncovering our own beliefs, getting to know students as individuals and having open dialogue with parents.

Parent Perspectives about Teaching and Learning Issues

Sedran (1996) examined parent and teacher perceptions about critical teaching and learning issues within a middle school setting. By sharing knowledge of various perspectives between and among parents and teachers, Sedran suggested that improvement can be made in the ability of the school to provide high quality education for every student. Alternatives could then be offered to students in curriculum and

instruction. The interview framework provided participants with a voice and an influence in school decision making.

Sedran (1996) contended that if a school ignores conflicting ideas parents and teachers may have about learning, then the ability of the school to provide high quality education for all students is limited and children caught in the gap may fail to reach their potential. Findings indicated that parents and teachers concurred with each other on major issues related to content and process of learning. It was noted that parents expressed beliefs more intensely and passionately than teachers on many issues.

Discussion

Of particular support to my study were the works of Bialostok (1999), Rubinos (2007), and Angion (2009). Bialostok sought to increase awareness among teachers of the commonsense understandings of parents. The methods employed to reveal these understandings informed my study. Bialostok (1999) revealed that upon examining parent understandings, a concentrated effort had to take place to "overcome the interference of my own cultural system" (p. 108). Here, Bialostok confronted his own culture bound biases and the impact these biases could have upon his research. Certainly, my culture bound perspectives could corrupt my own data collection and analysis without employing similar concentrated efforts. Rubinos examined the attitudes and beliefs of culturally diverse parents and uncovered them through the use of focus groups. Likewise, Angion (2009) utilized a focus group design and was alarmed that such a wide divide could exist among parent and teacher perceptions. Their research inspired me to use a focus group design within my own study to increase understanding. New realities emerged for these researchers, which are what I too sought out to accomplish.

An ample body of research exists where parent perspectives are explored across various topics within education, particularly in the area of parent involvement. Furthermore, an abundance of research has examined school cultures from preschool programs through higher education. However, a noticeable gap exists and a bridge is necessary to connect these two bodies of work—the exploration of a school culture through the alternative realities that parents form as they interpret a school. The purpose of this study is to provide that missing gap.

Yet another gap was discovered upon examining existing research. Studies exist that draw from the insights and understandings of parents in various school cultures. Missing, however, was the representation of the parent as a co-constructor of the very culture that was identified for study and ultimately, improvement. Employing Barth's (1986) concept of schoolpeople and elevating parents from a populace to acting partners in shaping the school culture of which they are part, will move toward closing this gap.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative form of inquiry that has an open-ended nature and finds out what people's lives, experiences, and interactions mean to them in their own terms (Patton, 1985) was selected for this study. Several key characteristics of qualitative research were closely aligned with the purpose of this study, which were framed by a focus group design. The first characteristic is that researchers strive to understand the meaning people have constructed about their world and their experiences; that is, how do people make sense of their experience (Merriam, 2002). Uncovering how parents made sense out of their Zaharis School experience was what this researcher sought out to understand. As Patton (1985) explained:

> Qualitative research is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there. This understanding is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of that setting—what it means for participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what's going on for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting. The analysis strives for depth of understanding. (p. 1)

A second characteristic of qualitative research is that the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. This is an advantage that allows the researcher to increase understanding through nonverbal as well as verbal communication, process information immediately, clarify and summarize material, check with respondents for accuracy of interpretation, and explore unusual or unanticipated responses (Merriam, 2002).

In short—qualitative research attempts to understand and make sense of phenomena from the participant's perspective. The researcher can approach the

phenomenon from an interpretive or critical stance. The research is characterized by the search for meaning and understanding, and the researcher can probe for deeper understanding in the collection and analysis of data, resulting in a richly descriptive end product (Merriam, 2002). Uncovering the socially constructed meaning that parents have formed of Zaharis School was central to this study and was best situated within a qualitative design using the focus group framework. This research design allows for an exploratory deep-dive into Zaharis by creating conditions for a fluid and interactive exchange with parents to uncover their perceived realities of the school they are part of.

Focus groups are group interviews. A moderator (this researcher) guides the interview while a small group discusses the topics that the interviewer raises. What the participants in the groups say during their discussions are the essential data in focus groups (Morgan, 1998a). In addition to the before mentioned benefits, a focus group design allowed me to identify the multiple subpopulations of parents who make-up our community of learners to create the conditions for a diverse representation of thought.

The study was conducted within the Zaharis School community. Data were gathered through a purposive or theoretical sampling of parents who represented a cross section of the community. I realize that in no way is the sample a complete representation of all sub-groups within the Zaharis community, nor did selected participants represent the full spectrum of experiences and opinions that exist. With that said, carefully chosen categories of participants were identified that reflect many of the groups that are well represented within the demographics of the Zaharis population.

Methods for Data Collection and Analysis

Prior to beginning the study, IRB, Informed Consent, and MPS approvals were received (Appendix A, B, C respectively). Data collection was accomplished exclusively through focus group interviews. Focus groups are fundamentally a way of listening to people and learning from them and creating a line of communication (Morgan, 1998). New topics and insights were uncovered. Data were generated that revealed the range of things that mattered to participants concerning their Zaharis School experience—data that offered insights and interpretations as to why parents think and act as they do.

Merton et al. (1990) presented four broad criteria for the effective focus group interview: It should cover a maximum range of relevant topics, provide data that are as specific as possible, foster interaction that explores the participants' feelings in some depth, and take into account the personal context that participants use in generating their responses to the topic.

Focus group interviews provided me with the ability to best explore the guiding research question that drove this study:

What are the multiple realities expressed by parents and what similarities and differences exist across these realities?

Selection of Participants

A segmented sampling of participants was drawn from categories of families that made-up a significant portion of the Zaharis School student population:

- Families who reside in cities or districts outside of the town of Mesa or the Mesa Public Schools.
- Families who come to Zaharis from back-to-basic traditional schools.

- Families from Title I school communities.
- Families who reside within the Las Sendas Elementary School community.
- Families who come to Zaharis from charter or private school communities.
- Families who come from home school environments.
- Families who live within the Zaharis attendance area.

The office specialist at Zaharis was a tremendous support in helping determine group composition. She interfaces with the Zaharis parent community on a daily basis, knows almost all of them by name and is plugged into their lives. In short—she is a friend to everyone. Using the Zaharis data base, she provided a list of families belonging to the seven sub-populations previously identified. Once the families were divided into the appropriate sub-populations, names were highlighted by the following basic considerations:

- willingness to talk about the school and share opinions,
- familiarity with the school (do we ever see them on campus?),
- gender,
- ethnicity,
- poverty (free or reduced lunch), and
- familiarity with each other.

While it was inevitable that focus group participants belonging to the same school community may know each other, a purposeful effort was made to avoid selecting those with close friendships. Conversations among strangers avoids the taken for granted assumptions that are common among friends and allows for a more productive group dynamic in exploring possible assumptions (Morgan, 1998b). Although acquaintances

can converse more readily, this is often due to their ability to rely on the kind of taken-for-granted assumptions that are exactly what the researcher is trying to investigate (Agar & MacDonald, 1995).

Table 1 provides an overview of the final selection of focus group participants who were identified through the collaborative efforts of the assistant moderator, office specialist, and me, and included 14 parents from the Zaharis community. Each of the two focus groups had a representative from the seven sub-populations. The demographic characteristics of the overall group composition consisted of:

- 2 participants were male, 13 were female.
- 3 participants came from Hispanic heritage, 2 from an Asian heritage, and 10 from a White European heritage.
- 3 participants were on free or reduced lunch, a frequently referred to criteria to identify poverty within the schools.

Group A focus group consisted of:

- 7 female, 1 male,
- 1 Hispanic, 1 Asian, 5 White,
- 2 free or reduced lunch

Group B focus group consisted of:

- 6 female, 1 male,
- 2 Hispanic, 1 Asian, 4 White,
- 1 free or reduced lunch

While considering each of the considerations for selection, the basic criterion for all participants was this—can the group comfortably discuss the topic in ways that will be useful to me?

Table 1

Final Selection of Focus Group Participants

Name (Pseudonym)	Ethnicity	F/M	Home School	Free or Reduced Lunch	Number of Children
Group A					
Anna	Hispanic or Latino	F	Back to Basic	N	3
Lori	Hispanic or Latino	F	Charter	N	2
Abbi	White	F	Home Schooled	N	2
Mark	White	M	Charter	N	3
Kayla	White	F	Title I	Y	4
Connie	Asian	F	Zaharis Attendance Area	N	2
Kara	White	F	Other Mesa School	Y	2
Dora	Asian	F	Outside of Mesa	N	3
Group B					
Sara	White	F	Outside of Mesa	N	1
Toni	White	F	Other Mesa School	N	2
Nanette	White	F	Zaharis Attendance Area	N	3
Oscar	Hispanic or Latino	M	Home Schooled	N	2
Geri	White	F	Back to Basic	N	2
Leah	White	F	Charter	N	2
Hanna	White	F	Title I	Y	3

Researcher positionality and subjectivity

In offering an honest self-assessment concerning my personal core beliefs, social values, theoretical orientation, and the very nature of how these intersect with my role as principal of Zaharis School, I acknowledge the indirect impact these factors may have on my research execution and interpretation. I consider this one of several noteworthy

research limitations within this study. Others will be identified in Chapter 5. With that said, disrupting the positionality that accompanies me into Zaharis School each day is the primary driver behind this research study. The very premise of my research rests upon the foundation that we can be imprisoned by these biases unless we seek to disrupt them. The biases that I bring to this study and my role as building principal with prior parent associations in the school community were considered during selection of participants for this study.

I experienced some degree of association with every parent at Zaharis School. As previously noted, this could also be said of the office specialist, who assisted me in the selection of participants. The office specialist received limited insight into the purpose of my study, was offered the identified sub-populations to draw from, and the beforementioned basic qualifiers and characteristics for participation in the study. Similar to my own circumstance, her greatest limitation was perhaps the greatest value she offered to me—her familiarity with our parent community. The assistant moderator might have been an equalizer of sorts. As a classroom teacher, her sphere of parent associations was much more limited. In short, her background experience with our parent community was not nearly as much of an influence and her voice played a significant role in identifying focus group parents. The role the assistant moderator offered to me was of great value in reducing the influence of the positionality that I brought into the study, not only with participant selection, but with analysis that occurred throughout focus group discussion debriefings.

Chapter 4 revealed that participants have experienced diverse perceived school related challenges with their children as well as a range of positive successful

experiences. In short, our effort to capture as best as possible a diverse representation of Zaharis School appeared to have succeeded.

The Level of Group Structure

The less structured approach to focus group discussion was especially useful for the exploratory research. The goal was to learn something new from participants, and it proved best to let them speak for themselves. Minimizing my role and involvement in the discussion as the moderator gave the participants more opportunity to pursue what interested them (Morgan, 1997). Certainly, this study was exploratory, and the goal was to learn from the participants, therefore, a deliberate effort was made to limit my involvement in the discussions. A compromise to either the structured or less structured design of the focus group was the funnel approach.

In the funnel-based interview, each group began with a less structured approach that emphasized free discussion and then moved toward a more structured discussion of specific questions. The funnel strategy offered a framework that made it possible to hear the participants' own perspectives in the early part of the discussion as well as their responses to my specific interests in the later part of the discussion (Morgan, 1997). One of the most useful features of the less structured approach to focus group discussion was that it wasn't requisite to know the focus group questions in advance. Once the participants started discussing the topic, they were able to react to each other. If they were at all interested in the topic, their conversation rapidly took on a life of its own (Morgan, 1998a). Morgan submitted that the goal in less structured groups is to find a few questions that not only interest participants but also get them to talk about the topics that interest the researcher. In other words, "less structured groups are *not* unfocused

groups" (p. 49). Instead, they are focused on broader topics. This goal of exploring broad topics is matched by a broad, open-ended set of questions. The funnel-based interview served as an effective approach to generating free-flowing discussions among focus group participants.

Categories of Questions

Five categories of questions were constructed for the purpose of the focus group discussions; opening, introductory, transition, key, and ending. Each provided a distinctive function in the focus group interview and offered a flow for discussion. These questions were not designed to serve as a topic guide, but rather a prompt to stimulate the flow of discussion (Krueger, 1998). At times, the questions gave way to unplanned or serendipitous questions that I found useful to the study—questions prompted by the comments of the participants. The focus group questions included:

- Opening question (Designed to be answered quickly and to make participants feel comfortable, connected and to build a sense of community within the group.):

  Tell us your name, who your children are and one thing you would like us to know about one of them—one thing that your child does that makes you smile.

- Introductory question (Designed to introduce the general topic of discussion and/or provide participants with an opportunity to reflect on experiences to the overall topic. Fosters conversation and interaction among participants.):

  When you hear James K. Zaharis Elementary School, what comes to mind?

- Transition questions (Designed to go into more depth about their experiences. Sets the stage for productive key questions—cannot be scripted.):

  Example: Tell us how this has influenced your youngster.

- Key questions (Drives the study and requires the greatest attention in the analysis. Prompted by participant responses.):

  Example: How important to you is this and why?

- Ending question (Brings closure to the discussion, enables participants to reflect on previous comments—ensures that critical aspects have not been overlooked.):

  Is there anything that we should have talked about but didn't?

Throughout the discussion, probes and follow-up questions were applied to facilitate the flow of conversation, such as:

- Who else has some thoughts about this—maybe something a little different?
- What else have people experienced in this area?
- You've been discussing several different ideas; what haven't we heard yet?
- Remember, we want to hear your opinions; who has something else?

The Size of the Group

The basis for the rule-of-thumb size that specifies a range of 6-10 is that if below 6, it may be difficult to sustain a discussion; while if above 10, it may be difficult to control one (Morgan, 1997). Without consideration to the rule-of-thumb for size consideration, 7 subgroups were identified to represent (to some degree) the student population of Zaharis. Focus group size for this study involved seven or eight participants, an assistant moderator, and me.

The Number of Focus Groups

This study had two parallel focus groups. Each met two times. It was my hope that two focus groups would provide more of a representative sample of the Zaharis School population. All focus group meetings occurred in a fifth grade classroom (#27) at Zaharis School; this was the classroom of the assistant moderator, Krista Flemming.

- Focus group 1 met on March 1, 2011 and March 3, 2011. The first session lasted from 3:30 to 4:55 pm and the second session lasted from 3:30 to 4:45 pm. All seven members attended both sessions.
- Focus group 2 met on March 7, 2011 and March 9, 2011. The first session lasted from 3:30 to 4:45 pm and the second session lasted from 3:30 to 4:35 pm. All seven members attended both sessions.

The problem with having only one group is that it is impossible to tell when the discussion reflects either the unusual composition of that group or the dynamics of that unique set of participants. Even when there are data from just two groups, if what they say is highly similar then this provides much safer ground in concluding that group dynamics were not responsible for this content (Morgan, 1997). Comparison occurs to an extent within a focus group, but it is of more interest to the analyst to make comparisons across focus groups with similar respondents. Then, as different types of participants are interviewed, the analyst seeks to compare results of the newer group with what has already been established (Krueger, 1998).

Range

There were issues relative to school culture that I perceived to be important. It was previously noted that one of the primary purposes of this study was to break through

the culture-bound reality we live within at Zaharis that is taken for granted as the reality. Uncovering the alternative realities formed by parents sought to disrupt the culture-bound realities that stifled growth. While there are issues of school life that command attention, it is the alternative realities that my colleagues and I may have never considered that I sought to uncover. The nature of focus group discussions that occurred within this study were not narrowed by implicitly assuming which issues were important. Range of discussion topics were determined by participant response. Analysis began with careful listening. Openness to new ideas, approaches, and concepts was essential (Krueger, 1998). Concern for the junior high transition and handwriting are issues that represent a sample of the broad range of topics introduced by focus group participants and were not often discussed by the Zaharis staff.

Specificity and Depth

Merton et al. (1990) emphasizes specificity to direct the focus group discussions toward concrete and detailed accounts of the participants' experiences. It can be all too easy for participants to drift off into generalities, but an emphasis was placed on hearing about the participants' experiences which helped to counteract this tendency. This meant that during the discussions, I, as the moderator, asked more prodding follow up questions such as: What do you mean when you say a sense of family and how important is that to you as your kids are learning in different areas? And how does that sense of community develop when you live in different neighborhoods and come from different perspectives, both in terms of your background experience and in terms of proximity—where you live?

As with specificity, my goal for depth was to avoid a discussion of vague generalities. By virtue of the topic for this study—the children of focus group participants

and their school of choice—parent participants were involved and motivated to share opinions and experiences. An emphasis on sharing personal experiences enabled me to generate a level of depth that drew the entire group into the discussion (Merton et al., 1990).

Personal Context

Perspectives and personal contexts were based on the social roles and categories that the participants occupied—focus group participants were drawn from seven segmented categories. The purpose of the focus group design was to bring a number of different perspectives into contact. Until they interact with others on a topic, individuals are often simply unaware of their own implicit perspectives (Morgan, 1997). Moreover, at times, the interaction in the group often presented the need to explain or defend one's perspective to someone who thought about the world differently. Using a focus group design to create such interactions allowed for a set of observations that might have been difficult to obtain through other methods.

Capturing and Handling the Data

Focus group discussions were electronically recorded and transcribed with additional notes taken by the assistant moderator (Krista Flemming, 5th grade teacher at Zaharis School). The assistant moderator also took notes on the body language throughout each discussion, asked additional questions and probed participant responses for more depth. A sample from the data collected by the assistant moderator that would not have been present during analysis if I was limited to transcripts alone includes:

Toni pulls out papers again discussing leadership.

- Others are nodding.

- Toni is getting emotional. Cries when discussing daughter being afraid to make a mistake at her previous school. Pauses. Breaks down when using term "broken spirit."
- Geri passes tissues.
- Toni begins again. Very animated. Hands drawing boxes.
- Others are nodding.
- Nanette seems like she wants to say something, maybe Geri, too.

(Everyone got comfortable, almost relaxed as Toni was talking… like they knew she had to tell her story, and they were there to listen.)

Another sample is when Hanna was telling her story.

- Everyone is listening, facing her.
- Laughs when she says Kate is falling asleep on the bus.
- During her description of Franklin (traditional school), several parents groan. Geri is nodding, whispering to Nanette—she knows!
- Looks of shock/wonder/admiration for Abbi wanting to go to Zaharis.
- Tells a good story, pausing, voices; everyone is into it. Pauses… someone finishes the thought. They keep doing it. It's like these are lifelong friends.

The assistant moderator was also utilized in the post-meeting analysis of each session. This role was of great value. A second set of eyes and ears increased both the total accumulation of information and the validity of the analysis (Krueger, 1998).

Data Coding and Analysis

Humans tend to see or hear selectively only those comments that confirm a particular point of view or a tendency to avoid dealing with information that causes

dissonance (Krueger, 1998). I sought to avoid the trap of selective perception by implementing the before mentioned safeguards of not narrowing discussion topics. Topics were generated by participant responses, limiting my role in the discussion to introducing broad open-ended questions, creating parallel focus groups to reduce the influence of the group dynamic, and utilizing the assistant moderator to provide another perspective. The contributions of the assistant moderator were primarily offered during analysis and not during parent discussion sessions. Focus group discussions were transcribed, printed out, and each topic and developing theme was assigned a color code and highlighted with a corresponding-colored pencil.

When a new discussion topic emerged, a code was attached. When the topic reappeared during discussion, the code was once again attached, allowing this researcher to selectively retrieve and review information pertaining to certain codes, combinations of codes, or related situations (Krueger, 1998). The corresponding names of participants were recorded on the transcripts next to each comment offered during discussion to allow for a more thorough analysis.

It was not uncommon for a single parent response to spill into as many as four or five different

discussion topics or themes. Topics were broken down into sub-topics and the data analysis became rather complex and somewhat messy. The color codes helped significantly in providing order and clarity and in identifying reoccurring discussion topics (see Appendix D). To distinguish between a topic and theme for the purpose of this study, a topic could be present in a single discussion or in few instances. A topic became a theme when it was repeated with significant frequency and often times, in both focus

groups. For example, the topic of *handwriting* appeared, but without much recurrence. The topic *learning climate* became a theme because it appeared frequently in each focus group. An effort was made to transcribe focus group discussions in a timely fashion to allow for as little lag time as possible between discussions and analysis. This helped establish analysis continuity and kept focus group discussions from growing stale over delayed periods of time.

Throughout the transcript analysis, a pattern quickly developed—significant topics and relevant discussion points were visible in review of the transcripts that were not detected by me in live-time during the focus group discussion. This allowed me to return to missed opportunities during initial discussions to go deeper into parent perceptions and realities in subsequent discussions. For example, meeting #2 for one of the two focus groups started with the following follow-up probe:

> In our previous focus group meeting, Toni said something that might be a good topic of discussion for us to explore today. She said that, 'Many schools use words to define their practice and that doesn't always align with what the school is really about.' Toni, what did you mean by that?

A thorough and comprehensive search for patterns among participant responses revealed that the majority of parent perceptions expressed and most frequently coded throughout focus group discussions fell within three parent realities. These are presented in detail in Chapter 4. In addition to identifying themes through response frequency, the following questions served as a guide toward identifying the three emergent themes that were ultimately selected:

- Did the discussion topic appear in both parallel focus groups?

- Were there outward signs of emotion, passion, or tension visible that revealed a high level of concern during responses?

Analysis should also seek to enlighten, provide interpretations, and lift the level of understanding to a new plateau. With this in mind, as I coded and read through the data, I asked the following questions of the data as recommended by Krueger (1998) to gain a better understanding of the parent's perceptions of Zaharis School:

- What was previously known and then confirmed or challenged by this study?
- What was suspected and then confirmed or challenged by this study?
- What was new that wasn't previously suspected?
- What implications do these results have for the future?

One example of how I used Krueger's guiding questions to assist in analysis was in response to question #2 (What was suspected then confirmed or challenged by this study?). The assistant moderator and I utilized these questions as to assist us in identifying the most meaningful insights and to increase our understanding. For example, the following episode described below concerning math, involved much discussion with the assistant moderator during one of our debriefings. As a classroom teacher at Zaharis School, the assistant moderator was surprised with how closely the parents' perceptions of math instruction aligned with her own and with other teachers at the school. Areas the teachers and I had identified as targets for growth were also clearly visible to parents. Together, we concluded that the topic of math was critically important to parents.

The debriefings with the assistant moderator occurred throughout analysis of the transcripts and immediately after each focus group discussion, prior to transcription, while the discussion was still lingering and fresh. As previously noted, question #2

helped to uncover the following: Many curricular conversations with and among teachers have concentrated on our need to incorporate more of an inquiry stance into the teaching of math. While other content area disciplines were anchored by a constructivist theoretical orientation, math was lagging behind. A more traditional and conventional approach to math instruction was evident throughout the school and across grade levels. This concern had been a continuous yet unsolved problem of practice we had been grappling with over time. Focus group data revealed that parents also identified this as a concern to take-on. Specifically, they identified the inconsistency with math and noted that the experience of authentic math conversations in learning was lacking. One parent boldly offered-up this challenge: "Are they *thinking* like mathematicians? Is there something we could be doing more of as a school and as parents to nurture that?" So, in response to Krueger's question, yes. What was suspected in respect to our math practice was confirmed. Parents too, identified this as an area for growth within Zaharis School. This particular example from data analysis will be described in detail within Chapter 4 and how it informed our practice in Chapter 5.

Ultimately, the driving force behind this study was embedded deep within our response to Krueger's last analytical question referenced above: "What implications do these results have for the future?" My answer to this question will be the focal point of Chapter 5. Disrupting culture bound biases to allow for a future vision of possibility for Zaharis Elementary School was the primary purpose behind this study.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I describe the findings of this research study and answer the research question:

What are the multiple realities and perceptions of Zaharis Elementary School as expressed by parents and what similarities and differences exist across these realities?

I begin with the obvious disclosure that a staggering number of realities exist within the cross section of parents participating in this study. A single parent response could reveal four or even five different topics related to a school experience or perspective. After an exhaustive search for patterns among participant responses, I arrived at this—the majority of parent perceptions expressed throughout focus group discussions fell within three emergent parent realities:

- Parent reality #1: Teaching and learning are social processes that support the development of student voice and nurture rich relationships.
- Parent reality #2: Learning through inquiry elevates class work to purposeful student learning, activates critical thinking, and fosters authentic real-world experience.
- Parent reality #3: Teaching is teamwork and all members of the classroom community are teachers and learners.

Each parent reality is addressed by providing episodes from focus group discussions that lend support to each claim. The three perceived realities introduced in this chapter were among the most frequently coded, emerged in both parallel focus groups, appeared within the notes from the assistant moderator identifying emotional

tones and body language that suggested a high level of concern, and were identified in response to one or more of Krueger's guiding questions introduced in Chapter 4.

Parent Reality #1: Teaching and Learning are Social Processes

Zaharis School opened years ago with the belief that learning is a social process, that learning does not take place in a vacuum—we learn with and from each other. Focus group discussion among parents revealed that when learning is experienced as a social process, students develop voice and rich relationships are formed between teacher and student.

The parent perception that teaching and learning are social processes was reflected in the following response by Dora, focus group participant:

> The kids at Zaharis are able to participate, they're able to put in their two cents or their ideas of what should happen in a group and things like that. That's what you do in work, you interact with people. They're able to really learn how to communicate to others whereas in a typical grade school, you would write a report, you'd stand up and you'd give a speech and it doesn't really mean anything. There's not really any interaction, per se. But they have that here and I think I see it more and more with a lot of my son's friends. They're able to interact with other individuals in groups, but also when they're interacting with other kids like younger kids or different situations, they can interpret the situation and instruct with the child, read their needs and help foster other kids through what they've learned and how they've learned to interact. That's one of the most valuable things in the way that the children learn here.

Dora identified three important elements related to teaching and learning as social processes; students at Zaharis have a voice in their learning experience, they learn how to communicate their ideas to others, and they learn how to teach others and are offered opportunities to do so. Dora was not alone with her perceptions that student voice is elevated and honored through social learning experiences at Zaharis.

Development of Student Voice

Dora's declarations that "kids are able to participate and put in their two cents" and offer-up "their ideas of what should happen in a group" emphasized that at Zaharis, students have a voice in their learning experience. After she noted that Zaharis students are empowered with voice, she then expressed why this is important; "That's what you do in work, you interact with people." Zaharis opened with the conviction to provide all learners within the school community with a voice. Our intent was to create socially situated learning conditions that would support the development of children who could think critically with the confidence to project their ideas out into the world. Dora's noticings revealed her perception that the intent to provide children with voice had become part of the learning culture at Zaharis. Dora was not the only parent to express this perspective. Anna suggested that "a lot of people need to do more of using their own mind and be able to share what they have personally with others."

Anna came from a back-to-basic traditional school environment. Throughout discussions she compared what her children now experience to what learning was like in a more controlled environment. She continuously referred to the socially active and engaging learning environment at Zaharis as something she valued. Coming from a learning climate where engagement and voice were not commonplace provided her with a distinctive lens to examine Zaharis through.

The following episode revealed how other parents valued learning conditions where children have opportunities to exercise their voice. The discussion was initiated from one parent's assertion that within the social learning experience at Zaharis, students "develop a confidence to project their thinking into the mix."

Geri: That the kids have a voice? Is that what you're saying? Absolutely.

Toni: Yeah, their voices and opinions are not only counted upon, but they're valued and recognized. Absolutely. That's everything.

Hanna:

> Absolutely. We had an experience with our daughter at her previous school where she felt as though outside of the classroom she wasn't listened to and she just kind of came home and she was perplexed and she was saying, 'Why can't adults always listen to us when we're at their school?' and 'Aren't we the students?' and was kind of questioning, 'Why am I not listened to?' … to give the impression that their not being listened to, I wasn't really listened to, so it's valuable to know that the teachers here are listening to our children.

Nanette: When your child is not being heard or felt validated, they shut down.

In this episode, Toni revealed that for children to feel that their voices and opinions are valued and recognized is not only important but that it's "everything." Toni, Geri, and Hanna each punctuated their assertions that empowering students with voice is an important condition for learning with a response of "absolutely."

Hanna's reference to her daughter's prior school experience revealed an interesting perspective on a child's ability to discern who has voice and control in a school community. She described her daughter as "perplexed" when she asked the following question, "Why can't adults always listen to us when we're at their school?" It wasn't the question of "Why can't adults always listen?" that caught my attention, it was the pronoun of choice that her daughter selected in referencing the school she attended. She referred to her school as "their school." She could have identified the school as *our school*; perhaps even *my school*. But she didn't—she identified her school as "theirs." We and our are inviting pronouns and expressions of solidarity or affinity. "Theirs" might suggest the opposite—divisiveness or perhaps even a sense of disconnectedness—hardly indicators of a true community of learning. Hanna's experience suggested that when a

child is deprived of voice, he or she comes to believe that school is a place that one frequents each day that belongs to others—in this case, teachers.

Nanette responded to Hanna's described experience and suggested that when "your child is not being heard or felt validated, they shut down." This exchange provided me with a new way of looking at voice in a learning community. For years, we at Zaharis discussed the importance of providing opportunities for rich discussion to occur in our classrooms of practice. Our inquiry into learning as a social experience led us to the work of Vygotsky (1978). Touchstone texts such as *Grand Conversations* (Peterson & Eeds, 1990), and *Choice Words* (Johnston, 2004), helped us to value talk in new and different ways. When we said, talk matters, Zaharis teachers held a common understanding of what that means in our classrooms. This episode revealed that while talk certainly does matter in a community of learning, listening deserves equal respect. Toni emphasized this with her appeal for a learning climate where "voices and opinions are not only counted upon, but they're valued and recognized." Hanna recounted her experience in school and shared this with the group, "I wasn't really listened to, so it's valuable to know that the teachers here are listening to our children."

The following episode revealed parent perceptions of an emotionally and relationally healthy learning community where a child feels secure enough to exercise his voice in a very tender way:

> Geri:
>
> Yesterday we had the funniest laugh at the dinner table. Tanner goes, 'Mom, I have to tell you something funny.' And he said, 'We sang a song in class today.' He's not that type of kid. I'm like, 'What?' He goes, 'We were learning about precipitation' and all this stuff and he goes, 'I used Addie's song.' Addie, his little sister, had learned a song in her first grade, *Comin' 'Round the Mountain*, the tune

> of that – and I go, 'You did that in class, Tanner?' He goes, 'Yeah.' And I don't mean to badmouth Franklin (her son's previous school), but that was not acceptable. You couldn't raise your hand and say, 'Hey, I know something because the teacher….'
>
> Toni: And sing that song.
>
> Geri: Yeah, because the teacher's the one who teaches. If the kid has a great idea, sorry, it's not acceptable. You're supposed to sit there and just listen and repeat what I'm telling you.
>
> Hanna: Yeah, sometimes it's too bad that they're talking too much and give a lot of information.
>
> Geri: But it was just really cute, then Tanner goes, 'And I won extra points for my group!'
>
> Toni: Aw, that's cute.
>
> Geri:
>
> You know, he was so happy and so proud, and he would never have done that at his old school and it's so cool that they learn things in a different way instead of 'Let's memorize this. Let's repeat it a hundred times so it's in your head.' So now both of them know it. Tanner picked up on it just like that because he had heard Addie sing it to herself and I just thought, 'Wow, how good, how neat it is for him to feel comfortable enough to do that in class.'

Several things were noteworthy to me about this exchange. First, Geri disclosed that Tanner's not "the type of kid" to exercise his voice by offering-up a song in class. Tanner felt comfortable and secure enough to, in the words of Dora, "put in his own two cents" in a very powerful and compelling fashion. Second, Geri recognized that Tanner's offering of the song in class reflects learning—learning in a way that's contrary to what she had experienced in a more teacher-controlled environment. Specifically, she disclosed that at Zaharis, students "learn things in a different way." Third, the community

of learning at Zaharis extends beyond individual classrooms. Addie's song was from her first-grade classroom community. That little song made its way from one class and grade level into another. And fourth, the end result of Addie's song experience? She was made to feel "so happy and so proud."

Developing Rich Relationships

In looking at the focus group data, what was most striking to me was that Zaharis parents did more than simply discuss what they like or didn't like about Zaharis School. They were able to, in their own language—a poetic, heartfelt, plain-and-simple, straightforward and unmistakable language—identify and expound upon various theoretical approaches to teaching and learning and discuss the differences, benefits, and challenges associated with them. While this section highlights their perceived outcomes of the rich relationships that are forged through collaborative learning experience, I felt it important to note that parents too, can identify theoretical orientations for learning at work.

Peterson (1992) asserted that restricting what happens in the classroom to the curriculum tells students that their lived experiences do not count. The process of schooling is considered to be enough in itself. This narrow focus denies the importance of caring and the contributions social relationships can make to learning. Being in place, belonging, is not merely a feeling we have but it expresses foremostly our relationships with others who truly care for us. Parent realities within this study suggested that not only do lived experiences count, but that connecting our lived experiences—inside and outside of school—enriched the learning experience for students and their relationships in school.

Focus group discussions suggested experiences that occurred through the social construction of learning fosters the development of rich relationships—from student to student and from student to teacher at Zaharis. As individual learners, we actively seek relationships with others. Short and Burke (1991) contended that our emotional, intellectual, and physical well-being is invested in others because it is as social beings that our world becomes multi-dimensional. As previously noted within this study, many parents came to Zaharis from surrounding communities. On many occasions, I was the first point of contact with new Zaharis parents as they sought after an alternative to what they have experienced. Often, this point of contact was the result of regularly scheduled tours which provided those interested in Zaharis with the opportunity to experience the school and walk through classrooms. Parents frequently expressed to me while walking through the school that what appealed to them the most was the school climate where both teacher and student learn side-by-side with smiles on their faces. Many of these parents identified the caring social tone they heard about from friends with children who attend Zaharis as what initially prompted their inquiry into our school. Here I provide evidence of that caring social tone and the rich relationships that are formed as a result of the social learning theory that grounds our practice. I present examples from the focus group discussions of where the teacher – student relationship developed beyond life in the classroom. Parents revealed the impact the outside-of-school relationship has on their children.

Connie:

> I think the kids are involved in the teacher's lives. When my sixth grader was in first grade, he had Kimberly Bernhoft and she got married that summer. She invited her entire class to the reception, and I took him and those were her kids

and she was introducing them as her kids and so they felt like they were a part of her life. So, they were still important. They weren't in her class anymore, but they were still important to her and I think that made a big—I mean, that was like the best thing all summer was he got to go and see her.

Connie's described wedding episode was not the only wedding experience moment among focus group participants. Abbi added yet another experience to the discussion where a child was invited into the life of her teacher.

Abbi: We just went to Las Vegas to Candice's wedding (her daughter's teacher), so she included our family and…

Dora: See how important her kids are to her?

Geri:

Well, I had to say it was as very small wedding. It was 20 people. But you have to realize too, Maddie's been in her classroom for ever since she started teaching. It's different in the special needs classrooms because you don't change every year, so we met Candice. Maddie's been here for six years and Candice has been here for four years, so they've become very good friends.

These two wedding description experiences that enriched the relationship between teacher and student prompted yet another parent to share her own account of a relationship altering moment away from school.

Lori:

Yeah, when Dante had his sixth grade promotion last year, we had a little lunch for him, a family lunch, and teachers Lori Scott and Heather Bullard—he just loves them—they came too, just to show that they care about them and everything. Gwen (another Zaharis teacher) had something too, he just relates with them and they're just like family.

Abbi:

I think kids feel like they can continue their relationship.… Cameron still makes it a point to go to Mrs. Strubel a lot and talk to her and he wants to continue that relationship even though she's not his teacher anymore. She's still a big part of his life and he wants to, over the summer, wants to invite all kinds of people, well

> teachers, to come over swimming at our house. Somehow, I don't think they'd have as much fun as he thinks they would. He likes to bring it up at least, though.

Connie's described event, the first of the two wedding receptions noted, produced a relationship that ultimately helped the teacher's students who attended the event feel like "they were a part of her life," and that they "were still important" even though they weren't in her class anymore. In an attempt to place the magnitude of the experience on a scale, Connie cited her son's reception attendance as "the best thing all summer was he got to go and see her."

I had the privilege of attending the wedding reception referenced by Connie. While my purpose in attending was not to collect data for a dissertation study, I couldn't help but note how special her students were made to feel and how tender the moments were when she was found in their company. The smiles on their faces spoke volumes. It was obvious at first glance that Kimberly (Miss Bernhoft) and her students had developed a unique relationship that had extended beyond the classroom and even beyond the season of their time that they were assigned to share.

Abbi added to Connie's reception experience with a wedding reception account of her own. Abbi began describing how her family traveled out of state to participate in a teacher's wedding. Dora was quick to point out, "see how important her kids are to her?" Abbi noted that the reception was very small—only 20 people. But almost as a rationale for why a student would be included in such a personal moment in a teacher's life, she added that Maddie (her daughter) and Candice (the teacher) "have become very good friends." I thought it was particularly striking that she would use the term "friends." Abbi went beyond just stating that the two have developed a close relation—she described

them as friends. This brought me back to my preservice training where we were taught and reminded over and over again, that danger results in getting too close with your students—you can't be their teacher and also their friend. These experiences would suggest that such is not the case.

It is important to note that when these unique relationships were being described, tears were shed among focus group participants—those sharing their personal accounts and those who were listening. Perhaps the strong emotions revealed the level of importance that Zaharis parents placed upon the relationships developed among teacher and student.

Lori added to the wedding accounts by describing a special luncheon that her son, Dante, held upon graduating from Zaharis. She noted that he invited two of his former teachers (from grades two and six) because "he just loves them." She suggested they came to "show they care." She concluded by stating that Dante "just relates with them and they're just like family." "Family" is a descriptor that is often heard from parents, students, and teachers at Zaharis and appeared within focus group discussions many times. Particularly striking to me was the genuine care, love and concern for each other that students and teachers displayed in these personal accounts shared by parents. It is also compelling to note that when focus group participants were moved to tears throughout discussions, it was almost always when they were describing how their children were made to feel as a result of close relationships that were formed with their teachers.

Abbi concluded that Zaharis students feel they can continue the relationship with their teachers, even when they are no longer in their class. She noted the special

relationship her son has with Mrs. Struble, his first-grade teacher, and that she is "still a big part of his life." Focus group participants smiled and laughed when Allison shared how her son invited his teachers over for a summer swim party. More laughter resulted when she surmised that, "Somehow I don't think they'd have as much fun as he thinks they would." What I see as important in this exchange is not whether or not his teachers would have "fun," but the fact that her son Cameron "thinks they would." This suggestion gave me cause to ponder—just how many deliberate moments between teacher and student, in and outside of class, occurred for Cameron to arrive at such a belief?

One parent, Kayla, offered another account that supports the value and benefit that results when relationships are formed between teacher and student. Then she added another dimension to the discussion concerning relationships—the relationship between teacher and parent.

> Kayla:
>
> I have my sixth grader who was at The Academy for two years. He was there for fourth and fifth grade and it was just awful, he wasn't doing his work, and I had a really hard time pulling him out of there, but I brought him back here for sixth grade because of the relationship. I wanted to get things corrected before he moved on to junior high. And so I did. I pulled him out of The Academy, and I brought him back here because he needed that relationship with the teachers because he just didn't have that over there.
>
> Anna: Is that the (she identified the school)? That one?
>
> Kayla:
>
> Yes. He got behind and he just didn't care and so we didn't know until progress reports because we didn't have the relationship with the teachers, whereas here, and I purposely requested Heather Bullard because I knew I would know the day or the day after he didn't do his work because I have that relationship. She knows she can come tell me, 'Hey, he didn't do his work yesterday.'

Lori: Yeah, we had that same thing with her. She's really good.

Kayla:

> And so, it's really important and it was a really hard decision, not because it's not a great school. I just felt he was giving up some opportunities by not going there, but it's been the best thing for him to get back on track before he moves on to junior high where, again, we're not going to have that relationship with the teachers. You can't almost when you've got a hundred kids coming in your classroom every day. You don't have the time to build those relationships with parents, so this year was really important for us to get back on track.

Focus groups participants addressed the junior high concern repeatedly within this study. One parent referred to the range of options offered to the patrons of MPS as a "deficit model." This detour from the topic of developing relationships was for the purpose of placing Kayla's perspectives in context.

Anna then attributed the lack of relationships being formed in back to basic schools (where her children attending prior to coming to Zaharis) to the more teacher-controlled environment that she described this way; "it's just the teacher and kid." She then made a profound statement that I am going to use to punctuate the parent perception that teaching and learning are social processes, "They have that (the type of relationship described through the wedding reception experiences) because they work together so closely—that fosters the relationship."

Anna not only recognized the value of rich relationships here, she made an assertion as to how they are formed—through the social construction of knowledge or in her terms, "working together so closely." She concluded by making yet another assertion, one to which all Zaharis staff would most likely agree with, "That's really important in the kids' lives."

In examining focus group data, I learned that Zaharis parents place a great value on having teachers involved in their students' lives. They felt with conviction that Zaharis teachers care about their students and likened the relationship between teachers and families to a family relation. These rich relationships, they expressed, are perpetuated over time and extend beyond the grade level year of time shared together. Zaharis parents felt very strongly that teachers are a big part of the lives of their children.

Parent Reality #2: Learning through Inquiry Elevates Class Work to Purposeful Student Learning, Activates Critical Thinking, and Fosters Authentic Real-World Experience

Wenger (1998) contended that "learning is a lifelong process that is not limited to educational settings but is limited by the scope of our identities" (p.273). In this regard, Wenger continued, "educational designs must aim to launch this broader learning process rather than substitute for it." Focus group data suggested that one way Zaharis teachers "launch this broader learning process" is by providing opportunities for authentic learning experiences to occur which promote purpose, activates critical thinking, and creates real-world connections. Parent reality #2 is organized around these three assertions.

To better understand this section, a definition is offered for how Zaharis School approaches and interprets the authentic work of inquiry learning. Inquiry-based learning at Zaharis is a fluid process where students have a voice in their learning. They operate under conditions of agency and create essential questions to guide their study. They identify questions in the world around them and work in concert together to solve them. They investigate, research, explore, and collaborate to build new understandings,

meanings, and knowledge. Zaharis learners rotate in and out of the roles of teacher and learner as they work side-by-side with their teachers, who also are active learners within their own classrooms of practice. Parent realities in this section revealed that the work of inquiry leads to excitement, where students become highly motivated to take on new learning challenges and wonderings.

Creating Purpose

Connie supported the definition of inquiry at Zaharis by making the assertion:

> The students are learners, they excel in the classes and they make purpose out of just… like, 'This is our thing.' They're going through the answers and then they'll question it. Like in social studies he's [her son] always asking about little things like that and the teachers, they love it! They love the Zaharis students because they're like.…

At this point, Dora jumped into the conversation and responded with, "They're thoughtful." Connie continued, "They initiate. Yes. They initiate. They have volition and purpose in everything they do, even if it's just rote." Kayla then offered an account that supports that "creating purpose" can follow a student beyond their Zaharis years. Her son James is a former Zaharis student who is now in junior high. Her comments reflected his experience in that arena:

> He's got straight As and he doesn't love doing the work, but he's gotten to the point now where he'll do the work because he wants the grade, but he finds purpose for it in other ways. He enjoys learning and so doing the work is OK because he's learning along the way and it's not the end all. The work isn't the end, it's the learning and I think that's what he took from being here.

Anna nodded her head in agreement and responded with, "It's about the learning and not the work. I like that!"

This episode offered a perspective of promoting purpose that is grounded in constructivist learning theory. As previously noted within this study, my background was

heavily situated within the work of Madeline Hunter. For years, Hunter (1982) established the need for the teacher to promote purpose through statements of meaning and value. Here, Connie made the assertion that the students are learners and it is they who "make purpose." These two examples are set apart from each other because the theoretical approach to learning that supports each view of how meaning is formed is set apart. In a transmission-based theoretical orientation, the teacher identifies the purpose, meaning and value and informs the student. In a constructivist theoretical orientation, the learner constructs meaning, or in Connie's words, "makes purpose," and they inform each other—sharing different perspectives and interpretations to create new understandings and ways of looking at the world. Kayla provided an account that suggested that not only can a student "make purpose" but that making purpose can follow a student into the grades to come, or in this case—an entirely different school and developmental stage. She described to the group that "even though he doesn't enjoy the work in junior high, "he finds purpose in other ways."

Activating Critical Thinking

Focus group discussion revealed how parents believe Zaharis learners are thinking critically and are "not satisfied with just facts." Content and facts that once had to be drilled into a student's head are now only as far away as their smart phone. What students do with that critical information requires critical thinking that "goes well beyond rote memorization."

Connie noted that Zaharis students "question answers" and that in social studies, they "question the little things." Connie's insight revealed that she recognized the questioning and critical thinking at work at Zaharis and that she placed a value upon it. In

her own words, “parents love it.” Kara offered her perspective on critical thinking at Zaharis in a very literal sense, without inference—she came right out and stated that Zaharis students are “looking critically.”

Parent insights offered detailed representations of critical thinking in the area of literacy development. Critical thinking in literacy learning encourages students to accept, reject, or reconstruct ideologies presented in text. In this section, evidence suggested Zaharis parents recognized that the purposeful use of real literature fosters the imagination, activates critical thinking, and provides opportunities for students to project their learning out into the world. Focus group responses in this section highlight how shared literacy experiences at Zaharis were used to arm students with a critical response, stance, or in some circumstances, a provocation to taking action.

One such focus group discussion took place where accepting differences was the topic of discussion. Parents were commenting on the impact interacting with the children in room 24 has had in the lives of their children and ultimately, this impact is attributed to the critical reading of a carefully selected children’s novel. Room 24 is a classroom where children with severe mental disabilities would come to learn each day. Most of our school had come to know each one of the students in Room 24 by name and were well acquainted with their likes, interests, and challenges. The following episode revealed how parents attributed the shared critical reading experience students engage in to the development of taking-up new perspectives and coming to see and understand the world in new ways as they take action. All elements of critical thinking in literacy.

With the exception of kindergarten, the entire school read the children’s novel *Petey* (Mikaelsen, 1998). To better take on some of the complex themes of the book,

teachers in the primary grades experienced the book as a read aloud. It was a challenge to eavesdrop on any conversation at Zaharis surrounding the topic of accepting differences without a reference to this book and it came up during focus group discussions as well. Dora commented on how teachers are "very purposeful" about how they use real literature in their classrooms and referred to the shared experience of reading *Petey*.

> It's not like one says, 'Oh, just start this project and these kids will just go to that classroom and spend some time.' The entire school read *Petey*, which takes you inside the mind of someone who has special needs. I think it has made a big difference for the kids. Both of my girls have talked constantly about *Petey*, while it's being read and after. That's transformation through literature. I think that is what carries them through that experience, and it helps them to make sense of it.

Several things were significant to me within Dora's commentary here and how her insights related to critical thinking. First, Dora was aware that Zaharis teachers are very purposeful in how they use real books in the classrooms. She has noticed how Mrs. Struble took a children's novel, *Petey*, to help her students better understand children with disabilities and to introduce them to children with special needs. Two, Dora was also aware of how guiding students through the critical reading of a children's novel can "take you into the mind of someone who has special needs." Dora suggested here that through story, one can take up new perspectives and see the world in new ways, elements of critical thinking in literacy. Three, Dora's comments revealed that she believes, as Zaharis teachers do, that learners can experience "transformation through literature." Dora, in her own way here, declared that through shared reading experiences, change can occur within the learner, changes that can reshape our thinking and how we come to know and interact with others. And four, by having experienced *Petey* prior to their visit to Room 24, the students had something "to help them make sense out of the experience."

Mrs. Struble's students experienced a living encounter with disabilities before ever stepping inside Room 24. Dora not only recognized this, she attributed their reading of *Petey* to be what "carried them through the experience and helped them make sense of it." Compelling insights that revealed in Dora's own words, the transformational power of story and the pathways that can result toward critical thinking.

Dora was not alone in her recognition of the role real literature plays in projecting student learning out into the world. In response to the notion that real literature helps children recognize that the world is a diverse place, Leah commented on the impact these critical literacy experiences at Zaharis has had on her daughter.

> It's been huge. With my daughter, she always has comments on different books they're reading in her classroom. At first it was a bit of a shock to me to see that they're reading books that address abuse. You know, is that appropriate? But at the same time, I had to sit back and understand how wonderful this is for her to see those views. Hopefully the teacher is able to comment and not only that, she's able to bring that home to me and I can talk to her about, 'why do you think that man was the way he was?' And, 'Is that something you would ever want in your life?' And, 'How can we avoid that?' It's brought in a type of communication that wouldn't necessarily be there otherwise. That's huge. I really like that they have real literature instead of just going through parts of books. They're actually getting the whole thing. Books are amazing and it's wonderful that we have that here at Zaharis. I think it's a huge plus.

Leah's comments revealed a few important elements of the Zaharis literacy experience where teachers and students create meaning together looking at text through a critical stance. One, the shared experience allowed space for the teacher *and* parent, and the parents placed trust in the teacher to guide these complex discussions. As discussion facilitators, Zaharis teachers were able to guide the collective inquiry into emerging complex themes to develop deeper and more critical understanding. Leah's response provided evidence of how the learning extended beyond the walls of the classroom and

how the inquiry invited other learners, in this case, the parent, into the meaning making. She then provided a sampling of the types of questions that were generated at home through discussion to lead to a deeper inquiry and understanding in the pursuit of taking-on new perspectives and learning to see the world in new ways. Leah then suggested this type of communication occurred because students and teachers draw from "real literature" and not just from "parts of books" that is often experienced where schools and classrooms are limited to scripted curriculum and basal readers. In Dora's words, students at Zaharis experienced a "transformation through literature" when given opportunities to respond to what they read in meaningful ways.

Creating Real-World Connections

Zaharis parents described the learning at Zaharis in this simple way, "The work that is done within the school mirrors the work that is present in the world outside of the school." Focus group discussions in this section revealed the recognition and value parents placed on learning experiences that connect to the surrounding world we live in.

Kayla introduced the notion that as learners, we have an obligation to act when learning experiences are authentic in nature, "We have to ask ourselves—is this about a life skill or is it not? And if it is, then certainly we should do something about it." Lori brought up handwriting at this point in the discussion. She noted that she doesn't write her letters "perfect." Anna responded by stating, "I don't know if I care. I guess that's another thing I enjoy here is that it's real worldly because you know out in the real world, I don't think they care if you make your letters perfect."

Kayla's discussion point resonated with one of the published core beliefs of Zaharis School and one that was often expressed in curricular conversations: The work in

our classrooms should mirror the work that readers, writers, mathematicians, and social scientists engage in out in the real world. If this isn't happening, Zaharis teachers often said that something was amiss. Anna's response suggested that one perspective among Zaharis parents is that little value is placed upon experiences where the learning is not considered to be real worldly.

Dora returned to an earlier topic of discussion concerning "learning how to work." She suggested that Zaharis students are "learning how to work and interact" and revealed that those are "real life things they're going to use after they're done with school." Dora then noted that meaning and purpose are packed within "all the subjects" at Zaharis and that learning is "related to their lives." She then punctuated her perspective by stating that the question of, "How are you going to use this?" is really important. Anna responded to Dora by offering an account from a prior school experience where her daughter was asked to "write and copy things she never understood—she never knew what it was for or why she was learning it." She disclosed that the end result—the lack of a real-world connection, was "frustration for my daughter."

Math was a topic of discussion that resulted in conversations that focused on the value of a real-world purpose and ultimately revealed differences of opinion. Dora opened the door to this by making the assertion that at some schools, students "know how to divide but they don't know what division is for." Anna emphasized her belief that "using manipulatives helps her (referring to her daughter) understand that this is what she really uses in life." Kara suggested presenting "really rich problem-solving situations to kids, where, yes, they're using skills but in doing so, they approach it differently." She connected this suggestion to how we learn out in the "real world." Dora agreed with Kara

and stated that “math is a system we use to understand what’s happening in the world, to make sense of it.” She continued by emphasizing that “this is a way to promote deeper understanding that goes beyond skills to solving problems and thinking them out.” Anna followed up with a series of questions:

> ‘Why do we use division? Why do we use all those different things?’ Logically, ‘Why are we using that?’ They gain appreciation for it. ‘If you want to be a scientist, you’re gonna’ have to use this and this and this... so you’re gonna’ have to understand it and this is how to understand it.’

Anna’s response led to differing perspectives and tapped into a discussion topic that had been part of many curricular conversations among the Zaharis teachers of inquiry: Is there a place for rote memorization when students take on authentic real-world work? See Chapter 5 for more about these conversations.

Lori responded with a comment that triggered the before mentioned debate related to purpose in learning. She suggested that “sometimes the inquiry can overwhelm it. Sometimes you have to work with the facts. Sometimes you have to think beyond that and sometimes that’s where we have a hard line.” Dora asked, “Does it go beyond math facts, though? Is there any sort of thought behind the facts?” Kayla answered Dora’s question:

> At this point, not usually. They’re just trying to outdo each other, but that’s how you learn. Those math facts are so important because you’ve got to have those basic facts before you can move on into the higher math. They’re getting those math facts and they know they’re important enough that they need to learn them. That’s OK.

Dora brought another perspective to the discussion: “I don’t think there’s anything wrong that they’re emerging with the skills they need, but are they thinking like

mathematicians? Is there something we could be doing more as a school and as parents to nurture that?" Kayla offered:

> I think that's part of the inquiry. Are they thinking of other ways to do it and how that applies? I think they are getting those skills. Math is one of those things where it's hard to… a lot of kids don't have math conversations, you know?

Anna and Kara, in their responses, suggested that they understand and can articulate in their own words how inquiry, unlike rote learning, depends on lived experiences. This was made evident in Anna's declaration that her daughter's understanding came through the realization that "math is something she really uses in life."

Kara suggested the continued practice of "presenting really rich problem-solving situations to kids" where they can use different problem-solving approaches—an example of learning through inquiry. She connected this to learning in the real world. Kara's comments reflected her understanding of how inquiry permits the learner to experiment, muck around with, and test out, using her words, "different approaches." Kara's comments provided evidence that she has an understanding that inquiry is a process of both problem posing and problem solving.

Dora revealed a very deep understanding of constructivist learning theory using the powerfully spoken words of a parent. When she stated that, "Math is a system we use to understand what's happening in the world, to make sense of it," Dora provided evidence of a belief that math can provide a learner with the ability to think and communicate in complex ways—ways that at times extend beyond what we traditionally perceive as language. Dora's assertion that math can enable a learner to better make sense of "what's happening in the world," revealed her understanding of multiple perspectives

and disciplines at work within Zaharis to create meaning and ways of knowing. She provided further evidence by going on to state that "this (real-world learning) is a way to promote deeper understanding that goes beyond skills to solving problems and thinking them out." Dora provided another way of stating what Kayla offered earlier—the work isn't the end, it's the learning. Dora offered her big picture view of math when she asked, "Are they thinking like mathematicians?"

Lori presented an argument that extends well beyond this focus group discussion—is there value in learning basic facts through rote memorization without context of deeper thought and meaning? In her own way, she stated this—sometimes you just have to know the facts without any connection to life experience.

Dora refused to yield to this notion. She posed her own questions, "Does it go beyond math facts though? Is there any sort of thought behind the facts?" Kayla offered an opposing view to her earlier declarations that "learning is about critical thinking and the focus should be on the learning and not the work" when she answered Dora's questions with the response of "…at this point, not usually. They're just trying to outdo each other, but that's how you learn. Those math facts are so important.…"

My interpretation of what Kayla said here is this—even though we know there are better ways to learn, some basic facts are so important that it's okay to learn them in a rote fashion. She went on to say that the students "know they're important enough that they need to learn them. That's OK."

Again, refusing to yield to Kayla's argument, Dora responded: "I don't think there's anything wrong that they're emerging with the skills they need. But are they

thinking like mathematicians? Is there something we could be doing more as a school and as parents to nurture that?"

Kayla closed the argument when she declared that Dora's questions are "part of the inquiry. Are they thinking of other ways to do it and how that applies?" She then made a profound statement that I have heard from teachers at Zaharis on occasion: "Math is one of those things where it's hard… a lot of kids don't have math conversations."

While there were differing opinions on the place rote memorization should or should not have in math learning, this is clear—focus group discussions revealed that parents both recognized and valued the work that Zaharis learners engage in to, in Dora's words, use math as a system "to understand what's happening in the world, to make sense of it."

Parent Reality #3: Teaching is Teamwork and All Members of the Classroom Community are Teachers and Learners

Teamwork was the focal point of this parent reality. To create a shared understanding of the term for the purpose and context of this study, the definition of teamwork in teaching and learning is offered here.

For the purpose of this study, teamwork within teaching and learning implies that a shared responsibility exists among teacher and student to co-create learning experiences within and outside of the classroom. Everyone in the classroom is a learner and each takes on the role and identity of both teacher and learner. The dynamic of the classroom is fluid, where the community of learners rotate in and out of those roles. This dynamic requires a shift from the traditional way of thinking about learning, where scripted lessons are often imposed upon the students, to a shared responsibility of creating an

engaging and autonomous learning experience. Teamwork implies that learning is collaborative and that each learner brings meaning into the learning experience, and through shared interpretations of knowing and seeing the world, new understandings emerge.

The following sub-assertions will frame the parent reality that teaching is teamwork and all members of the classroom community are teachers and learners:

- Teamwork is a means of engaging students in their own learning.
- Teamwork is situational in nature. Not every learning experience needs to be collaborative.
- Teamwork prepares students for real life.
- Teamwork supports learning processes.

Engaging Students in Their Own Learning

The following vignette suggested that parents feel that teamwork in the classroom is a means of engaging the students and furthermore, that the engagement fosters a love of learning.

> Connie: "But even for the kids learning, it's kids asking and learning and doing things…"
>
> Dora: "Cooperative."
>
> Abbi: "As opposed to just sitting there…"
>
> Uncertain: "Right."
>
> Abbi: "And just not being able to say anything."
>
> Anna: "In straight rows."

Dora: “Looking bored out of their minds. They’re engaged and it’s exciting. I think it will foster a love of learning.”

Parent perspectives revealed their beliefs that engagement fosters a love of learning. Data supporting this notion will be presented within this section. Associated with that belief, is the counter argument that disengagement fosters the opposite condition—feelings of antipathy, displeasure, and a strong aversion toward learning. Several parents voiced their concern for prior learning experiences in other schools—schools they chose to vacate—where impediments to student understanding included lessons dominated by the teacher with students in rows of desks and an apparent devaluing of student thinking, expression, and to borrow the term mentioned by multiple parents, “working together.”

One parent, Geri, likened Zaharis to a cake that is so yummy you want to share it with everyone. She expressed how both of her children now love school and described how they go through boxes of paper at home because her youngest is “constantly writing books and coloring pictures of what she learned in school.” Such was not always the case, Geri stated:

> My kids went to Franklin (a back-to-basics traditional school) and I feel bad for my oldest son because I didn’t change anything sooner. He went to Franklin from kindergarten to fifth grade. It’s a good school. They teach him, he learned, he hated it. Every day was a battle. My second oldest, she went to kindergarten at Franklin. She did fine. She got straight As. She learned that every time she got home, she wouldn’t let me go and I didn’t know why. Then we came here, and she loves school.

Repeatedly during focus group discussions, Angie referenced the learning climate she chose to vacate where children were placed in isolation, the paradoxical condition to teamwork, in worksheet driven classrooms. “Like I said,” she continued:

> I feel bad for my older son because I didn't know about this sooner and I didn't change it. But he now loves learning. I'm excited for my kindergarten girl who will be coming because I know she's gonna love it just as much as they did.

Geri's high appraisal of Zaharis appeared to be closely associated with her children's love for learning and for the collaborative approach to teaching and learning they experience. Another parent, Leah, offered similar accounts:

> I come from a very test score-oriented school. My kids did not like going to school before and now my children love school. They wanna come back. They don't even want to have off next week. They'd rather be in school. They love this school and I can't tell you what a difference that makes.

Leah, like several other parents, emphasized that both her kids "love to learn." She attributed this to their feeling "like they're part of something" through their experience in the classroom where they "actively work together to create understanding."

Lori emphasized her gratification that Zaharis is not "traditional." She expressed her initial concern because of all the "talking with each other," but then revealed that "it's working for Mika" and that "Mika loves it because the learning is so inviting."

Dora suggested that the "talking together" or the emphasis placed on "communicating" in Zaharis classrooms provided far more meaningful motivation for a student to "keep at it." Yet another parent, Kayla, attributed the classroom engagement to an "excitement about learning."

Focus group participants offered concrete examples of engaging experiences of students and teachers teaming together that lead to joyful learning moments—moments that fostered a love for learning.

Leah:

> So, she moved here from that other environment. Then we moved her up a grade. So, she had a lot of change and you know she didn't want to leave here. She still

doesn't want to leave here, so I just hope she gets to go where she wants to go next year. So, anyway…she's in sixth grade.

Uncertain: "Yeah."

Nanette:

I think it's like a family, and so they were so sad to have to move on even though you wanna' move on and go to bigger and better things, but this is the ultimate kind of family environment. The school and the kids, I feel like they're experiencing their learning.

Leah: "Right."

Nanette:

It's not just I sit, you feed it into me. They're experiencing it. I'm trying to remember when, was it the taxes—Mackenzie would come home I would learn so much from her—it wasn't like you guys sat there and said, 'This is how it works.' They were living it in the classroom, you know?

Hanna: "A lot of role playing."

Nanette:

Right. Or in first grade where they go to see the kids with special needs and they read Petey and then they write about it. My kids would come home crying. I would cry reading this and they're experiencing. They're learning. It's not just 'Let's come and sit down.'

Hanna: "They're experiencing life. It's not just memorization."

These parents revealed that the judgment they place on a school goes beyond what children come to know or their performance on traditional standardized measures. Parents within this study repeatedly emphasized the great value placed upon a school's ability to nurture a child's love for learning and to provide conditions that allow for collaborative learning experience. In their own terms, they painted a picture of opposing theoretical approaches to teaching and learning—an expert-novice model of transmission and one grounded by constructivist learning theory.

Not Every Learning Experience Needs to be Collaborative

While parents certainly accentuated their belief that teamwork is a means of engaging students in their own learning, the perspective that there are times when a student needs to work independently in a more traditional learning structure was introduced.

Connie suggested that there are times when you need to "sit in your own spot and do your thing" and then followed that with her observation that at Zaharis, children are going to "gather together as a group after you do this." The argument that there is value in sitting at a desk to "do your thing" was embedded in her belief that:

> When you're at a job there are times when you've got to sit at your desk and you've got to do your thing and there's other times where you need to be able to interact with other people, so they're getting all of that and they're learning that there's a time for this and there's a time for this and it's not always when you want it to be, but we're going to get to it and there will be a time when you can share it.

Lori suggested that a "hard line" is drawn for students at Zaharis. She presented the claim that "sometimes the inquiry can overwhelm it" and there are times when you have to "work with the facts to think beyond that."

Kayla gave a concrete example from her son James' classroom:

> I was talking to Heather (classroom teacher) about James and she was trying to help her kids and explain how to do a math problem. Of course, you know James cannot keep his mouth shut if he has an answer and so he's like, 'But there's another way to do it.' And she's like, 'Wait. Let me get them this one way first.' And he'll spout out how to do it. For some of the kids, they get what he's saying and for others it's like, 'What?'

Kayla acknowledged that there is great value to a collaborative approach where students are "learning through inquiry" to "think of other ways they can do it and how it applies," but then suggested that for some kids, they don't do as well with "math

conversations," where students work together in collaborative groups. She went on to say that it's much easier to follow the example offered in the textbook.

In response to Kayla's assertion, Kara reminded the group that there are "different factors to consider." She suggested presenting a "really rich problem-solving situation to the kids" in order for them to "use the skills to approach it differently." She sealed her point with the disclosure that "in the real world, we have to consider different factors when we solve problems using numbers."

In response to the assertion that teamwork is situational in nature, it would appear that parents were somewhat divided. Connie, Lori, and Kayla presented the argument that while there is great value in learning collaboratively, there are times when the situation calls for students to work independently. Kara's argument to this brought it back to the real world where a learner has to grapple with the multiple realities that come through working with others and the myriad of possibilities that command attention.

Teamwork Prepares Students for Real Life

Focus group responses indicated that Kara was not alone in the real-world connection that she made. Dora referenced prior school experiences where children learn in isolation where "there was never any sharing afterwards." She voiced her concern for this type of learning experience:

> People go to work, and they don't know how to work. They don't. These kids are learning how to work and interact, and I think that's real life things that they're going to use after they're done with school. I remember sitting in school just thinking, 'What am I going to use this for?' I think that in all subjects, it's related to their life— 'How are you going to use this?' I think that's really important.

In response to Dora's contention that Zaharis students are learning how to work together and interact, Anna described her daughter's prior school experience where she

would sit in isolation, "copying things she never understood or for what purpose they were even learning it." She then described her daughter as the "hands-on type" and offered the suggestion that many others learn best when they are engaged. She then presented the argument that the learning becomes purposeful throughout life when they can "share what they have learned personally with others."

The following episode presented the argument that working together as learners is not a natural born skill but rather something that you have to work at year after year and day after day.

Hanna: "Well, I like the fact that they still work in groups here."

Toni: "I do too."

Toni: "Cause I think you do work in groups in junior high and high school…"

Hanna: "For the rest of your life."

Geri: "Where we came from, there was nothing of a group. You didn't talk to your neighbor. You didn't turn around."

Hanna: "You did worksheets."

Toni: "A lot of kids in high school end up hating working in groups. It's because they're working with kids that don't know how to work in groups."

Hanna: "It's a skill. It really is – learning how to…"

Toni: "It's not a natural born skill. If you continue to use it year after year after day after day…"

Hanna: "That's life."

Nanette: "You will work in groups the rest of your life."

Hanna:

Working in groups teaches you to respect other people, and also to try and figure out collectively how to get to your end goal. That's lost on a lot of people. They don't know how to get from point A to point B.

Toni: "Do your fair share."

Leah:

Right. And that's key, as well. My daughter's come home before and said, 'Oh, I'm working on this thing and these two people don't wanna' do anything and we're trying to get group points' and I'm like, 'Well, hon, you know, it's a group. You're graded as a group.'

Hanna: "It's a skill."

Toni: "And that's how it's gonna' be when you go to work and you're part of a work group if you do that."

In respect to working together as a preparation for life beyond school, I learned Zaharis parents valued experiences in the classroom where students "learn how to work and interact" with others. They affirmed that working together is not a natural born skill and that it must be developed by working at it over time. They further suggested that students learn to respect other people and to accomplish results by arriving at an end goal when given opportunities to work together. In the end, Zaharis parents contended, by working together learning becomes purposeful throughout life.

Teamwork Supports Learning Processes

With very few exceptions, teachers at Zaharis brought with them a background of traditional teaching practice where curriculum consisted of textbooks, teachers' guides, district and state guides and standards, and scope and sequence charts. Curriculum was something outside experts developed, issued to them to implement, and then transmitted

for the student to passively receive. Short and Burke (1991, p. 3) describe the traditional model as a top-down hierarchy that often excludes both teacher and student from actively thinking about learning and curriculum and often results in the attempt to pass down someone else's thinking. Within this model, they contend, teachers frequently violate their own intuitions to stay within the confines of predetermined curriculum resulting in students who are unmotivated because what happens in the classroom is so disconnected from their own experiences and interests.

Data collected within this study indicate that Zaharis teachers may have reversed this hierarchy and have placed the student at the top. Parents reported that teachers and students "work together" and negotiate to create an ever-changing curriculum that is alive in the classroom, resulting in a fundamentally different set of existing social relationships. Within this learning climate, the curriculum is not centered on the student or the teacher. The emphasis is placed on learning. In short, parents shared that teachers and students worked as a team to create their own inquiry-based curricula, as described by one parent.

> …the classrooms here are very much like a team. Yes, the teacher is an important part, but she's not the most important part. She's just sort of the guiding force on this team and if you go and sit in any of these classrooms for any extended period of time, you see that there's just as much teaching happening from child to child as there is from teacher to child, if not more so.

This parent had spent an extended period of time in Zaharis classrooms and within the school. Her response raised the question, "Who's in charge of learning?" Identifying the teacher as "the guiding force on the team" would indicate a perspective of a shared responsibility, with the teacher fulfilling a critical role in the experience. Brooks and Brooks (1993) asserted that in a constructivist classroom, the teacher's responsibility is to

create an educational environment that permits students to assume the responsibility that is rightfully theirs. By recognizing the student as "the most important part" of the learning experience, one might argue that this parent perspective suggested that autonomy and initiative has shifted from teacher to student at Zaharis. She related this to her previous experience at a neighboring elementary school noted for exceptionally high test scores. She continued:

> It's almost like the teacher goes out there and says, 'OK, I'm gonna' set up some scenarios where learning's gonna' happen…' There are these small teams that all work together, and I think the kids feel that too. They feel the sense of camaraderie and teamwork among themselves and they want to help each other do better and there's not this competition to be the best kid in class. Obviously, at (she referenced her child's previous school) that was a big thing. It was, 'Who's the smartest in the class?'

In their own way and in their own terms, parents such as this one, described learning as a social experience where students play an active role in their learning and in the learning of others, where competition is deemphasized. Harste (1991) asserted that new ideas are collaborative and that social structures guide personal beliefs; what has become social becomes internal. New codes are built on old codes forming a social legacy of ideas, forms, and ways of thinking. Language and the symbol systems we use are socially created. Literacy is and always has been influenced and shaped by social collectives.

Data within this study suggested that like Harste, Zaharis teachers have taken social learning theory seriously and respect that knowledge and knowing is created collaboratively through interaction between and among learners. Quite often, parents used the term "working together" throughout focus group discussion to communicate

their perspectives on the value of learning with and among other learners. Kara offered-up a rich commentary on teamwork as a support to learning processes:

> I also think here the environment that the kids are placed in, the desks, the sitting areas, the way they interact during lessons, it's very much a team approach. They're able to interact with other individuals in groups. I think that's one of the most valuable things in the way that the children learn here.

The idea that Zaharis teachers have dedicated their efforts to foster learning through inquiry with student-to-student interaction and an interdisciplinary curriculum appeared to be present within these parent perspectives.

An invitation of sorts is painted above the doorway of a 5th grade Zaharis classroom inviting all who enter to seek out these multiple realities: "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new lands, but in seeing with new eyes." Wenger (1998) asserted that educational imagination is about looking at ourselves and our situations with new eyes. It is about taking a distance and seeing the obvious anew. It is about being aware of the multiple ways we can interpret our lives. Short and Burke (1991) call for a learning climate where such discoveries occur; "We need learning environments where we can see others actively learning and can engage in many collaborative dialogues about our ideas and experiences" (p. 15). Vygotsky (1978) suggested that the ways in which we talk and interact with other people become internalized and changes the ways we think. When we are in learning environments that allow us to take full advantage of what others have to offer, to really interact and learn from those around us, we create new potentials for ways of thinking.

Focus group responses within this study suggested that parents perceived that educators at Zaharis appeared to recognized that curriculum is connected to our lives as

teachers, students, and learners and that it evolves and grows in a dynamic state, influenced by life experiences, understandings, interpretations, and interests. It is through what parents described repeatedly as working together that students moved beyond seeking after the one fixed answer to the higher ground of creating new understandings.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Discussion

This dissertation took a systematic and intentional look at James K. Zaharis Elementary School through the eyes of the parents and offered an opportunity to uncover the perceived realities about the school—realities formed by parents. The study addressed the following research question:

What are the multiple realities expressed by parents and what similarities and differences exist across these realities?

To uncover these parent perceived realities, focus group discussions were conducted and transcribed, participant responses were coded and analyzed. The analysis revealed that parent perceptions expressed fell within three perceived realities:

- Parent reality #1: Teaching and learning are social processes that support the development of student voice and nurture rich relationships at Zaharis.
- Parent reality #2: Learning through inquiry elevates class work to purposeful student learning, activates critical thinking, and fosters authentic real-world experience at Zaharis.
- Parent reality #3: Teaching is teamwork and all members of the classroom community are teachers and learners at Zaharis.

It was previously disclosed that a staggering number of realities existed within the cross section of parents who participated in this study. Topics ranged from handwriting in the early primary years to the transition into junior high. Ultimately, these three perceived parent realities were frequently discussed and described in both focus groups.

These three key findings, framed as *Parent Realities*, are discussed below followed by a discussion of the similarities and differences found among the parents' perceptions, the onset of my study.

Parent reality #1: Teaching and learning are social processes that support the development of student voice and nurture rich relationships

It was noted in Chapter 3 that throughout analysis, a series of questions should be considered to guide interpretation (Krueger (1998). One of these guiding questions was, *what was previously known and then confirmed?* It came as no surprise to me that parent discussion revealed the perceived reality that throughout Zaharis School, teaching and learning occurred through a social experience. The decision was made before the groundbreaking of Zaharis that the teachers of Zaharis and I would strive to create the conditions for teaching and learning based on a socially constructed theoretical orientation. We were in the midst of a multi-year ongoing curricular conversation in our efforts to determine what best practice looked like through this theoretical lens. It would have been a grave disappointment if the many hours of parent discussion failed to address this. Hence, a possible limitation of the researcher who was also the school principal was the possible impact of my strong commitment to a school built upon theories of social construction and my hope that parents perceived evidence of this.

Parent realities identified two developments that result from socially constructed learning experience—the development of rich relationships and student voice. Many times, throughout focus group discussion, parents likened the relationships between teachers and students to a family relation confirming what the teachers and I had always

suspected—Zaharis teachers were a big part of the lives of their children. The interviews confirmed this.

The second development that parents recognized was the development of student voice. Of particular significance to me was the tender story one parent shared that was featured in Chapter 4, describing how a song, introduced in her daughter's first grade classroom, ultimately made its way into their home and then throughout multiple grade levels at Zaharis. Parents repeatedly referred to the song as a metaphor, noting that Zaharis students felt confident enough in exercising their voice to "sing their song." This particular parent's recount gave me cause to wonder, what did the classroom teacher do to create the conditions for this little song to take flight?

Parent reality #2: Learning through inquiry elevates class work to purposeful student learning, activates critical thinking, and fosters authentic real-world experience

Parent perceptions into Zaharis appeared to support our supposition that we were a school of inquiry, rich with real-world learning where the work students engage in is purposeful and critical thinking abounds. With a resounding exception. Math. This parent reality did not come as a surprise to me. I was not anticipating, however, that parents would see this as a comprised discipline with no less clarity than the teachers who lead the charge in developing young mathematicians each day. One parent asked a question that generated much debate: Are they thinking like Mathematicians?

Without a doubt, math was an intently hot topic for parents during focus group discussions. As noted in Chapter 4, parents recognized the value of skill development in math. But they expected more than students who can simply do math. As one parent

wondered aloud during a focus group : “Is there something we could be doing more of as a school and as parents to nurture that?” And another added “Math is hard… a lot of kids don’t have math conversations.” Zaharis teachers had long shared with me that it was a challenge to teach math through an inquiry stance where students engage in authentic math conversations, think like mathematicians, and develop identities as mathematicians. Likewise, parents perceived there were challenges associated with teaching math through an inquiry stance.

Parent reality #3: Teaching is teamwork and all members of the classroom community are teachers and learners

What I found most striking within this perceived reality was the value parents place on student engagement. In their own words, they made it quite clear and simple: Engagement fosters a love of learning, while disengagement fosters the opposite condition—feelings of antipathy, displeasure, and a strong aversion toward learning. What was striking to me was the overwhelming conviction that accompanied this perception and their profound ability to articulate it in such a clear, simplistic, and unmistakable manner.

Within this perceived reality, parents painted a picture of opposing theoretical approaches to teaching and learning—an expert-novice model of transmission (Johnson, 2010)) and one grounded by constructivist learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978). It was noteworthy to me that one, parents were able to identify the two theoretical approaches to teaching and learning, and two, they could attach the learning theories to such vivid experiences in the lives of their children in referencing them.

Existing differences and similarities

This section responds to the second part of my research question and discusses the similarities and differences that existed across the parents perceived realities.

Differences

Throughout focus group discussion, real-world learning was repeatedly brought up. Parents appeared to be in one accord with unanimity of opinion concerning the value of real-world work. The group sentiment was this: Students at Zaharis learn how to work and interact together with experiences they will draw from long after they leave Zaharis. One difference that stood out to me and eventually led to a school-wide problem of practice that teachers investigated became visible during the discussions of math.

One parent made the assertion that "math is a system we use to understand what's happening in the world, to make sense of it," and further emphasized that "this is a way to promote deeper understanding that goes beyond skills to solving problems and thinking them out." Multiple parents supported this assertion. The divide was formed and an ensuing debate was triggered when yet another parent declared, "Sometimes the inquiry can overwhelm it. Sometimes you have to work with the facts. Sometimes you have to think beyond that and sometimes that's where we have a hard line."

The debate was underscored by this argument: There needs to be thought behind the facts. Math thinking should go beyond plain facts and rote memorization. One parent suggested that students learn when they try to outdo each other. She continued to promote that the math facts are so important because they are foundational skills to higher math concepts. The attempt to form an amicable truce was made with the suggestion that Zaharis students know the math facts are important enough to justify a temporary detour from the inquiry model that anchors Zaharis learning. The differences led to a stand-off.

There's nothing wrong with learning skills, some parents declared, but rote memorization cannot come at the expense of critical thinking—the work isn't the end, it's the learning. It is an imperative that Zaharis students learn to think deeply as developing mathematicians according to the parents. One parent, in an effort to find a compromising offering, made the disclosure that this argument needs to "become part of a future inquiry."

The math debate was what I consider to be the capstone of the series of focus group discussions. During post-focus group reflection, the assistant moderator and I perceived that the entire group was so drawn into this topic that focus group discussion was elevated to simply focus group learning. By respectfully challenging each other's differences, it appeared individual interpretations and realities were disrupted and stretched. Ultimately, a similar schoolwide inquiry was formed that took the entire assembly of Zaharis teachers and learners to higher ground.

Another difference among parent realities that brought about much discussion focused on the role of collaboration in learning. Parents were somewhat divided on this topic. Three parents acknowledged the value in learning collaboratively, but firmly pronounced that there are times when the situation calls for students to work independently. One proclaimed, "When you're at a job there are times when you've got to sit at your desk and you've got to do your thing." She continued to suggest that some students do not function well in groups and that it is easier for them to work independently and follow the example in the textbook. Other parents continued to counter this assertion and brought the discussion back to real-world work where learners have to grapple with a multitude of challenges that come through working with others.

Similarities

Many more similarities were found among parents than differences as realities were uncovered through focus group discussion. The most frequently discussed topic was also the most emotionally charged, one that often moved the group to tears. An overwhelming group conviction identified the shared reality that learning at Zaharis is a socially constructed experience that leads to the development of rich relationships. Each focus group participant had something to offer here. Accounts of how relationships are developed between students and teachers that persist over time and outside of the classroom were shared. Some of these experiences even led to out-of-state travel to previously described teacher weddings where students joined in out-of-school life moments of significance. The repeated utterance of Zaharis family rang loud throughout discussion. Parents were unified in their front that these outside-of-school relationships impacted the lives of their children in a profound way.

Harmony among parents existed when the topic of student voice surfaced. Parents shared accounts of how learners developed the confidence to project their voices into the mix throughout learning. Parent expressions that teachers expect students to exercise their voice and that teachers value and recognize the voices of students frequently spilled into focus group discussion.

One topic that was not addressed in the analysis within the previous chapter but is significant to note is the discontinuance of the Zaharis learning model that was experienced upon entry into junior and senior high school. Parents' realities rang out in unison within focus group discussions relative to this topic, where a high level of concern and frustration was revealed. Multiple accounts were offered, describing in their own

words how Zaharis students learn within conditions of agency for the first seven years of their school journey, only to enter into a dimension of conventional school experience at grade seven upon entry into junior high school.

Implications

In this section, I present the implications of my study for leadership, pedagogy, and building school culture. I include within this section how the implications can be explained using existing literature, literature that was not available when data collection and analysis occurred in 2011.

Implications for leadership

My study provides insights to school leaders who are seeking to identify and work toward solving local problems of practice within their own school communities, or as referenced in Chapter 1, those who are seeking to improve their schools from within. Those who are seeking to use data analysis and data gathering to inform their practice and offer immediate impact and influence within their school culture might profit from this study. School leaders may refer to the study as a blueprint for a systematic approach to taking-on school improvement or reform.

Similar to Barth's expansion into who should be considered among the ranks of schoolpeople, school leaders might benefit from beginning their own inquiry to enhance their communities of learning. My personal view into Barth's work has both informed my thinking and altered my practice to now to include grandparents, local business owners, operations workers, groundskeepers, the manager at the local coffee shop, and policy makers, to name only a few, as partners in taking-on school improvement. Research would indicate the role of school leadership is critical when considering parents and the

community as partners in school improvement. Barr and Saltmarsh (2014) found that parents are more likely to be engaged with schools where the principal is perceived as welcoming and supportive of their involvement, and less likely to be engaged where the principal is perceived as inaccessible, dismissive, or disinterested in supporting their involvement. It was of particular interest to me to note how Barr and Saltmarsh did not contend that the level of parent involvement is associated with the principal's degree of support or disinterest with parent engagement, but rather their *perception* of the school leader's attitude toward engagement. Kelty and Wakabayashi (2020) found that how engaged families are in school, predicts their success in school and in life. Using a focus group study drawing upon parent perceptions, relationships with the school and staff were revealed to be most critical in supporting family and parent engagement. By fostering strong relationships that create the type of two-way communication Barth calls for, Kelty and Wakabayashi contend that schools can capitalize on the strengths of parents and families to support learning at home and in the school community.

By examining a school through the perceived parent reality that *teaching is teamwork and all members of the classroom community are teachers and learners,* I can envision the school leader calling upon the pediatric emergency room doctor to serve as an adjunct faculty member one day a week at a high school mentoring future doctors, nurses, and physician assistants. I can imagine the engineer who offers mentoring to young aspiring engineers, working in an elementary school STEAM design center where students learn computer aided design using 3D printers and laser wood carvers to make their thinking visible in creative and innovative ways. I can imagine parents and other community members influencing students by serving as academic tutors, intramural

coaches, event organizers, or technology specialists helping students create their own podcasts to plug their learning into the world where it could make a difference. The possibilities for school leaders to consider are without end.

This type of school culture I envision is supported by the work of Essuman (2019), who suggests that when school leaders employ a genuine interest to engage parents and the community as partners in learning, it leads to a positive response where a social contract of sorts exists between the community and school. The relationship hinges upon a mutual reciprocity, where success is predicated by the fulfillment of the expectation of both parties. In short, both school and community benefit when a partnership exists.

School leaders are often asked to do more with less. Tapping into a school community's social, cultural, and human capital reservoirs of potential schoolpeople, provides a pathway to multiply school resources exponentially. In doing so, one might benefit from exploring the perceived reality of parents within my study, suggesting that *teaching is teamwork and all members of the classroom community are teachers and learners.*

Implications for pedagogy

While the study focused on using parent realities to disrupt culture bound biases and ultimately lead to improving a school from within, my study provides a view of a school community anchored by a constructivist theoretical stance where teaching and learning are perceived by parents to be social processes. A view into a school with an inquiry-based learning model may be of value to school leaders and teacher practitioners interested in taking on a theoretical shift in practice and pedagogy.

A parental view, although one of perceptions, was provided within my study of an inquiry-based teaching and learning model. As the perceived realities of parents were expressed and analyzed, teacher practitioners might benefit from reviewing how the practice and pedagogy of learning through inquiry was perceived among parents to influence purposeful student learning, critical thinking, and authentic real-world learning experience, hallmarks of Parent reality #2. This reality as Chen (2021) also found, had a favorable effect on student engagement, critical thinking, and their ability to communicate and collaborate.

This study offers a ringside seat to multiple parental exchanges, like the one described within Parent reality #2, where a parent asked the question that generated much discussion: Are students thinking like mathematicians? The debate of what is more important in math instruction, teaching the skills or critical thinking, is not much unlike the debates that teacher practitioners often engage in (Khasawneh, 2016). Parental discussions within this study might serve the teacher as researcher well, offering prompts to consider for teacher inquiry and exploration into their own practice.

Implications for future research

Marsh and Gonzalez (2020) note the value practitioner research has in empowering teachers to take charge of their own professional learning. Questions or challenges can be defined and through the systematic process of inquiry, immediate solutions can emerge. Practitioner research, they contend, is a stance that offers insight by encouraging practitioners to question the status quo of schooling, which is what this research study allowed me to do. Through my research, the status quo of my past

practice, current practice, and as this chapter indicates, the very essence of how I perceive the school I lead, was disrupted.

Implications for practioner researchers might be to consider embarking upon a similar inquiry guided by the following questions:

- How might best practices in other disciplines be leveraged to support enhanced mathematical learning experince?
- How might learning conditions be enhanced during math instruction to allow for an increase in student voice, choice, and agnecy?
- In what ways could students be provided with increased opportunities to collaborate in constructing multiple approaches to solving math problems?

The teacher as researcher might also benefit from examining topics introduced by parents within this study such as student engagement, student voice, and activating critical thinking and form future inquiries into their own teaching practices.

Limitations

It was previously noted within Chapter 3 that to some degree, my research execution and interpretation were influenced by the personal core beliefs, social values, and theoretical orientation that accompanied me into the study. The first noteworthy limitation of the study is found within my position as both researcher and principal of the school. Returning to Spradley's *Culture Bound Theory,* to be certain, I brought my personal biases into the study. Just because I am more aware now that they do exist, does not imply that my biases disappeared as I entered into the study, and therefore, influenced to some degree my research and my interpretation. This limitation may also be one of the greatest benefits of the study.

While I may have been unconsciously looking for things I wanted to see, I was confronting those biases and the very purpose of the study was focused on the disruption of them. That is the very essence of the beforementioned work of Spradley and supported by the work of Mertler (2017), who contends that "reflective practice within action research forces us to look inward, to be introspective, and to be honest with ourselves" (p.62). When we look at what we have done in the past, Mertler suggests, and how our practice looks in general, "we can determine what we do well and what we can do to improve. Reflection within action research is a critical part of professional growth and learning" (p.62). Looking at what we have done in the past at Zaharis School through the lens of the parent perspective, allowed for a disruption of personal biases or in Mertler's words, one way of "being honest with myself" to ultimately improve upon our practice.

Data presented within this study reveals perceptions. Not documented realities. Even though the parent perceptions offered-up within this study may be verifiable realities of the school, they are still perceptions, unverified. The study did not document what is going on within the day-to-day culture in the Zaharis community of learning. However, the study did reveal what parents perceive to be the day-to-day culture of Zaharis School. In short, their perceptions are very real to them and provided a view into the school that was of value. Are there limitations associated with perception studies? Without a doubt, and some of these are noted within this section. Is the nature of a perception itself a limitation? I do not know. My research attempts were unable to find anything conclusive to support such a claim.

As previously noted within Chapter 3, yet another limitation was found within how participants were selected for the study. Efforts were made to include participants

who represented a diverse range of demographics in the Zaharis community, but it was not a random sampling. I experienced some degree of association with every parent within the school and so had the office specialist who assisted me in participant selection. While she received limited insight into the purpose of the study, similar to my own circumstance, her greatest limitation was perhaps the greatest value she offered to me—her familiarity with our parent community. Chapter 3 described measures that were taken to reduce to the influence of the biases that the office specialist and I brought to participant selection. One adjustment that might have further minimized the influence of this limitation would have been to form an expansive pool of potential study participants who met qualifying criteria, and then randomly select from the pool.

Building school culture

Much of what parents described within the perceived reality that *teaching and learning are social processes that support the development of student voice and nurture rich relationships* might possibly be attributed to the school culture of Zaharis. In examining focus group data, I learned that Zaharis parents placed a great value on having teachers involved in their students' lives. They stated that Zaharis teachers care about their students and likened the relationship between teachers and families to a family relation. These rich relationships, they expressed, were perpetuated over time and extended beyond the grade level year of time shared together. Zaharis parents felt very strongly that teachers were a big part of the lives of their children. Developing the types of relations that existed throughout the grades and beyond the years of school that parents repeatedly described within my study might possibly be connected to the existing culture of Zaharis. Parents participating in this study are not alone in their assertions that social

processes nurture rich teacher-student relationships. Quinn (2017) likewise found that better quality teacher-student relationships were associated with an enhanced culture of student engagement in school. Other schools seeking to examine or enhance their own developing cultures might begin a quest to conduct similar research.

A scripted blow-by-blow account of parental exchanges like those presented within this study, blended with a commentary of how these types of parental perceived realities may have informed or disrupted our thinking as practitioners, offered some degree of insight into the culture of the Zaharis School professional community of learners. I placed great value on the type of learning culture where curriculum is viewed as something that we should strive to co-create alongside children. Thomason (2003) found that students in constructivist classrooms experienced an increased awareness of learning and thinking skills when engaged in authentic learning situations. Likewise, my study is saturated with parent insights that would indicate that they perceive the same to be true. Educators who value a similar learning culture may benefit from opening-up a similar inquiry by asking parents to share their perceptions of school practices.

Barth suggested that many schools fall into the trap of looking at parents as a populace to be informed sending them the message of *this is how we do things here and this is what you need to know.* Communication with them is often a one-way-transmission, not much unlike instruction is in far too many classrooms. By exploring the parental perception within my study that teaching is teamwork, this style of communication could be disrupted and school culture could potentially be positively impacted.

Through my own experience as a school leader who feels the inherent pressure developing a school culture can bring to the role of building principal, the question comes to mind, why go it alone? Teachers and school leaders share an enormous amount of responsibility in developing a school culture. Research aside, I have found that it is not easy. When Barth's idea that suggests a school might profit by expanding the concept of who are considered to be among the schoolpeople is explored and implemented, the weight of culture creation is shared and distributed, and the heavy lifting might potentially be reduced. Yates and Campbell (2003) found that children whose parents volunteer at the school experience higher student achievement and these parents typically become staunch supporters of their schools. Furthermore, they contend, the parents see carefully planned instruction that occurs day after day and they develop a loyalty to the school. In support of my supposition that a shared responsibility could be developed to reduce the amount of heavy lifting among teachers and school leaders, they also found that volunteer parents help to reinforce school expectations, serve as role models, and encourage students to do well and become role models themselves. They concluded by sharing their finding that a culture of school caring grows when volunteers are welcomed and put to service. Teachers and school leaders might benefit from conducting a similar study to investigate ideas for developing school culture by exploring the parent perception that *teaching is teamwork and all members of the classroom community are teachers and learners.*

While the crux of my research focused on three emergent realities, I found what Spradley (1980) contended to be true: Schools have their own cultural systems and even within the same institution people see things differently. My study is not alone in this

conclusion. Berkowitz et al. (2021) found a gap in positive parent perceptions of school climate and negative school problems and suggested the disparity of perceptions might be attributed to a lack of knowledge and familiarity with their children's schools. It was suggested for future researchers to partner with parents by collecting feedback from them, and to form interpretations and ultimately, action, based upon their views and needs, exactly what I was seeking to accomplish through my research. They further called for school leaders to engage the school community to develop a caring, inclusive, and nurturing school climate to support students. Their study found the divide in parent perceptions was more pronounced among ethnic minority populations. This might validate the effort taken within my dissertation study to form a diverse representation within the Zaharis School community upon selection of focus group participants.

Yang et al. (2021) experienced similar findings to those within this dissertation study, with parents offering differing perceptions of school climate according to cultural influences. Ramsey et al. (2016) also found that students, parents, and school staff experienced differing perceptions of school climate and attributed this to different roles within the school and to the individual beliefs and status within the school. These studies appear to confirm what Spradley (1979) contends to be true—one can become culture-bound, living inside of a particular reality, and to some extent, imprisoned without knowing it. Spradley's assertion that culture provides people with a way of looking at or seeing the world seems to be supported through the beforementioned studies. What was most supportive to me within these studies was this: While there may be limitations associated with how culture influences perceptions among parents, the resulting variance was of great value to me, offering multiple vantage points for looking into the Zaharis

School culture. This body of research, along with my study, provides a blueprint for others to disrupt culture-bound perceptions of looking into a school culture or climate.

Conclusion

Berkowitz et al. (2021) offers research findings that would appear to underscore the importance of mobilizing a force of schoolpeople to influence developing school culture and calls for educators to encourage parent involvement. How parents perceive the school climate, they contend, is related to the degree the school encourages them to be involved. Berkowitz et al. recommended for schools to respond to these findings by inviting parents in to share their cultural traditions and knowledge with students at the school. They assertion: Community outreach leads to community empowerment.

To this, I might suggest, it may also lead to community ownership. The work of Berkowitz et al. further informed my thinking regarding parents and schools by shifting my focus from how the school might benefit from their involvement, to how parents might be more positively impacted through their engagement—by feeling more empowered. In short, both parent and the school they are part of might be edified. Berkowitz's findings appear to validate my own study as a way to empower parents within their school, by affording them the opportunity to share their voice and knowledge of what they have come to perceive of their lived school experience.

Quirk (2017) found that when parents are made to feel valued as partners in their children's schooling, their confidence to support their children's education is strengthened. Pena (2000) described reciprocal benefits of involving parents to improve the school. For the parent, they develop better attitudes, become more active, and help to support activities. Parents, Pena posited, are more likely to seek additional education for

themselves, develop higher educational aspirations for their children, develop more positive attitudes toward their children's teachers, become more involved in their children's schooling, and experience an increase in parent-child communication when they are involved in school improvement. Pena also found many benefits existed for the school when parents were involved. Schools that favor the involvement of parents outperform those with little parent involvement and the overall community-school relationship is enhanced. These studies would appear to support what I found within my own research: Both parent and school prosper when parents are invited in as partners.

I have come to believe when the value and role of those who belong to a school community is elevated to culture creator and they are empowered to contribute , a school can be greatly enhanced. Seeing an expanded school community as a brigade of potential schoolpeople could provide opportunities for those who may have been perceived as outsiders in the past, to move beyond the role of patron, consumer, or spectator and become part of the family, essential architects who build and create with teachers and administrators on a daily basis.

Perhaps the parent was not far off the mark, who in Chapter 4 likened the role of the teacher as "the guiding force on a team." Parent perceptions within this study and the beforementioned research referenced within this concluding chapter would indicate that when a school community partners by working together as a team, everyone within the school community prospers.

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APPENDIX A

ASU IRB

ASU Knowledge Enterprise Development

Office of Research Integrity and Assurance

To:	Karen Smith ED
From:	Mark Roosa, Chair Soc Beh IRB
Date:	02/16/2011
Committee Action:	**Exemption Granted**
IRB Action Date:	02/16/2011
IRB Protocol #:	1101005906
Study Title:	Disrupting culture bound realities: A parent perspective of Zaharis Elementary School

The above-referenced protocol is considered exempt after review by the Institutional Review Board pursuant to Federal regulations, 45 CFR Part 46.101(b)(2) .

This part of the federal regulations requires that the information be recorded by investigators in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects. It is necessary that the information obtained not be such that if disclosed outside the research, it could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability, or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

You should retain a copy of this letter for your records.

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT

Disrupting culture bound realities:
A parent perspective of Zaharis Elementary School

February 13, 2011

Dear Zaharis School Parent or Guardian:

While serving as principal of Zaharis Elementary School, I am also a graduate student under the direction of Professor Karen Smith in the College of Education at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study that will explore Zaharis Elementary School in a new way—by taking a systematic and intentional look at the school through the eyes of the parents.

Within our school community, we are set apart one from another in many ways. We attend different churches, vote for different candidates who run for office and shop at different supermarkets. However, there is one thing we all have in common—each of us has a vested interest in Zaharis Elementary School and the children who attend there.

Every year, the Mesa Public Schools distributes a survey for parents to complete. Stated right across the top of each survey is the declaration-- *Parent opinions are important to Mesa Public Schools.* And they are. They are also very important to the teachers and principal of Zaharis Elementary School. But the survey alone is not enough. The numerical ratings provide little data for us to explore and learn from. They do little to help us examine our practice in a critical way.

Not long ago, I began to wonder what would result if I were to take a systematic and intentional look at the school through the eyes of the parents. And the result? A proposed study in the framework of a dissertation.

I am inviting your participation, which will involve two focus group interviews, each lasting approximately ninety minutes to discuss the school in your own terms. What we discuss will largely depend on what you determine to be important. The focus group will be comprised of seven parents, an assistant moderator, and this researcher. You have the right not to answer any question, and to stop participation at any time.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty.

Result of this study will offer alternative perspectives of Zaharis School and can be meaningful in helping identify targets for growth and future development. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation.

While complete confidentiality cannot be maintained, your responses will be anonymous. This researcher will be deliberate in ensuring that your name will not be used in association with the study. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations or publications.

I would like to audiotape the focus group interviews. You will not be recorded, unless you give permission. If you give permission to be taped, you have the right to ask for the recording to be stopped. The audio tapes will be stored in the front office at Zaharis School and will be destroyed one year upon completion of the study.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact the research team at: Karen.Smith2@asu.edu or maoliver@asu.edu or call me direct at 480 308-7244. If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788.

By signing below you are agreeing to participate to in the study.

_____ _____

Signature Date

By signing below, you are agreeing to be taped.

_____ _____

Signature Date

If you know of someone who would be interested in participating in this study, please provide my contact information and they can contact me directly.

APPENDIX C

MPS DISTRICT APPROVAL

MESA
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

March 12, 2010

Joseph O'Reilly
Executive Director
Student Achievement Support

63 East Main Street #101
Mesa, Arizona
85201-7422
www.mpsaz.org/research

(480) 472-0241

Mike Oliver
Zaharis Elementary School

Dear Mike:

The Mesa Public Schools Research Priority Board has conditionally approved your request to conduct research in MPS. The committee needs to review your focus group questions or prompts. Once that has been done you may proceed with your study.

The District requires a report of your findings along with any copies of studies that are published with this data.

Thank you for your cooperation in these matters and we look forward to your results.

Sincerely,

Joseph O'Reilly, Ph.D.

APPENDIX D

COLOR CODE SAMPLE

winner never quits and a quitter never wins." And I saw these little sayings all throughout the campus.

Tracie: It's awesome.

Natalie: And it's amazing how little things like that can touch a child. But it says a lot about who thought about what the school should be, what the foundation's gonna' be. A building is a building is a building – I don't care what you call it. It's the people inside that make what is a result of that and that's our children. If there's a commitment with the staff, if there's a leadership involved, if there's a supportive structure with the district and supports, you know, what this educational program's about, then it's gonna' work.

Angie: I think the kids feel special. They feel special. Like for example, yesterday our third gracers had the sunrise poetry.

Poetry at sunrise.

Angie: That was beautiful and it was so beautiful to see the teachers stand right here 6:30 in the morning every other morning. There's a lot of people involved

Orlando: But it's thinking outside the box. We would have never had that when I was growing up and times have changed, obviously. But at our other school that we came from…

Tracie: That's hands-on learning. That's learning through experiencing and that is what we didn't have growing up and what you don't have in a traditional school. You have books, which is fine, but it's this way and this is how you're gonna' learn it. Whereas, learning about Arizona, and I wrote that from the first time we came here, we were here only third quarter of the last year, and that was, so it would have been first grade and third grade and my little bullet points for learning through experience would be "Ferdinand the Bull". My kids cut out all of the staging and the backgrounds and Miss Rachel is in there painting, ready to give birth at any minute. She's in there doing that. Third grade was the poetry at sunrise. I have never in my life heard of such a thing.

Angie: For Ellis Island?

Tracie: I just couldn't believe it.

Angie: Yeah, Ellis Island. I got to volunteer for that and that was such a cool….

Heath: Now, see I don't know that one, so that's for third grade.

Angie: It's immigration. It's about the immigration.

Heath: Ok, well I mean we missed that part in itself, but….

Angie: But from the beginning through the end…

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Michael Oliver was born in Houston, Texas. In 1985, Michael earned his Bachelor's Degree from Arizona State University. Upon graduating, he married his wife Trish, and started a career with the Mesa Public Schools that continues to this day. Michael taught for seven years, served as an administrative assistant for two, and in 1994 he started a 27 year run as a principal for the Mesa Public Schools, leading three different learning communities. He has served as a faculty associate for Arizona State University and BYU Idaho. In 1992 Michael earned his Master's Degree in Educational Administration. Michael and his wife Trish are parents to four extraordinary children, Brittany, Colton, Jacob, and Rex, and one extraordinary son-in-law, Jesse. He was startled to discover that all the hype surrounding the arrival of grandchildren was not just a hoax. Mike and Trish bask in delight whenever found in the company of grandbabies, Vera and Clark. His family has relentlessly supported his doctoral journey, from beginning to end. They have helped him to find balance while leading a school community, serving in a church leadership capacity, and striving to continue his learning pursuits.