BUILDING A BRIDGE BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES: 
TEACHERS’ PERSPECTIVES OF FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN LOW-INCOME AREAS ON 
O‘AHU

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ABSTRACT

Educational research has long recognized the importance of family-school partnerships in cultivating success for students. However, little is known about how in-service elementary educators perceive, prepare for, and engage in family engagement practices. Few researchers have addressed effective family engagement practices particularly targeting the specific needs of low-income families. This qualitative study examined teachers’ perspectives of family engagement. Individual interviews and surveys were conducted with 11 ethnically diverse teachers, who taught at public elementary schools serving low-income communities on the island of O‘ahu, Hawai‘i. Grounded theory analysis resulted in six themes: definition and importance of family engagement; teacher roles and beliefs; teacher preparation; considerations for low-income and diverse immigrant families; school culture; and school resources and funding. Teachers described effective and ineffective strategies and practices that helped and inhibited their work with low-income families.
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Building a Bridge Between Schools and Families:

Teachers’ Perspectives of Family Engagement in Low-Income Areas on O‘ahu

Educational research across the nation has long recognized family engagement as an important factor in cultivating success for students (Epstein, 2011; Fantuzzo, Tighe & Childs, 2000; Fantuzzo, McWayne & Perry, 2004; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Lopez, Scribner & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; McWayne, Camps & Owsianik, 2008; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2011). Research has demonstrated that family engagement in children’s education is strongly associated with positive school outcomes, such as improved grades, higher test scores, and improved attitudes toward schoolwork (Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Sui-Chi & Willms, 1996; Van Voorhis, 2003). Research has also demonstrated associations with other behavioral and psychological benefits, such as improved behavior at school, higher attendance rates, lower dropout rates, higher self esteem, and less risky behavior in adolescence (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2005).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore (a) how elementary school teachers serving low-income populations on the island of O‘ahu perceived and prepared for family engagement, (b) their efforts to partner with diverse families and (c) the challenges they encountered. Despite the widespread interest in family engagement and positive findings from research, strategies about how to effectively engage diverse families from low-SES backgrounds remain elusive. The period in which children are in elementary school is considered to be important to children’s development because this period is critical for long-term educational outcomes (Alexander, Entwisle & Dauber, 2002). Turney and Kao (2009) suggested that the majority of studies of racial, ethnic, and immigrant differences in family engagement have
examined adolescents; and therefore, little is known about elementary schools, which is the focus of the current study.

**Defining Family Engagement**

While the benefits of family engagement are well documented, definitions and enactments of family engagement continue to vary. Family engagement has been defined and measured in numerous ways in the literature. Family engagement can be a vague term that can mean different things to different people (Jeynes, 2003). In fact, there is no unitary definition, model, or measure of family engagement (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Price-Mitchell (2009) suggested that the language has changed over time, from parental involvement and participation to parent-school partnerships. Parent engagement or family engagement also gained wide usage, “emphasizing the importance of parent’s active power-sharing role as citizens of the education community rather than people who participate only when invited” (Price-Mitchell, 2009, p. 13).

In this study, I used the term family engagement, addressing the shared responsibilities of schools and families for student success; though parent and family were used interchangeably, as in the literature. The term family includes all members; parents, siblings, grandparents, and extended family members who are important to students. The Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) expanded the definition of family engagement as follows:

- First, family engagement is a shared responsibility in which schools and other community agencies and organizations are committed to reaching out to engage families in meaningful ways and in which families are committed to actively supporting their children’s learning and development.

- Family engagement is also continuous across a child’s life and entails steadfast commitment but changing parent roles as children mature into young adulthood.
Finally, family engagement is about promoting children’s learning anywhere, anytime. Effective family engagement cuts across the multiple settings where children learn—at home, in prekindergarten programs, at school, in afterschool programs, at faith-based institutions, and in the community. (HFRP, 2014, p. 2)

**Epstein’s school, family, and community partnerships.** Epstein and colleagues (e.g., Epstein & Sheldon, 2002) described how the links between school, community and home environments can influence children’s achievement and well-being. They argued that students are positively influenced when the link between school and home environment is consistent and cohesive. Epstein identified six different types of family involvement: (a) parenting, (b) communicating, (c) volunteering, (d) learning at home, (e) decision making, and (f) collaborating with the community (Epstein, 1992; Epstein & Jansorn, 2004). Epstein’s six types of family engagement is the most widely used theoretical model for studying family engagement (Price-Mitchell, 2009). Many activities suggested in the literature on how to engage families are based on Epstein’s (1992) six types of involvement. Furthermore, the framework of six types of involvement was adapted by the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) standards in 2004 for all schools to inform and involve parents and community partners in children’s education (Epstein, 2011).

Many educational policies on family engagement utilize Epstein’s theory and typologies that the family, the school, and the community operate optimally, when the three spheres (family, school, and community) share their goals, missions and responsibilities (Banquedano-Lopez, Alexander & Hernandez, 2013). In this model, three contexts; home, school, and community, “overlap with unique and combined influence on children through the interactions of parents, educators, community partners, and students across contexts” (Epstein, 2011, p. 44). Epstein’s
theory of overlapping spheres of influence extends ecological perspectives (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979) on social organization and relationships (Epstein, 2011). Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1979) suggests that child development emerges from the interplay of five nested systems. First, microsystems are environments in which “the person repeatedly engages in direct, personal interaction with others” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22), such as home and school in which children are situated. In microsystems, individuals form interpersonal relationships, assume social roles, and share activities. Second, mesosystems are the relationships or interactions that exist between two or more microsystems. Third, exosystems are settings and practices that affect but do not directly involve the child, such as parental workplace. Fourth, macrosystems are outermost layer, such as societal systems, cultural values and customs, and lastly, chronosystems are ecological changes that occur over the life course.

The theory of overlapping spheres of influence and the framework of six types of involvement “promote the view that school, family, and community partnerships should operate as an organized program of structures, processes, and collaborative activities to help students succeed in every school, not as a set of fragmented activities for parents” (Epstein, 2011, p. 48). Epstein (2011) also stated that concepts of social capital were relevant to the theory of overlapping spheres of influence. Through interactions, “parents, educators, and community partners establish social ties and exchange information that accumulates as social capital, and that may be used to improve children’s schools and learning experiences” (p. 44).

**Family engagement and social and cultural capital theory.** Family engagement is often conceptualized as involving social and cultural capital (Coleman, 1988; Domina, 2005; Lareau, 2001; Lee & Bowen, 2006; McNeal, 1999). According to Coleman (1988), social networks
produce social capital. Bourdieu (1986) suggested that social capital is not a given. Social capital, or a network of relationships, is

the product of endless effort … which is necessary in order to produce and reproduce lasting, useful relationships that can secure material or symbolic profits … the product of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships that are directly usable in the short or long term. (p. 89)

McNeal’s (1999) study suggested that parents’ social networks predicted student outcomes in school. In addition, Sheldon (2002) stated that parents with more social capital are more likely to be involved in their child’s education. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), social networks are channels of communication that enable people to identify human and material resources they need, and to share and carry information or attitudes from one setting to another (Sheldon, 2002). Domina (2005) articulated three mechanisms through which parents’ social networks positively influenced children. First, family engagement socializes children. Parents who are engaged convey the importance of education, and their children are more likely to value education. Second, family engagement provides parents with a means of social control. Parents who are engaged get to know other parents, teachers, and administrators through PTA meetings and volunteering in school. As a consequence, those parents may better monitor children’s behavior and teachers’ practices. Lastly, family engagement provides parents with access to insider information. Parents who are engaged can learn about children’s problems at school in an early stage and discuss available solutions with teachers.

Social justice in education is critical to discussions of family engagement and its relation to social and cultural capital, especially the impact of class status on academic achievement and
equal educational opportunity (Banquedano-Lopez, Alexander & Hernandez, 2013). Lareau (2000) emphasized that schools’ structures and practices were aligned with middle-class culture, and served the middle-class agenda, which privileged upper-middle-class families who drew on their social assets to secure advantages over other people’s children. For example, Lareau (2000) suggested that middle-class parents appeared not to be threatened by educators, while families from lower SES backgrounds expressed considerable anxiety toward interactions with educators and there was a “fundamental lack of trust” (p. 78). Therefore, it is important to examine the uneven linkages between schools and families of different social class backgrounds.

Bourdieu (1977) distinguished social and cultural capital, the latter being defined as “instruments for the appropriation of symbolic wealth socially designated as worthy of being sought and possessed” (p. 488). He argued that cultural capital was inherited early in life from one’s family and could result in successful accumulation of cultural wealth. Disadvantaged families without extensive social networks hold cultural capital. However, Bourdieu indicated that traditional schools reinforce inequalities of cultural capital because they reproduce and reinforce existing class disparities. Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory suggested that there are diverse cultural practices in the society, and schools must change the way they offer opportunities and resources for family engagement to make them available to all parents (Lee & Bowen, 2010).

**Traditional forms of family engagement versus Funds of Knowledge.** Auerbach (2012) indicated that traditional forms of family engagement (e.g. the parent’s physical presence) have created systems that reinforce deficit-based thinking and negative stereotypes about race and class. Deficit-based thinking involves perceiving families as being in need of amelioration, with the assumption that families have little to contribute. In contrast, the funds of knowledge
approach challenges deficit-based thinking by seeking and celebrating historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills that families already have (Moll, et al., 1992). These knowledge and skills can provide educators with important resources for learning. To draw upon these funds, schools and teachers must gather information about students, parents, and their communities in order to use this knowledge to strengthen family engagement. However, funds of knowledge and other strengths of families may remain invisible to educators (Auerbach, 2006). Weiss et al. (2010) suggested that traditional family engagement practices tend to “treat parents and families as bystanders rather than as partners, and often overlook their strengths and their capacity to transform public education” (p. 1).

**Family engagement in NCLB.** Emphasizing that family engagement is important, educational policies include mandates and policies that promote family engagement. Family engagement is important from federal policy makers’ perspectives, as family engagement in elementary school is one of the six central goals of the Bush administration’s No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (Turney & Kao, 2009). Certain targeted federal programs (e.g., Head Start, Early Head Start, the Even Start family literacy program, and Title I) currently legislate family engagement as a requisite and eligibility for funding (Lopez, 2001; Weiss, et al., 2010). Title I under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) from the U.S. Department of Education (2004a) defines family engagement as:

- the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities, including ensuring that parents play an integral role in assisting their child’s learning; that parents are encouraged to be actively involved in their child’s education at school; that parents are full partners in their child’s education and are included, as appropriate, in
decision-making and on advisory committees to assist in the education of their child.

(p. 3)

Studies suggest that the characteristics of family engagement are multidimensional and bidirectional (Fantuzzo et al., 2000; Fantuzzo et al., 2004; McWayne et al., 2008), and the NCLB definition of family engagement acknowledges the multidimensional and bidirectional aspects of family engagement. Auerbach (2012) suggested that these types of two-way and meaningful participation and communication are challenging for educators, considering the diversity and complexity of modern families. Challenges to successful family engagement in the literature will later be addressed.

The 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) under the NCLB Act of 2001 attempted to bridge schools and families and aimed for schools to partner with families and communities (Banquedano-Lopez, Alexander & Hernandez, 2013). Every school that receives Title I funds must implement family engagement programs that involve all parents and in ways that support students’ achievement and successes in school (Epstein, 2005). NCLB (e.g., Section 1118, as well as Sections 1111-19) also requires schools, districts, and states to organize family engagement programs and to communicate with parents and the public about students’ achievement and the quality of schools (Epstein, 2005). An annual meeting is required by the Title I Act to involve parents in the planning, review, and improvement of programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2004b). The meetings must be structured for the largest possible proportion of parents to attend. Translation of parent communications into a language that the parents can understand is required under the Title I Act as well. Equity is the stated goal of NCLB’s requirements for family engagement, which addresses the needs to overcome
inequalities in education and to design and test programs that yield more equal educational opportunities (Epstein, 2005).

**Barriers to Family Engagement with Families from Diverse and Low SES Backgrounds**

Most research has found that the advantages of family engagement are consistent across different racial/ethnic and income groups (Jeynes, 2003). A recent analysis of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data also demonstrated that building bridges between schools and parents is beneficial for student outcomes, across cultures and countries, regardless of socio-economic circumstances (OECD, 2011). However, despite the positive findings between school and parents’ relationships, there are numerous variables that can influence the school-parents’ partnerships (Knopf & Swick, 2008). Research has demonstrated that there are barriers to family engagement confronting parents who seek to engage in education and educators who wish to engage families.

**Perceptions and beliefs of teachers and parents.** Promoting culturally responsive family participation among diverse populations is a challenge for educators (Stoicovy, Murphy & Sacuo, 2011). Swick (2004) mentioned that unhealthy relationships between teachers and families may be influenced by teacher’s perceptions. Teachers may have hidden assumptions and generalizations that are influenced by past experiences (Sauto-Manning & Swick, 2006). Teacher perceptions may be formulated by negative experiences with a few families, which may influence their creating negative stereotypes about certain groups (Swick, 2004). Halsey (2005) emphasized that most parents want to be involved in their children’s education. On the other hand, it has been suggested that teachers do not always perceive that parents are willing to get involved (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004; DePlanty, Coulter-Kern & Duchane, 2007). These studies reveal that there are misconceptions between teachers and families about families’ desires for
partnerships. If parents are absent from school activities for reasons such as psychological obstacles (e.g., not confident to communicate in English, nervous about going to the school campus or meeting teachers), lack of transportation or conflict with work schedules, teachers may perceive these absences as a demonstration of families’ lack of interest in their children’s education, when in fact families may want to be involved in children’s education (Ladky, 2007). Teachers’ and parents’ sociocultural backgrounds and experiences may influence how parents are perceived, and how the process of engaging families is constructed (Halsey, 2005). While teachers are waiting for parents to indicate a willingness to become engaged, parents may be waiting for invitations from teachers. Gaps between teachers and families may exist, in that each group expects the other to initiate or maintain the family engagement process. In addition to teachers’ perceptions toward certain families, teachers’ beliefs regarding teaching effectiveness and their self-efficacy may influence the way teachers engage families (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009). Efficacy “manifested by confidence in one’s teaching and instructional program … implies a sense of professionalism and security in the teachers role. Such confidence would logically enhance teachers’ efforts to discuss their teaching program and goals with parents” (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987, p. 429).

Patel and Stevens (2010) found that perceptions of students’ academic abilities held by teachers, parents, and students were related to parents’ involvement and teachers’ facilitation of home school partnerships. Patel and Stevens’ results highlighted the need to understand the role of perceptions; both parents’ and teachers’ conceptualizations of students’ abilities in order to foster family engagement. The authors mentioned that it was not enough to provide parents with opportunities to be involved, but instead, it was necessary to begin the family engagement process with “conversation about parents’ and teachers’ views of students, the purpose of
schooling, and the role of all stakeholders involved” (Patel & Stevens, 2010, p. 133). In addition, Sirin et al. (2009) found that when teachers perceived that their values were different from that of parents, this was related to lower expectations of students’ math and literacy achievement and more negative evaluations of students. In other words, teachers’ expectations and evaluations of their students were linked to how they viewed the children’s parents and their values as similar or dissimilar.

In terms of parents’ motivation for involvement, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) proposed three major sources of motivation for parents to be involved. These sources were: (a) parents’ motivational beliefs relevant to involvement, including parental role construction and self-efficacy for helping their child to succeed in school; (b) parents’ perceptions of invitations to be involved, including general invitations from the school and specific invitations from teachers and children; and (c) personal life context variables that influenced parents’ perceptions of whether the forms and timing of involvement seemed feasible, including parents’ skills and knowledge for involvement, and time and energy for involvement. Using Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler’s conceptual model, Whitaker and Hoover-Dempsey (2013) found that parents’ perceptions of school expectations for involvement, school climate, and student invitations to involvement influenced parental role beliefs about their own involvement in their child’s education. The encouragement from teachers and schools to be involved also affected positive parental beliefs about how they are supposed to support children’s learning. While parents’ own experiences with schools may influence some of their beliefs about their roles to support their children’s educations, this finding highlighted the importance of the social environment (e.g., school climate, encouragement to get involved from teachers and schools) in parents’ constructing their beliefs about their roles in their child’s education.
**School culture.** It is not easy for schools and educators to engage families who have different backgrounds, values, and beliefs. Beliefs, values and backgrounds vary across families and these may conflict with the school culture and influence the way schools engage families in general (Sauto-Manning & Swick, 2006). Some schools may have a history of using teacher-dominant approaches such that teachers make decisions about how families can be involved, instead of creating partnerships with families. In these cases, parents may feel that their voice is not considered and that their roles are limited. In this kind of school culture, teachers may perceive parents who play leadership roles or take initiatives, as aggressive. At the same time, new teachers in this type of school culture may feel that they have to adapt to the existent school culture to fit in, even though they would prefer a different approach to family engagement (e.g., family-centered).

A study that focused on high-performing schools with immigrant families revealed that these schools first started the process of engaging families by addressing immigrant families’ social, economic, and physical needs in order to facilitate the engagement process (Lopez et al., 2001). These schools created an awareness of families in need within an organizational culture, which resulted in positive partnerships and outcomes with families and as a community at large. The important finding from this study was that the schools took initiatives in facilitating the engagement process and that the process itself was family-centered. Providing a welcoming environment for families and addressing their needs influenced the family engagement process, and created a positive and collaborative school culture.

**Diverse families: race, ethnicity, and culture.** The racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity of families also may influence family engagement. Wong and Hughes (2006) found that family engagement was perceived and conceptualized by parents and teachers differently,
and this depended on race and ethnicity of the parents and teachers. Teachers and principals often attribute lower levels of family engagement by ethnic minority parents to a lack of motivation to cooperate, a lack of concern for their children’s education, and a lower value placed on education (Lopez, 2001). Azmitia and Cooper (2002) also reported that teachers rated White parents as being significantly more involved than Latino parents, and it was because White, higher-income parents tended to participate in activities held at school and their participation was more visible to teachers; even though both White and Latino parents were equally involved at home.

Turney and Kao (2009) found that Black, Latino and Asian parents felt unwelcome at their children’s school and were significantly less likely to attend school programs than White parents. Their study indicated that all minority groups (Black, Latino, and Asian) faced substantially higher levels of barriers to family engagement than did White parents. Another study found that many Latino and Southeast Asian immigrant parents believe that they should maintain a distance from teachers to be respectful (Ladky, 2007). Cultural attitudes and language proficiency can be barriers to effective communication between teachers and immigrant parents (Stoicovy et al., 2011; Turney & Kao, 2009; Wong & Hughes, 2006). Filling the gaps between teachers and racially, ethnically, linguistically and culturally diverse families is a challenge, but a necessary step for diverse communities (Stoicovy et al., 2011).

**Socioeconomic status of families.** Jeynes (2005) demonstrated that the socioeconomic status (SES) of families was related to the degree of family engagement. Research suggests that parents who have higher incomes and have higher educational attainments tend to be more engaged than parents from lower SES backgrounds (Lareau, 2000), with some exceptions (Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996). Trotman (2001) suggested that parents with lower educational attainment
were less likely to be engaged in their children’s education through activities such as helping with their homework at home, because they felt that they lacked the knowledge needed to participate in their children’s education, and consequently, felt isolated from their children’s experiences at school. As mentioned earlier, social networks may also play a role in determining family engagement, in that parents with extensive social networks and community supports are more likely to have the resources necessary to take active roles in children’s education, compared to parents with minimal social networks (Sheldon, 2002). Families from low SES backgrounds were less likely to create social networks with parents of their children’s friends than were middle-class parents (Lareau, 2000).

Lack of financial stability may also interfere with paying for school activities. Even non-financial barriers, such as time constraints, work flexibility, and parents’ views of their role in the education of their children may be related to SES (Lareau, 2000). Lack of childcare and transportation, inability to leave work for meetings, long working hours, holding multiple jobs, and other family responsibilities have also been suggested as barriers to family engagement (Lareau, 2000; Turney & Kao, 2009). Despite these barriers to family engagement with families from lower SES backgrounds, a study by Domina (2005) found that engaging families from lower SES backgrounds brought greater returns in child achievement than the engagement of higher SES parents. Family engagement with families and community members from minority and disadvantaged groups has been shown to be crucial in improving academic achievement (Epstein, 2001).

**Lack of Teacher Preparation for Family Engagement**

Not only are there gaps between teachers and families regarding family engagement, but there is also a need to better prepare teachers to engage families. The lack of preparation in
family engagement is significant considering the powerful role of educators in creating strong partnerships with families (Bartels & Eskow, 2010). As the importance of family engagement is increasingly recognized, professional teacher organizations have also started to emphasize the need for teachers to develop skills in engaging families (Halsey, 2005). Previously, an analysis of the state teacher certification requirements revealed that majority of states did not clearly define family involvement or address what it means to engage families (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider & Lopez, 1997). Shartand and colleagues’ (1997) survey found that teachers felt they needed more instruction on how to work effectively with families.

In a more recent study to explore the extent to which teacher preparation programs addressed family engagement, Epstein and Sanders (2006) collected survey data from administrators in 161 teacher education programs (Bartels & Esknow, 2010). The findings by Epstein and Sanders (2006) was promising compared to the past research, suggesting that most schools, colleges, and state department of education offered at least one course and some coverage of topics on family engagement. However, these course and coverage of topics did not adequately prepare educators to develop meaningful partnerships with families because educators did not have access to comprehensive courses on family engagement (Epstein & Sanders, 2006). Most programs offered on family engagement were for preparing teachers for early childhood and special education, and few teacher preparation programs provided comprehensive topics on family engagement (e.g., basic, research, practical, and advanced topics) in courses for all undergraduate and graduate students preparing for careers in education.

Changes over the past two decades in teacher preparation on family engagement has been slow.

Another recent survey collected as part of Harvard’s Education Schools Project (Levine, 2006) evaluated perceptions of principals, college deans, college faculty, and teacher education
program alumni regarding the degree to which they felt teachers were adequately trained in 11 key areas in teacher preparation (Bartels & Esknow, 2010). Regarding the capacity to work with parents, only 21% of principals reported that teachers were “very well” or “moderately well” prepared (Levine, 2006). In regard to the capacity to address needs of multilingual learners and those from diverse cultural backgrounds, only 16% of principals and 27% of alumni reported that teachers were at least “moderately well” prepared. Even though Levine’s survey did not evaluate teachers’ capacity to work with multilingual parents or those from diverse cultural backgrounds, this can be assumed to be low.

Although Levine (2006) did not ask respondents about teachers’ preparation to work with low-income families, Dauber and Epstein (1993) collected data from a sample of over 2,000 families of elementary and middle school students living in economically disadvantaged areas. They found that “the strongest and most consistent predictor of parent involvement at school and at home are the specific school programs and teacher practices that encourage and guide parent involvement” (p. 61).

**Shift of Focus: Children At-Risk and Families in Need**

Most research on family engagement in the past focused on middle-class families in the United States (Clair & Jackson, 2006). Only recently has research shifted to minority groups in the U.S. (Clair & Jackson, 2006). Research findings suggest that children of low-income families have lower academic achievement, higher dropout rates, and other school-related problems. Moreover, new immigrants and individuals who live in poverty have the highest dropout rates in the nation and hold lower levels of educational attainment (Dearing et al., 2004). Researchers emphasize that children living in poverty face great risks in their education and that promoting parental engagement in that target group is crucial (Clair & Jackson, 2006; Dearing et
al., 2004). In fact, increasing family engagement has been identified as a possible strategy for reducing the achievement gap, since studies has shown that family engagement mediates the effects of poverty, parent’s educational attainment, and race/ethnicity on achievement (Lee & Bowen, 2006).

Children in the U.S. are increasingly from (a) diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, (b) diverse households with respect to the nationality of parents and family structure, and (c) environments where there is exposure to poverty (McWayne et al., 2008). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2014), an estimated 4.1 million English Language Learners (ELLs) were served by the U.S. K-12 education system in school year 2012-2013. Children under 18-year-old represent 23 percent of the population in the U.S., but they comprise 33 percent of all people in poverty (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2014). Forty-four percent of all children live in low-income families. However, schools in general still tend to limit family engagement practices to formal activities that may ignore the culture or values of low-income and diverse populations (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008; Lopez et al. 2001).

**Relevance to Hawai‘i.** According to the latest U.S. data collected by the National Center for Educational Statistics, 51 percent of the public school students in the State of Hawai‘i were from low income households in 2013 (Southern Education Foundation, 2015). As school populations become even more racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse in Hawai‘i, it is important that definitions of family engagement apply to a variety of sociocultural backgrounds, and honor diverse students, their families, and their identities. Considering the rise of new immigrant and ELL students in Hawai‘i, and that often new immigrant families struggle financially and to find adequate work, it is crucial to consider strategies to assist these families in need and to engage them in their children’s education. At the same time, it is important to
prepare teachers for family engagement. As discussed earlier, engaging diverse families is complex. Moreover, teachers tend to come from middle class backgrounds and may need preparation to understand that families from lower SES backgrounds may have less resources than middle class groups, and need information, time, transportation and finances.

**Purpose of the Study**

While reviewing the literature on this topic, I realized that the in-service teachers’ perspectives on family engagement in Hawai‘i were missing. There is little research that addresses effective family engagement practices that are particular to the specific needs of both low-income and diverse families. I believe that it is essential to take positive steps to fill the gaps in the literature. The purpose of this qualitative study is to address unanswered questions regarding family engagement from the perspectives of elementary educators serving low-income and diverse populations on O‘ahu, Hawai‘i.

The data-set used in this study is part of a larger qualitative project on pre-service teacher preparation for family engagement, called *Activating Educators Focus on Family Engagement as Central to Teaching* (AFFECT) (Ponte, Ratliffe, & Yamauchi, 2012). The purpose of the AFFECT project was to develop a web-based curriculum to prepare pre-service elementary teachers to create strong partnerships with families.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions were explored within the context of this study: (a) What promotes teachers to engage low-income families in education? (b) How do teachers perceive, prepare for, and engage in family engagement practices? and (c) What are obstacles teachers face regarding their family engagement efforts?
Methods

This study was exploratory in nature, and therefore, a qualitative research design was used to answer the questions posed. According to Merriam (2009), the purpose of qualitative research is to “understand how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 5). I strived to understand public school teachers’ perspectives on family engagement in low-income public schools.

Participants

Participants were 11 elementary school teachers, eight of whom were female, and all who taught in public schools serving low-income populations on the island of O'ahu. The participants taught at 10 different elementary schools. Their ages ranged from 24 to 60 years, with a mean age of 40.55 (SD = 12.70). Number of years teaching in the U.S. ranged from 3.5 to 35 years, with a mean of 12.86 (SD = 10.36). Number of years teaching in Hawai‘i ranged from 2 to 35 years, with a mean of 11.91 (SD = 10.63). Most of the participants (n = 8) had only taught in Hawai‘i, while three taught for 1.5 to 6 years on the U.S. continent prior to teaching in Hawai‘i. Two teachers had lived abroad for 2 to 5 years, and they both taught English to either adults or high school students in Asia. Two teachers had master’s degrees, and nine teachers had bachelor’s degrees. Table 1 below shows the teachers’ ethnicities and grade levels. All names are pseudonyms. As shown in Table 1, teachers were from three different groups: (a) those who worked at regular elementary schools; (b) those who worked for the Head Start program at a participating elementary school; and (c) a teacher in a Hawaiian language immersion program at a participating elementary school. Note that some teachers’ positions changed from the time I recruited them to the time this manuscript was produced.
### Table 1. Teachers’ Pseudonym, Ethnicity and Grade Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maile</td>
<td>Mixed/Part-Hawaiian</td>
<td>Grade 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dean</td>
<td>Japanese/Chinese/Hawaiian</td>
<td>Grade 1 and 2, Hawaiian Language Immersion Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanya</td>
<td>Italian/French/Irish American</td>
<td>Grade 6 at the time of the interview (end of school year), preschool after the summer break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean</td>
<td>German/Native American</td>
<td>Grade 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>European American</td>
<td>Head Start (Inclusion Program) teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassy</td>
<td>Okinawan/Japanese American</td>
<td>Title I Coordinator at the time of the interview (end of school year), Head Start teacher after the summer break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paula</td>
<td>Japanese American</td>
<td>Head Start teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaylie</td>
<td>Filipina/Italian American</td>
<td>Grade 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbie</td>
<td>Japanese American</td>
<td>ELL Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>Irish/German American</td>
<td>Grade 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>Japanese American</td>
<td>Head Start (Inclusion Program) teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I first used purposeful sampling by recruiting teachers from public schools for which 50% or more students received free or reduced-priced lunch in 2012. Appendix A lists elementary schools that met these criteria. Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover and understand a phenomenon, and therefore participants must be selected from a sample that the most can be learned from (Merriam, 2009). After this, I used snowball sampling by asking participants to nominate other teachers who were known to be doing well in engaging families.

There were two ways for students to be certified as eligible for a free or reduced-priced lunch. One way was based on income information provided by the head of a household. Students were eligible for a free lunch if their household income was less than 130% of the poverty guidelines, and for a reduced-price lunch if their household income was less than 185% of the federal poverty guidelines (Harwell & LeBeau, 2010). In 2012, the official poverty guidelines in Hawai‘i for a family of four was an annual income of $26,510 (U.S. Department of...
Another way to be eligible for a free or reduced-priced lunch was direct certification, based on whether a household included foster children, received food stamps, or participated in at least one of the federally assistance programs such as Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

Poverty guidelines are issued by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and are widely used in research such as public health. On the other hand, Socio-Economic Status (SES) is frequently used in educational research. Free or reduced-priced lunch is commonly used as a measure of low income in research in education (Harwell & LeBeau, 2010).

In terms of students and families’ background diversity, I categorized the elementary schools in Appendix A (public schools for which 50% or more students received free or reduced-priced lunch in 2012) into three groups, based on location and student demographic backgrounds. First, there were elementary schools with large populations of new immigrant families, such as from the Freely Associated States (FAS), the Independent State of Samoa, China, and the Philippines. These schools had larger percentages of students with limited English proficiency, and were located in Kalihi, Palama, and Liliha. Second, there were elementary schools where the majority of the students were Native Hawaiians, such as those in Waimanalo, Waianae, and Nanakuli. Finally, there were elementary schools that had more mixed and diverse students than the other schools, such as in Ewa, Waipahu, Wahiawa, Urban Honolulu and Waikiki. I strived to recruit teachers from each of these three groups of schools.

The 11 participants came from 10 different elementary schools representing all three groups of schools described above. Free or reduced-priced lunch for the schools in which participants taught ranged from 62.6 to 89.2%. See Table 2 for a list of the school locations and
student characteristics at each school. A school in which one of the participants worked was located on the west side of O‘ahu where the majority of students were Native Hawaiian. Two participants worked in schools in windward O‘ahu that had high populations of Native Hawaiian students as well. The windward schools also had diverse students including those whose backgrounds were Japanese, White, Samoan and Filipino. What made these three schools in west O‘ahu and the windward district from other schools in which the three participants worked is that they had much lower percentages of ELL students enrolled. The seven other schools represented came from central O‘ahu and urban Honolulu, with mixed and diverse students. These schools had large populations of families who were new immigrants, such as from FAS, the Philippines, and the Independent State of Samoa. These schools had large enrollments of ELL students.

**Table 2. List of the School Locations and Students’ Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>School location</th>
<th>Students’ Demographics (%)</th>
<th>FRL (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maile</td>
<td>West O‘ahu</td>
<td>ELL: 9.1, Native Hawaiian: 59.7, Samoan: 13.3, Filipino: 9.7, Micronesian: 2.5</td>
<td>89.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dean</td>
<td>Windward</td>
<td>ELL: 4.1, Native Hawaiian: 62.4, White: 10.0, Filipino: 9.6, Japanese: 4.8</td>
<td>62.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanya</td>
<td>Windward</td>
<td>ELL: 2.8, Native Hawaiian: 60.1, White: 7.2, Japanese: 6.9, Samoan: 5.8, Filipino: 5.8</td>
<td>79.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean</td>
<td>Central (Aiea)</td>
<td>ELL: 22.6, Filipino: 23.0, Native Hawaiian: 22.7, Micronesian: 20.7, Samoan: 17.0</td>
<td>84.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>Central (Waipahu)</td>
<td>ELL: 43.1, Filipino: 35.1, Micronesian: 23.5, Samoan: 21.2, Native Hawaiian: 9.3</td>
<td>84.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassy</td>
<td>Honolulu</td>
<td>ELL: 36.9, Filipino: 37.5, Micronesian: 20.9, Native Hawaiian: 11.2, Samoan: 10.2</td>
<td>80.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recruitment. To recruit participants, I first contacted either the school’s Parent Community Networking Coordinator (PCNC) or principal on the list. I introduced the AFFECT project to them and asked if they could nominate a teacher who was engaging families well at their schools. I also asked professors and peers in the College of Education at the University of Hawai‘i if they knew any teachers working at the schools on the list and if they could introduce me to these teachers. Recruitment was more successful by contacting teachers who were introduced to me by my professors and peers, rather than when I contacted PCNCs and principals directly. Educators from quite a few schools on the list did not reply to my phone calls or emails even after multiple efforts, particularly if I did not know anyone at the school. Many of the schools that responded to me declined to participate in the research because they said that the teachers were busy. I started the recruitment process in April 2013, and as it was close to end of the school year, school staff may not have had enough time to follow up. The initial timeline was to recruit and interview 10 teachers in five months; however, the data collection process took 11 months instead.
Data Collection

Survey. Prior to the initial meeting for the individual interviews, I asked teachers to complete a short demographic survey on their own time. The demographic survey also included two open-ended questions. Survey questions were developed by the AFFECT project team. See Appendix B. I emailed the participants the consent form, demographic survey and the interview questions prior to the interviews. I asked teachers to fill out the survey form before the interview date.

Interview. I individually interviewed the teachers at a time and location convenient for them. Seven interviews were conducted at the teacher’s school. Three interviews were done in the College of Education at University of Hawai‘i. One interview occurred at a teacher’s home. With permission from the participants, I video recorded 10 of the 11 interviews. One teacher did not want to have her interview video recorded, so I audio recorded it instead. The use of the interview video and audio record was discussed with each participant prior to the interview. The interviewees were offered a $50 stipend for their participation, which one teacher declined.

Both teacher and school names were kept confidential. I wanted teachers to be open about their responses without being worried about their school names being released to the public. During the interviews, teachers’ responses were not always positive about their experiences at the schools at which they were working. Ensuring confidentiality helped me support teachers in being open and honest in their responses without being worried about any negative consequences of their comments on their work or on that of others at the schools.

The interviews lasted between 36 to 60 minutes. I asked 12 semi-structured, open-ended interview questions to acquire information about the respondents’ feelings, thoughts, opinions about their own experiences, and their values. As Merriam (2009) emphasized, “interviewing in
qualitative investigations is more open-ended and less structured” (p. 90). See Appendix C for the interview questions. With the consent form and the survey questions, I also emailed the participants the interview questions at least one week prior to the interview, because I wanted the participants to take time to think through their answers to my interview questions.

I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews because I wanted to be open to themes that arose during the interview, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic, as well as to get specific information from all the respondents (Merriam, 2009). Since 11 teachers came from 10 different elementary schools, the semi-structured questions were important for obtaining a level of consistency across teachers serving in different school districts, while allowing me to explore new concepts, ideas, and issues raised during the interviews. The first seven questions were developed by Drs. Katherine Ratliffe and Chen-ju Lin from the AFFECT project team, as general questions about family engagement. I, with the help from Dr. Eva Ponte, developed five additional questions to ask teachers about their experiences specific to teaching students and engaging families from low-income backgrounds.

**Interview notes.** During the individual interviews, I took notes about respondents’ expressions, emotions, and new themes that arose during the interviews. I also noted connections with other interview responses and across the participants. The main purpose of the notes was to supplement the recordings, not as a main data source, because I wanted to focus on the conversations with the participants. Notes were synthesized into theoretical memos during the data coding, which I will discuss in detail below.

**Data Analysis**

I used grounded theory to identify themes and generate hypotheses about the data, employing open, axial, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). Open coding is the initial
coding to start analyzing the data. The intermediate phase of the data analysis is axial coding, where reduction and clustering of categories are conducted. Final development of the data analysis is selective coding, where detailed development of categories, selection of the core categories, and integration of categories are generated. The purpose of three phases of coding was to reduce and condense data.

Grounded theory was jointly developed first by Glaser and Strauss (1967). They described coding steps as first to acquire as many categories as possible, and then to integrate categories. They mentioned that “it must be emphasized that integration of the theory is best when it emerges, like the concepts. The theory should never just be put together” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 41). Also, they emphasized the process of ongoing reflection and analysis in coding procedures as well as the generation of categories and theoretical memos. I tried not to be satisfied with ideas generated during early analysis, because these ideas were subject to further comparisons, and “generation of theory through comparative analysis both subsumes and assumes verification and accurate description, but only to the extent that the latter are in the services of generation” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 28). As I analyzed and coded the data, ideas and potential insights began to develop, which I recorded in theoretical memos. I considered all data to be important. I tried to avoid selection to fit preconceived ideas, by keeping an open mind to new themes that emerged.

After each interview was complete, I transcribed it verbatim. I time-coded with a 5-minute time span so that later I was able to go back to the video records of the interviews easily. The transcript of each interview was sent to each participant for member checking. I read the transcripts multiple times to become familiar with the ideas of each interview. I left the right column empty on every page of the transcripts for the purpose of theoretical memos, so that I
was able to record the process of data coding as well as insights from watching interview videos. See Appendix D for the template and the example of a transcript with the theoretical memos.

After I read the transcripts multiple times, I watched the video recording of the interviews while taking the theoretical memos such as observations of the teachers’ expressions, emotions, and connections to other interview responses. Eventually I synthesized the notes I took during the interview into the theoretical memos attached to the transcripts.

**Open coding.** Open coding is the initial process of coding to uncover, name, and develop concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). Data are broken into parts, and compared for similarities and differences. Concepts that are similar in nature or related in meaning are grouped into “categories” (Corbin & Strauss, 2007, p. 102). Through this initial coding process, I tried to always keep my research questions in mind so as not to get lost in the data.

I started open coding by coding the transcripts of all the participants. I coded sentence-by-sentence (unless the sentences had the same concepts) throughout the 12 questions for each respondent. I labeled each sentence according to the question number (Q1 to Q12), the respondent (their initials), and numerical sequence, e.g., Q1 (question 1)-M (the initial of the respondents) and 1 (sentence 1, 2, 3, so forth). Therefore, each sentence for each respondent was labeled for example, Q1-M1, Q1-M2, Q1-M3, Q1-M4 (for Maile, Question 1), or Q2-D1, Q2-D2, Q2-D3, Q2-D4 (for Dean, Question 2), etc. There were many times when I asked questions of the participants related to their previous responses, of which questions were not necessarily prepared prior to the interview. I coded those non-structured questions as N. For example, if I asked a non-structured question after Maile’s responses to question 1, then these sentences were coded as N(Q1)-M1, N(Q1)-M2, N(Q1)-M3, etc.
The written survey was similarly coded. The first five questions were demographic questions, and were not coded. The demographic information from survey Question 1-5 was described in the participant section earlier. For Question 6-8, each sentence was labeled according to the survey question number (S6 to S8), the respondent (their initials), and numerical sequence, e.g., S6-N1 (survey question 6, Nicole, first sentence), S7-S2 (survey question 7, Sean, second sentence), or S8-E1 (survey question 8, Erin, first sentence). Exact quotes by participants were treated as individual raw data units. There were a total of 2,899 raw data units.

After each sentence was coded, conceptual names were given to each sentence, based on discrete incidents, ideas, events, acts, feelings, and opinions (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). These conceptual names were either placed by me because of the meaning they evoked when examined comparatively, or were taken from the words of respondents themselves, which is referred to as “in vivo codes” (Corbin & Strauss, 2007, Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The strength of using vivo coding is that the data remain true to the exact statements of the participants. When I encountered a long sentence with more than one events, ideas, incidents, feelings, etc, more than one conceptual name was given to a sentence. During this process, comparative analysis was also conducted within and across participants. When I came across another sentence of the same teacher or another participant that shared common characteristics, I gave the sentence the same name, that is, place it into the same code (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). I tried to choose the names that could easily remind me of the referent of the sentences or what was talked about. A total of 3,291 conceptual names were given to individual raw data units. Examples of the coding and the process of giving conceptual names are included in Appendix E.

After coding sentence-by-sentence and giving conceptual names to each sentence, I re-read the whole paragraphs of responses to the same question, asking myself about the major idea
brought out in the paragraphs about a particular question. I wrote down my thoughts in the theoretical memos. After that, I grouped certain concepts together under more abstract higher order concepts, in an attempt to explain what was going on (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). Grouping concepts into categories is important, as it reduces large amounts of data into smaller and more manageable pieces of data. Categories are “concepts, derived from data, that stand for phenomena” (Corbin & Strauss, 2007, p. 114). Phenomena are “repeated patterns of happenings, events, or actions/interactions that represent what people do or say, alone or together, in response to the problems and situations in which they find themselves” (Corbin & Strauss, 2007, p. 130). I typed out these grouped concepts (categories) into excel sheet with the code numbers, so that I could go back to the exact quotes of the respondents later, to see where these initial categories came from. During the process of grouping concepts into categories, I began to see patterns in the data.

**Axial coding.** Axial coding is “the act of relating categories to subcategories along the lines of their properties and dimensions” (Corbin & Strauss, 2007, p. 124). I utilized axial coding to examine relationships between each of the pre-established categories from open coding. I started axial coding by looking at each sentence of the raw data I wrote on a piece of paper independently, with the label of coding and the conceptual names I gave during the open coding. The index-card sized paper with each sentence was compared within each respondent’s answers, and then across the eleven respondent’s answers.

First, I compared the raw data units by question (Survey Q6-8, and Interview Q1-12), within participants and then across participants. Second, I compared them by similar conceptual names or the initial themes of the responses that I categorized during the open coding, such as comparing coding categories with positive and negative experiences to note similarities and
differences in perspectives, within and across participants. I created maps to visualize the connections among raw data units.

**Selective coding.** During selective coding, I analyzed the data again using the constant comparative method within and across each respondent’s data to improve and refine the fit of categories into major themes of family engagement. I compared coding categories for teachers in the Head Start program, in the Hawaiian language immersion program, and in regular elementary schools during selective coding. I also compared coding categories between teachers who seemed to be doing well in engaging families and those who seemed to be struggling. Through this iterative analysis process, six themes and subthemes emerged.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness of this study came from member checking, triangulation of the data, and maximum variation of participants. For member checks, I asked participants to read the transcripts of the video interviews to confirm they agreed with what they said during the interviews. For triangulation of the data, I used multiple sources of data including survey, interviews, and observation notes, to confirm emerging findings. Trustworthiness was also enhanced by including teachers from various schools with both differences and similarities of student demography and location. There was some consistency across schools, as I used purposeful sampling of low-income schools with 50% or more FRL. Knowing the similarities and differences of the schools helped me to compare findings across the teachers. Results that were consistent across different school types could more likely generalize to other settings.

**Role of the Researcher**

My role as a researcher was as a data collector, data analyzer and the research instrument for this qualitative research. I was born and raised in Japan, and have academic training in
English education in Japan. I have experiences in educational research in Japan and in Indonesia, and moved to Hawai‘i in 2012 to study educational psychology. However, I have no experience as a teacher at elementary schools in Hawai‘i, where this study took place.

Research suggests that differences in ethnicity, race, education, and role between interviewers and interviewees affect responses by participants (Dunbar, Rodriguez & Parker, 2001). In order to minimize the effects of the differences between myself and participants, I tried to make sure that teachers were comfortable in the interview setting, letting them decide the interview location and time. I also attempted to build the trust with the teachers by sharing with them my background and letting them know beforehand that I did not have experience teaching in elementary schools in Hawai‘i. Because of my lack of experience in elementary schools, I felt that teachers felt comfortable talking about their experiences freely. I built trust and relationships with the participating teachers, many of whom subsequently invited me to their school events related to family engagement.

I believe that I was able to listen to the experiences of in-service teachers with fresh eyes, as a data collector, and more importantly, a research instrument for this qualitative research not to judge any information given by the participants, but to be open-minded to the different perspectives teachers had. Since I did not have prior relationships with the participants of this study, I did not have preconceived expectations about them.

Lastly, I am aware of my lack of experience when analyzing data, that may have led to my making biased assumptions or interpretations of the respondents. Throughout the data collection and analysis process, I tried to be cognizant of my possible biases, such as teachers’ negative assumptions toward certain groups of students and families, which I became familiar with through my initial literature review as well as through interactions with some families with
negative experiences with their teachers. I overcame these by including quotes from teachers to support the themes that arose from data analysis, as well as including as many details as possible on how I coded the data until the themes emerged.

**Results**

From the data analysis, six themes emerged: (a) definition and importance of family engagement; (b) teacher roles and beliefs; (c) teacher preparation; (d) considerations for low-income and diverse immigrant families; (e) school culture; and (f) school resources and funding. Even though these six themes overlap greatly, I will describe them separately. Throughout the interviews, teachers described effective and ineffective strategies and practices that helped and inhibited their work with low-income and diverse families.

**Theme One: Definition and Importance of Family Engagement**

Family engagement was defined in a variety ways by the participants. Participants defined family engagement in terms of traditional engagement (e.g., attending conferences and school events, responding to communications from the school, volunteering in the classroom, fundraising) and also less-traditional engagement practices (e.g., participating in home activities, parental ownership of some aspects of the school). For example, Dean’s definition of family engagement was more traditional and school-based, stating:

> I guess family engagement would be, if I can get any sort of participation, with my parents, if they could help me, like if they volunteer in the class, that’s family engagement.

(Dean Interview, 2013, May 13)

Similarly, Paula stated:

> I would define family engagement as active participation of parents both in child’s education and in terms of schools activities. (Paula Interview, 2013, June 29)
In terms of less-traditional engagement practices, Abbie defined family engagement as the efforts of teachers and schools to:

- encourage them [parents] to work with their children, ask about them, check their homework or even just to read with them at night, . . . know about their child, being concerned about what’s happening with them in academic as well as behavioral and social aspect of being in school. (Abbie Interview, 2013, October 3)

Her definition of family engagement was more home-based, compared to more traditional definitions. Some participants explicitly acknowledged that family engagement consists of more than parental participation in school. Erin described it in the following way:

- Family engagement is a form of connection, to tie school life with home life. I think it’s a method in which school staff can communicate with parents and families to engage, encourage, and success in academic and actually, overall, well-being. (Erin Interview, 2014, January 14)

Erin’s response indicates that family engagement does not simply promote children’s academic achievement, but also serves a greater purpose of expressing care and promoting academic and overall well-being through connection and communication.

Three teachers defined family engagement as school-family-community “partnership.” For example, Tanya defined family engagement as a “shared responsibility in which school and community reach out to engage families in educational and meaningful ways” (Tanya Interview, 2013, June 4). In fact, she came up with the definition collectively with her coworkers prior to the interview, since a lot of the family engagement practices she employed at her school were both whole-school and community-wide efforts. She continued by saying “it’s school reaching
out to the families through the community and within, it’s a partnership” (Tanya Interview, 2013, June 4). Similarly, Cassy mentioned:

Family engagement is not necessarily just getting the parents to come to school, but to be involved in the school, involved in the processes, so like decision making, involved in the activities that we do, planning the activities. So it’s not just kind of like a surface, “oh, we come, because you have an event,” but “we helped you plan, we helped the school to make decisions about academic things,” and “we are involved in all of the processes.” (Cassy Interview, 2013, June 27)

Cassy provided examples of school-family-community partnerships that created support, resources, skills, networks and programs that were useful in helping families as well as providing responsive services to meet the numerous complex needs of families. I will introduce these examples of Cassy and other teachers in a later section on considerations for low-income and diverse immigrant families.

All of the participants emphasized the importance of family engagement, and wanted to know more about it. In addition, participants addressed a direct link between family engagement and student achievement. For example, Maile said:

In my experience, it seems that the students who have the parents most involved, you know, open communication, come-in and ask questions, make sure that the homework is completed, and the forms turned in promptly, I would say they seem to be the most successful student . . . I think it’s just as important as having a good teacher, almost . . . . Because the kids who have the strength, the support, really you can tell. Like one student . . . the parent just comes in and talks us stories whenever, she has questions about even homework or anything, she worked with us and she re-did her whole evening
schedule, for the whole family to support their son, and he has just been doing so much better because of it. (Maile Interview, 2013, May 20)

Similarly, Erin explained the links between family engagement and children’s academic achievement:

I believe more than anyone else, families have the most direct impact in the child’s learning, so child’s success in school is closely tied with how involved the parents are in the school, and the work in school. So when the parents are involved in the schools and then the work students carry are more positive attitudes and outlook on education, they tend to do better than those whose parents are not actively involved. So overall I think that the positive outlook that parents can carry, and children are very observant, so I think that makes a big difference. (Erin Interview, 2014, January 14)

Kaylie was more specific, saying “I found out that it [family engagement] helps students’ grade be higher and they get their project done, and all their homework done, they do much better in school,” (Kaylie Interview, 2013, October 18) mentioning both the link between family engagement and children’s academic achievement and positive attitudes toward education.

Similarly, Dean stated “if the parent has a positive attitude, then it will transfer to the student” (Dean Interview, 2013, May 13). Furthermore, Paula, who has been teaching for 24 years, addressed the positive long-term results of family engagement:

Results we found when working with the parents, and we got them engaging with the child, were so dramatic. It made a really, really big difference in how well a child did in school, from the time they left our preschool program, all through the remaining school years. (Paula Interview, 2013, June 29)
**Communication.** All the participants recognized that family engagement was strongly tied to parent-teacher communication. In fact, many teachers emphasized that communication was a key factor in building partnerships with families. Teachers were cognizant of the fact that communication styles varied depending on individuals, as well as across cultures. In some cases languages barriers existed among teachers and ELL families. While all the teachers acknowledged the importance of communication, they admitted that it was sometimes challenging to practice two-way communication. Teachers’ responses suggested that most communication was school-to-parent-directed, although parents also communicated to teachers when they had concerns.

School initiated communication that participants reported using included: written communication (e.g., weekly logs, newsletters, report cards, class website, daily communication book); formal meetings (e.g., parent-teacher conferences, Head Start monthly parent meeting); informal meetings (e.g., parent night, orientation meetings, open house at the beginning of the school year); and verbal communication (e.g., phone calls, teacher initiated conversation). Dean and Tanya mentioned that their schools had invited families to the school campus a few days before the new school year started, so that families were able to meet teachers, which initiated successful communication with families. Furthermore, a few teachers conducted a survey at the beginning of the school year, asking parents about their preferences of family engagement activities or events they wanted the school to hold, about their availability to help or attend these events, as well as to ask for the parents’ input of what they wanted to learn. One teacher conducted another survey asking parents about the ways they preferred to communicate, such as phone calls, text messages, emails, or a school homepage. These surveys were described as effective ways to gain parents’ perspectives on better communication and stronger partnerships.
One teacher suggested that the communication methods should be “whatever works for the parents” (Erin Interview, 2014, January 14) and should not be only based on the convenience of teachers.

Another teacher mentioned home-visits as school-directed communication attempts, and she mentioned that families sometimes were not comfortable with teachers coming in to their homes:

A couple years ago, we did have some grant that worked with our school that gave us a little stipend to do home visits, but that was a few years ago. Then that kind of died out, too. Even the home visit, maybe family were not that comfortable all the time with us coming in to their homes. Our school really does try hard to get the involvement, and we are always trying different things, just haven’t figured out what the best thing is yet.

(Maile Interview, 2013, March 20)

As mentioned in Maile’s quote, the importance of funding and grant money was mentioned by many participants, which emerged as one of the themes. I will discuss the issue of support for teachers and schools’ family engagement efforts in the section on resources and funding.

Communication concerning the individual child was both teacher-directed and family-initiated. These were face-to-face conversations when parents dropped off or picked up their children, contact regarding problems (mainly phone calls), and informal conversation during, before or after activities or events that parents attended. Teachers discussed valuable strategies for communication, emphasizing children’s strengths and being direct about difficulties. For example, Dean said:

Some things are negative. Like, we are talking about tardy because they come late everytime to school. So, how to tell the parents, you know? You just have to tell them . . . .
You have to say something positive first when you approach parents. Like “your son is really good at this. He works really hard, you should be proud of him. Maybe he can work on this, and that next semester. And thank you for supporting. All the support you have given. Maybe work on attendance this year. He has a lot of tardy, try work on that.” So positive, negative, positive, negative. I don’t want to be scolding them. They are adults, right? (Dean Interview, 2013, May 13)

Barriers to the effective communication were also discussed, including differences in language and culture. For example, Paula stated:

One of our big obstacles is that many of the parents don’t speak English. It does become a problem in our school a little later on, when their children actually understand more English than they [parents] do. So when the child is in the 3rd or 4th or 5th grade, teachers send them notes, “your child didn’t do the homework” or there was a problem. Sometimes parents can’t read it. But the child can read it but the child will not tell the parents what it says. So that is something we’ve also run across. (Paula Interview, 2013, June 29)

Paula addressed that in addition to needing translators for face-to-face communication, it was also necessary to translate written communication for ELL families, such as newsletters and report cards. Another teacher mentioned that she put a lot of pictures on her newsletters showing the kinds of activities or lessons that students were currently working on, for families who were not confident with English reading comprehension. She suggested that even if parents were not able read what was written in English, they were able to understand the classroom and school activities through pictures.
All the teachers who served large ELL populations emphasized the importance of translators for ELL families. Not only verbal translators, but cultural mediators were mentioned. For example, George stated that he appreciated the help in the classroom by an older woman from the Philippines for both students and their parents. Since the woman was well respected in the community, she mediated the communication between George and parents. She translated as well as called parents at home. George said that she also taught him about Filipino cultures, including how to approach things in their culture. The woman’s help was a valuable part of his teaching and family engagement with a large student population from the Philippines. A few other teachers mentioned the importance of hiring school personnel, who were bilingual in the languages spoken in the community, to mediate communication and bridge cultural gaps between school, teachers, and families.

Establishing trust and positive relationship with families. Many teachers suggested that they were making an effort to emphasize face-to-face communication with the parents to foster a stronger relationship and trust between schools and families. Nicole saw parents every day because she was a Head Start teacher, and Head Start promoted family engagement in their curriculum. She stated:

Being with young children, I get to see the parents every day, and get to know them, establish core relationships with them, the parents. That’s been very important part of my teaching, because being involved with parents and talking to them each day, I know perhaps what their days would be like, for example, if they [children] didn’t sleep the night before, the parents can inform me of that, and I will understand during the day as I am teaching them. The child may not be attentive, or paying attention and I will understand why. (Nicole Interview, 2013, September 19)
Nicole continued by saying:

I try to really emphasize working hard to get good relationships with the parents and that’s so important because when there is a problem down the road, there is always an understanding and you have a relationship, so the problem can be resolved in a better way. (Nicole Interview, 2013, September 19)

Another teacher mentioned that she preferred face-to-face versus paper notification with families from low SES backgrounds, “big thing with our low-socioeconomic families is I keep repeating the personal connection beyond paper notices because they might be struggling themselves with reading everything” (Abbie Interview, 2013, October 3). Abbie noted that it is the personal connection and relationships that teachers build with such families promoted engagement. She suggested making families feel personally invited, such as saying “I hope to see you tonight at open house” (Abbie Interview, 2013, October 3).

Paula shared what she would tell new teachers regarding what she learned through her experiences as a teacher, which illustrated the importance of building trust and relationship with parents:

I think sometimes you almost have to look at it [being a teacher] like “I am going to build a relationship with these parents so they will respect me” because it [respect] is not given anymore. I don’t think that they automatically respect you because you are the teacher. I do think that it’s really important to build the relationship to get the parents listen to you. If I could say anything to new teachers, I would say it’s little scary to deal with parents sometimes, you may go really apprehensive. But if you smile, and say “good morning” to the parents, it makes a big difference . . . . One of the things I have learned to do is to try to stand by the door in the morning when my students get dropped off, and I say “good
morning” to the students AND “good morning” to the parents . . . . I usually try to, I think even something as simple as addressing the parents, recognizing them, recognizing that they are there, I think that goes along the way toward establishing some relationships.

(Paula Interview, 2013, June 29)

It is important to note that teachers used “parents” and “family” interchangeably during the interviews, acknowledging the importance of other family members as well as extended family in the child’s development. Also, as defining family engagement, the words family “involvement,” “engagement,” and “partnership” were used interchangeably by participants.

**Theme Two: Teacher Roles and Beliefs**

All participants were passionate about being teachers and supporting children. When asked about their specific roles as educators, participants’ responses revealed the associations with the activities or definitions of family engagement. It became clear that the ways teachers perceived their roles as educators were directly related to the family engagement strategies and styles they employed. In other words, teachers’ beliefs made up a large part of family engagement practices, as well as how they viewed certain families. The way teachers defined family engagement and their beliefs about their own roles at schools reflected their enactment of practices. The larger system or organization, which was referred to as school culture, similarly influenced teachers’ views and practices toward family engagement, and emerged as another theme. I will introduce the latter in the section on school culture.

Abbie described her role at the beginning of the interview:

Basically, my role really, although I may not be a classroom teacher now but it really stems from being in a classroom. As a [ELL] coordinator, in my position, what we try to do is for any opportunities where we can really involve our parents or promote the
engagement with them in checking in with their child and being involved in the learning, so it stems from daily check of their planners, to see if there is communication between the classroom teachers and parents, and to check on their homework . . . to send out newsletter and notices, and what’s happening in the school, all the way to the other end where we are inviting them to the activities, such as informational sessions for our ELL parents, our Title I meetings, our school community council, meetings where we invite the community and parents to know what’s happening in the school and what we do here.

(Abbie Interview, 2013, October 3)

She continued to explain more specific engagement practices, such as holding informational sessions about ELL programs to parents from diverse populations (she said mostly from Chuuk, Marshall islands, and other Pacific Islands) to introduce them to aspects of the school system that were new to them. Because Abbie was not a classroom teacher at the time of the interview, she described family engagement strategies that she practiced within her role as an ELL coordinator.

She was more vocal about the importance of interpreters for ELL parents than many other teachers:

  We try to support them, include them in all of our activities, but we also have specific sessions for them where we have interpreters there, so they can relate a little bit better. School becomes so far reach for them that they are kind of fearful because they don’t know. So we hope that having interpreters available makes that more comfortable and inviting. (Abbie Interview, 2013, October 3)

As an ELL coordinator, Abbie’s roles and objectives were integrated into her family engagement practices. This phenomenon was observed across participants. For example, Nicole stated:
My role is to help students become lifelong learners. I think of myself as a facilitator of learning and that parents and teachers are partners in helping students strive to do their best and my job is to bridge the communication gap between us. (Nicole Interview, 2013, September 19)

She continued to describe her beliefs by stating:

Parents are their child’s first and most important teacher and I think the role of the schools is to help build relationships with parents and make them feel comfortable being their child’s “teacher.” Schools can provide parents with the resources to be comfortable with helping their child and by improving communication between the parent and school. (Nicole Interview, 2013, September 19)

Nicole’s definitions of her teacher roles and beliefs influenced the way she engaged her families, since her family engagement strategies were more academic-focused and focused on empowering family members. She emphasized the importance of having parents as volunteers in the classroom. A lot of parents who were volunteers in the past were later employed at her school on a part-time basis. Nicole’s role and views of families as children’s first teachers may have stemmed from her early childhood teacher preparation, as well as the Head Start program curriculum. Another Head Start teacher, Paula, also held a similar belief that parents are “actually the child’s first teacher, the first and most important teacher that your child would ever have” (Paula Interview, 2013, June 29). Paula modeled for parents, showing them activities, like games that families could play with their children at home.

Dean, who was a classroom teacher in a Hawaiian language immersion program, described his role: “my role as a teacher is to inspire students to learn about themselves, their ‘ohana
(family), their land, and their world. I strive to achieve these by doing activities that connect them to this land (Dean Interview, 2013, May 13).

Dean’s family engagement activities included having parents come to sit in the classroom so that they could listen and learn the Hawaiian language with their child. Another activity was a school garden project where parents came to help dig all weeds, prepare the soil, and plant with their children, which all tied in to his roles and values. It should be noted that not all of his family engagement strategies were directly related to his values; however, it is clear that his roles as educator in a Hawaiian language immersion program and values influenced the way he engaged families.

Sean, a classroom teacher, described his role as to “get students ready to succeed in real world settings,” and his family engagement definition included “getting families excited about the school” (Sean Interview, 2013, May 28). He mentioned a unique family engagement strategy, explaining that he was into sports, he encouraged families to play sports with him and their children, as he believed that would make parents feel excited and want to be more involved with their child’s education. He also mentioned his conversations with his students, saying that he wanted them to be more successful than himself and their parents, “to dream big” (Sean Interview, 2013, May 28).

**Teachers’ sociocultural backgrounds.** According to Vygotsky (1978), a person’s sociocultural background and experiences affect their learning and development. The data in this study suggested that this idea applied to teachers, in that their own experiences and value systems influenced their practices in the classroom. In this study, two out of the 11 teachers were from the same ethnic backgrounds as the majority of students at the schools. Those two were Maile, who was part-Hawaiian and taught at a school in West O’ahu with a majority of Native
Hawaiian students; and Dean, who was also part-Hawaiian and taught at a Hawaiian language immersion program. The nine other teachers were either (mixed) European American or (mixed) Asian (mostly Japanese and/or Okinawan) American, teaching at schools where the majority of the students were of different ethnic backgrounds than that of these teachers. In these nine schools, there was a high percentage of ELL students who were mostly new immigrants. None of the teachers in these cases represented those populations. These patterns mirror the national trend that the racial and ethnic background of teachers rarely reflect that of their students in the current educational system (Sirin, et al., 2009).

In their interviews, three teachers mentioned a workshop they attended about understanding poverty. These three teachers did not know each other, and they went to different professional development and workshops in different years; however, it turned out that those workshops had used the same book, called *Understanding Poverty* by Ruby Payne. All three teachers mentioned that the workshop enabled them to reflect on their middle-class backgrounds. During the interview, they emphasized the importance of understanding the differences of teachers’ backgrounds and those of families from low-SES backgrounds. For example, Paula said:

*One of the workshops I have ever been to, was a workshop called “Understanding Poverty.” I actually wished that within the Department of Education system, all teachers could go to that . . . . Because our criteria was to serve families who were in the poverty level, all the parents we got were in usually financial crisis or receiving some kind of public assistance. I would just be flabbergasted. I didn’t understand why they behave the way they did, like when they got tax returns, why they spent all on fireworks for the 4th of July, or they had a hard time paying out rent, but they would have $600 first birthday party for one of their kids. And I would think “why would you do that?” because you*
should save that money. So it would be really hard to deal with families because I didn’t understand why they couldn’t save, you know. Middle-class family is, everything is about saving, save. If you have extra money, maybe not so much now, but usually your mentality is to save. Within the families we work with, saving was not the priority. When I took this workshop, it was very interesting because they explain why families who are in financial need spend the way they do, or why they don’t prioritize the way we think they should. After taking that class, it really helped me when I dealt with the families who were coming from lower-incomes because it was like “I understand why, even though you don’t have three dollars to give me for the bus fare for the first trip, but you just went out and bought iPad. I understand why you did that. I don’t think that’s the greatest thing to do, but I understand why you did it.” That is something we have to work on. So I would say that probably the first couple of things working with families just in terms of engaging them is understanding their culture, understanding what their belief is, what their cultural belief is, what their traditions are, because that really, really impact how they will relate to you as a teacher, and what they believe their child should be doing at school. So it’s a cultural belief, just in general, where they are coming from, what their belief are. (Paula Interview, 2013, June 29)

Maile also shared her experiences learning about culture of poverty, which helped her understand how things she had taken for granted, such as transportation, going to the doctor, having regular medicals, child care, could be issues for families with lower SES background. Similarly, Nicole stated:

Another strategy that helped me a lot that was shared at Head Start training was “What does it mean to be in poverty?” so we looked at Ruby Payne’s book about living in
poverty and there were questionnaires in there, and said “How would you live in poverty?”

There were questions such as “What would you do if someone stole your things [belongings] every day?” or “What would you do if you didn’t have enough food for dinner?” and “How would you live if you needed to carry a gun to protect yourself?” and by questions like these and they also compared upper-class who has another social strata of questions with our class, being in middle-class. When you look at these questions, I thought about my life and I understand that I cannot really put myself into the lives that these children face being in a low poverty level. Maybe 14 family members in two bedroom apartment, there is no personal space for the children to do homework, things we take for granted that we have a desk at home to do homework or to work with the parents but there are 14 loud and noisy relatives in the house that there is no chance for the quiet learning. Children play in the street until 11 or 12 at night or if you are trying to sleep, your neighbor down the road is having a party and drinking. There are drugs. How can children even have a good sleep at night that affects their learning the next day? Things that we just take for granted as teachers because we used to do that, we don’t know what it is like to live in poverty. (Nicole Interview, 2013, September 19)

Nicole discussed the impact of the workshop about culture of poverty, and her application toward non-judgmental attitudes, saying:

You will see these families with very fancy cars like Escalades, or fancy vans, very nice vans and you would think “if you don’t have money, why are they spending money on a very fancy car or van” but through learning about poverty, people raised in the mindset put a high value on material items because they don’t often get to have anything to call their own, so they may spend their food money or other kinds of money, all put together to
get a nice car even if they live in a very crowded condition. Very poor condition. But just having that car to go around. Now I understand if I see a parent like that with a fancy car, I don’t judge them anymore. I realize that I understand that is something very valuable or special to them. That is part of that background. (Nicole Interview, 2013, September 19)

In addition, Nicole discussed the importance of the principal’s support: one year her principal took initiatives to hire a bus, and took all the teachers at her school on the tour through the poverty areas in the school district, so that teachers could understand what the lives of these children and their families were like. Even though principal’s additional support did not emerge as one of the themes, it was strongly tied to the fifth theme, school culture.

Related to teachers’ critical reflections of their sociocultural backgrounds and the importance of non-judgmental attitudes toward families whose backgrounds were different from their own, Paula shared her experiences with a homeless student:

I had a student when I taught upper grade, who I was scolding him every day for not doing his homework. Every day. I would send notes home, I would scold him, he was not doing his homework. I would get so upset with him. Unfortunately . . . I would call him out even in class “Why didn’t you do your homework? Look, everyone else did their homework.” And finally, one day, well, he never said anything. One day after school, I said “You know what, I need to talk to you.” I said, “I don’t want to scold you, I don’t want to yell at you, why is it you are not doing your homework?” And he didn’t want to say anything, so I said “Just tell me if you don’t like it, you don’t understand it, you just don’t want to do it, you don’t like me. If you tell me what it is, then I will not scold you. I just want to know why so I can help you, because I want you to do your homework so you won’t feel so apart from the other kids.” Well, [the exchange] made me feel so bad.
He and his family were living in a car. They were living in their car. And where they parked at night, they only had a street light, he couldn’t do his homework because he had no light. And there was nowhere, they were literally, slept sitting up in their car because there were five of them, sitting in their car, every night, parked because he had no home. And he couldn’t do his homework, so I felt so bad. What I did was every day after school, I had asked [his] mom if he could stay half an hour to 45 minutes after school. So every day, I let him do his homework after school in my class. So he could get it done, and he wouldn’t have to worry about it. But understanding those things, you have to make an accommodation. Sometimes you think, “Why do I have to do this?” but the circumstances are the fact that students, sometimes it’s out of their control . . . . So he really taught me a very, very important lesson about finding out where they are coming from and what the circumstances are. I have learned to ask first, find out, research what’s going on. (Paula Interview, 2013, June 29)

**Frustrations.** In spite of the efforts of the teachers, the level of family engagement in many of their classrooms remained low, which served as a constant frustration for these teachers. Also, frustration arose when teachers did not experience what they defined as family engagement. Teachers were especially frustrated by requests for assistance to families that were unanswered and report cards that were unreturned or returned without being read. As George noted, “parents need to pick up the phone and they need to sign the form. Or if they have questions, return the form. But they don’t” (George Interview, 2013, May 30). Maile mentioned that she provided information about workshops she planned, and she also sent a newsletter to inform and remind parents about the school events numerous times, but the parents did not reply to her multiple requests to sign up. She continued by saying:
I wish I could just have the parents buy in a little more, I think it would be just less intimidating, and there would just be more of an openness about how the child can be supported at home, or even with me. You know, I would want the parents to tell me more about the students. . . . Figuring out what’s the best way (is a challenge). . . . The phone calls, sometimes phones are turned off, or maybe they are a little defensive sometimes. (Maile Interview, 2013, March 20)

Maile continued with her challenges to communicate with families whose children were struggling:

Because they are not that involved sometimes, I don’t know if they realize how far behind the students are. So if I call and say “you know, so-and-so is struggling with the assignments and they are quite behind.” It is almost as they don’t agree with me. It’s because maybe they don’t have another student to compare, or see that they struggle, or maybe because they haven’t sat down and done homework with them that there is some sort of difficulty. So that would be the biggest struggle like they think everything is okay. And they would never realize that the child is two years behind on her reading level. . . . It is a teacher’s essential job to move the child to where they need to be, but it’s difficult if there is no follow-up at home. . . . I can’t depend on the families to offer the support. It’s not maybe because they don’t want to, but possibly they don’t know how, or they don’t have a means or time to do it. (Maile Interview, 2013, March 20)

Although communication difficulties served as a source of frustration, parents’ lack of attendance at school events garnered the greatest frustration among participants. All the participants, without exception, emphasized that they struggled with parents’ lack of participation at school events. At the same time, they all acknowledged that poverty presented
barriers to the forms of family engagement they identified and practiced, which will be discussed in the section on considerations for low-income immigrant families.

**Perceptions and assumptions about certain families.** All the participants acknowledged that families in general cared about their children and wanted to participate as partners in education. However, these teachers’ beliefs about parents’ desires to be involved contradicted in some cases. For example, Sean shared his struggles with the lack of parents’ participation in parent-teacher conferences, as follows: “I think this year I had eight families showed up for the conferences, out of 27, which is not good. So I can’t say they are not really, they don’t care . . . But some really don’t care” (Sean Interview, 2013, May 28). He continued by saying:

Some of my students actually ride a city bus [to commute to school]. I do have two of them I know they ride a city bus. Even those two, I feel bad for them because I know that one of them, their parents are home, but they don’t want to drive him. So they make him ride a bus, instead of driving him to school. I feel bad for the kids, because he has to get up early and jump on the bus, when his mom is doing nothing. She could take him to school but she doesn’t want to. (Sean Interview, 2013, May 28)

It was clear from his narrative that Sean had negative assumptions about certain families, which contradicted with the notion he stated earlier that parents in general cared about their children’s education, which he followed by saying “some really don’t care.”

There was also evidence of negative attitudes from teachers about some parents of ethnic minority groups. For example, one teacher stated:

Some of the cultures that we have in our district, do not value education. Their culture, their land they came from, they don’t start school maybe until third grade, so there is another conflict with homework for example. The parents would say “No, I need you to
take care of your younger brother or sister.” That’s the priority, family comes first. Not the schoolwork. So that’s one of the limiting problems when the families are struggling just to get their next meal, so education is not so important . . . . We just have to try to find a hook or motivation. When we find that, families come and we know that they are very happy that they did get involved with the school. But it’s finding the right motivation that works with that culture and activity. (Nicole Interview, 2013, September 19)

Similarly, another teacher said “you will always come across some parents who just don’t see child’s education as priority, so those are some things that are barriers we come across every year” (Erin Interview, 2014, January 14). Furthermore, cultural gaps were mentioned in response to some families who did not seem to value education:

At this school, because of the make-up of the families that we have at our school, we are still struggling a bit to get some of our parents from, especially families of newcomers from Micronesia, to come over and understand the educational system. So our biggest, how do I say, probably our biggest obstacle is trying to bridge that gap where culturally they believe things one way, and in the Western United States, we believe in things another, so just trying to bridge the gap and getting them to understand that education should be important to them, as well as you know, it’s important to us as teachers, but we are trying to get them to understand we need education to be important to them. (Paula Interview, 2013, June 29)

Frustrations did not prevent teachers from attempting to further engage families. However, the findings suggest that frustrations influenced their attitudes towards family engagement, and in some cases, the development of negative perceptions toward certain families. For example, some teachers seemed to stop expending the same amount of energy to invite parents to school
because they believed that families would not come or did not value education. A teacher shared “it’s a hassle, you feel like you are bothering them to ask them to come and talk about their child (at parent-teacher conferences)” (Sean Interview, 2013, May 28). Previous negative experiences directed future efforts. This theme highlighted teachers’ beliefs, values and perceptions that were essential parts of the implementation of family engagement activities.

**Theme Three: Teacher Preparation**

All teachers, except three, felt that they lacked formal education and preparation on family engagement. Less than half of the teachers indicated that they had received professional development in the area of family engagement. Participants also reported that they felt unprepared to engage families when they were new teachers. Because of the lack of pre-service training on family engagement, teachers’ personal and professional experiences, as well as more experienced teachers’ advice, had influenced and shaped the teachers’ family engagement styles and strategies. All of the participants acknowledged the importance of family engagement, placed it as a high priority in their teaching, and wanted to learn more about it.

**Learning from experience.** Since most participants did not receive formal education on family engagement, their practices and strategies were dependent on their experiences. Tanya stated:

> When I was going to school, we rarely had a course on family engagement. I think I learned it when I was actually teaching at a preschool, called “parent participation preschool” and that’s where I got much of my knowledge. Because the parents were there, they were working with us. It was so rewarding to work with the parents and it helped me, as far as my communication with the parents, and how to work with them, and how to guide them . . . . Every year you teach, I think, you learn and you gain knowledge and
how to communicate with the parents and how to involve them more. (Tanya Interview, 2013, June 4)

Because of the lack of family engagement preparation, teachers reported that their ideas, strategies, and practices for family engagement were limited. For example, Erin mentioned:

The biggest thing that I wish I learned while preparing to be a teacher, I think is variety in which family engagement can be defined as. And how it can be implemented in my teaching. I think when I was first starting, I assumed family engagement was simply helping in the classroom with organizing papers on the side. But being in the classroom with the years I have been teaching, I realized how more broad the word family engagement is. And that’s why currently we try to have the parents be part of the lesson planning . . . . Basically, family engagement doesn’t need to be just helping prepare the craft or papers on the side and that parents should be a part of the teaching. (Erin Interview, 2014, January 14)

Similarly, Abbie stated:

We know that parents always want to help, but I don’t think we specifically learned how and different ways of trying to engaging families, other than expecting them to help with the homework, or maybe inviting them to the field trips, but we never really think about other ways that we can almost embed parent involvement. (Abbie Interview, 2013, October 3)

Participants addressed that they were not exposed to a lot of family engagement strategies or activities other than the ones they were using or had tried previously. All the participants maintained that they would like to learn more about family engagement, especially various ways to engage families, more creative and collaborative ways to improve participations, and more
ways to reach out to the families and communities. Paula also mentioned her learning from mistakes, as follows:

Sometimes you can’t learn it until you experience it. So I would say a lot of the things that I learned that helped me deal with families all came from making mistakes in my classroom. Sometimes, inadvertently hurting a child even though you didn’t mean to, sometimes I hurt a parent’s feeling, I didn’t know because culturally, they don’t get talked to that way or culturally they are not supposed to be involved with education. (Paula Interview, 2013, June 29)

**Learning from experienced teachers.** Since most teachers did not receive preparation on the topic, some teachers shared that they learned and adapted their family engagement strategies from more experienced teachers. For example, Dean said:

I didn’t really learn about this kind of stuff [family engagement] in college, but you did learn about trying to get the parents on your side. And then when I was a student teaching, my coordinating teacher [mentor], she told me that it’s very important. So I kept that in my mind to always try to keep myself open to the parents to keep them on my side, so it’s not, you know, combative or that kind. She said that the report card can help you if you keep it open, line-up communication. Because the report card, it can hurt you, too. If you are not open, if they don’t know about the grade going down down down until the report card. So you really have to be open. Because the report card is just another way of communicating with the parents. Keep them informed. I don’t know if that’s considered as engagement. But I mean, that’s a part of the engagement I guess. (Dean Interview, 2013, May 13)
Learning from other teachers was also part of another theme, school culture, because teachers’ learning from each other’s experiences at the same school sometimes led to a shared goal to improve family engagement practices. I will explain this further in the section on school culture.

**Generational differences.** The three participants who said they had taken pre-service courses on family engagement in college all had been teaching for less than five years. While younger or newer teachers tended to mention more experienced teachers’ advice as their resources, older teachers suggested that younger teachers seemed to be more used to working with families, since family engagement was not mentioned in many teacher education programs in the past. For example, Paula stated:

I think our younger teachers are kind of open to having parents, you know, coming on board. Sometimes we find that teachers teaching in the system for a really long time are not always used to having parents really involved. They communicate with the parents but we don’t have a lot of participations of parents within the classroom itself. (Paula Interview, 2013, June 29)

Nicole also mentioned that she was not used to having parents in the classroom, saying:

It took me a while to become comfortable having parents in my classroom. When I was first teaching, I was very nervous when parents would come in the classroom and I would say “No, I really don’t want parents in my room.” I would be all nervous about it. But after realizing that we can work together as partners and it’s better for the parents to see what we are actually doing in the classroom so they understand what the child is talking about. It helped me overcome my nervousness. (Nicole Interview, 2013, September 19)

Similarly, Abbie stated that when she was a beginning teacher, she was “always nervous about having the parents what they are looking at, but then you never come to appreciate the fact that if
you have them join you as partners, that becomes more rewarding” (Abbie Interview, 2013, October 3). This theme highlighted the emergent needs to prepare pre-service teachers, which will further addressed in the discussion section of this paper.

**Theme Four: Considerations for Low-Income and Diverse Immigrant Families**

All of the participants acknowledged that time and money were major concerns for families from lower SES backgrounds. They acknowledged that poverty presented barriers to the forms of family engagement they identified and practiced. They were cognizant of the fact that work schedules, lack of transportation, and lack of childcare prevented some families from attending school events. Some teachers pointed out that parents from lower-SES backgrounds often held positions that did not allow for days off without wage loss.

**Collaboration with diverse families.** Teachers who were successfully engaging families took into consideration the students’ and family members’ cultures, languages, backgrounds or careers, and their interests. Furthermore, these teachers recognized the students’ and families’ diversity as resources in the classroom. For example, Tanya’s school had a “career week” for the 6th graders when the school invited parents to talk about their careers:

We invited the parents, and it didn’t matter what their career was, if they just absolutely love what they did. We had parents come in, parents who are police officers, parents who are nurses, lawyers, and contractors. We had military, my student’s teacher, she had military friends come in. We even had my coworker’s husband came in, he is an engineer. Just to share their career to the students, it was wonderful. So that’s another way we engage the parents to come in and share. (Tanya Interview, 2013, June 4)
In terms of engaging families from diverse cultures, three teachers shared about their cultural projects. Cassy described her successful culture-teacher project involving families who were from diverse backgrounds:

I asked the families if they wanted to come in during that week (a culture-teacher week) to share parts of their culture with the students, and kids really liked it. They were happy to promote it and that pride of their culture and themselves as well as making them more aware of their first language, I think, because a lot of them are not too proficient in it. It also helped with bridging the parents-teacher relationship. . . . I think it helped because they were more comfortable coming in and talking after that. (Cassy Interview, 2013, June 27)

Nicole explained the cultural basket, which was a part of Head Start to focus on the children’s and their families’ culture every month. She stated:

We try to collect items for the basket. One way to get parent involvement is to ask parents to bring materials that related to their culture . . . . We try to develop a basket that has as many things as we could collect from that culture. I am having a difficulty collecting Marshallese and Chuukese culture but they have beautiful skirts that have fancy scrap edges that are very beautiful for the children and adults. I am trying to also get more music. For the Philippines culture we have music and dance that pertains in the culture. And the children from the Philippines in our classroom, they really love that. For the Samoan culture too, we have a dance and we have children bringing in their clothing. And Samoan children eyes light up. And the parents are happy too that their culture is being talked about in the classroom. (Nicole Interview, 2013, September 19)
She continued on with difficulties she had with Marshallese and Chuukese families with the communication, and addressed the importance of School Home Assistant. These assistants are native speakers: “When we have difficulty understanding the language of the child or parent, we can ask for help from that person. We have Samoan and Marshallese, and Chuukese and I think Filipino one as well” (Nicole Interview, 2013, September 19).

Kaylie talked about a similar cultural project with her second graders and their families (culture-teacher project involving families who were from diverse backgrounds); however, she recognized it as one of the “low turnout” activities:

I do a quarterly project every quarter, and the last one we did was a cultural project. And some of the students that don’t have that support, they were not able to do it. So they didn’t have anyone to help them I guess, so I would keep them after school, and my co-teacher and I would work with the students and do the project. But that, I found really difficult. This year was a better turn out than last year, though. (Kaylie Interview, 2013, October 18)

Kaylie continued her thoughts on the previous year’s low turnout, stating:

They had to bring something and some students brought in a flag or bought in a story related to their culture, but my students who really don’t have the family support, just couldn’t do the project. I went to ask someone and said “Oh, my mom, she doesn’t help me” or “She is working all night so she doesn’t come home on time” so I noticed that was one of the ones that didn’t work . . . Those students, my co-teachers and I worked with, were the ELL students. A lot of them were ELL. So I also think, maybe they didn’t understand the directions. But my co-teacher and I also presented it to the class so
students can model, model for them [parents] what’s supposed to look like. (Kaylie Interview, 2013, October 18)

Kaylie’s narrative indicated that she did not directly communicate with the families about the cultural project. When asked what she did differently from the previous year to this year after she explained that “this year was a better turn out,” Kaylie explained that the students last year were “more from the towers, the housing, and then this year it’s not as high [high population from the housing, from lower SES backgrounds]” (Kaylie Interview, 2013, October 18).

Kaylie’s responses seem to indicate that the change was in the families she served rather than in her own views about or strategies for family engagement.

In relation to collaborative efforts with diverse families, teachers addressed the importance of developing cultural empathy. Paula suggested that understanding families’ cultures, what their cultural beliefs and traditions were, influenced how they related to her as a teacher.

Similarly, Nicole stated:

I think one of the important strategies especially at our school, we have a high population of English Language Learners, is really to know about culture of the student. And in that way, we can be sensitive to how parents might react to us as we are building rapport, the most important strategy to me is having a good rapport with our parents, good parent teacher rapport. In the Marshallese and Chuukese cultures, for example, parents may nod their head and say “yes” when you ask them a question. And you find out later that they didn’t understand what you were saying, but they were saying “yes” to be polite. So we are taught, we have support at our school from ELL teachers that bring in speakers who can help us learn about the cultures. In some of the cultures, it is rude to look at an adult, for a child to look at an adult when speaking, so we would be frustrated as teachers--Why
isn’t the student looking to us? Why aren’t they looking and watching us? But they are taught by their culture not to look down and that’s part of it, so we have to be sensitive as a teacher to try to gently persuade the child as “It’s okay in school, to look at me so that I know you understand what I’m saying.” (Nicole Interview, 2013, September 19)

**Providing supportive settings for diverse families.** Teachers sought to develop supportive and inviting settings for families so that they felt welcomed, mentioning physical settings that were supportive and welcoming, as well as psychological support. In terms of physical support, Abbie said that school could be open to the needs of families who have younger siblings. When she described the strategies she used to get parents excited about coming to school to participate, Abbie said that finding the right time for parents to come to school was always a challenge:

> Trying to find a way with finding the right time because a lot of low-income, socio-economic, whether they have two or three jobs, or whether they have so many children that they need childcare, those are the kind of things that I think we always have to address . . . . We have to be open to the fact that they will bring their siblings with them for low-socioeconomic population, because childcare would be out of their means . . . .

Again, the school needs to be open to the needs of the families that have siblings coming along, you know, and having something for them [younger siblings]. I think that’s all part of things that we found helpful. (Abbie Interview, 2013, October 3)

Erin also mentioned that she found it helpful to have toys for younger siblings to play with when her students’ families came to the school for a conference or other school events. Erin also emphasized the importance of families’ input to better address their needs:
Actually, in front of the parent board (in the classroom), we also have a suggestion box. So during that time (class activities or events), parents can anonymously add a suggestion or concern, comment, for the class or teachers to kind of take a look at. If they want it to be anonymous, they can. (Erin Interview, 2014, January 14)

Teachers also mentioned the importance of providing psychological support to families. For example, Abbie described her shift in strategies to send less paper notification home to ease parents’ psychological obstacles, which was a part of school-wide efforts:

If a lot of what our families get, they get a lot of papers from school, so it becomes overwhelming, I think. For some of our families, with what they have to deal with, being, they might have multiple children, they might have multiple jobs, so one of the strategies we are trying to do is, this year, rather than giving them multiple notifications all over the week, we are trying to focus. We [school] made a big effort this year to set one day designated as the day we send out the notices, so if the parents are busy at home, childcare or work, they know that if “I don’t have time to check every day, I can check at least that one day that anything that’s really important I know that one day I really need to check” . . . . We thought more would be better before, more notices we send, we would get more response, but we didn’t find that much benefit for us. Instead, we tried to put their shoes in that they have so much going on in their lives, so if we can minimize what they have to look. (Abbie Interview, 2013, October 3)

Other teachers addressed the encouragement and consideration needed to support families from lower SES backgrounds and diverse cultural backgrounds. For example, Nicole said:

If parents know they are needed, and their help is valued, it makes them become more involved. It is important to support them and encourage them as much as their children
especially for low-income parents that may not have a lot of English knowledge and may feel very worried or hesitant about the classroom. (Nicole Interview, 2013, September 19)

Similarly, Paula mentioned cultural differences in relation to psychological support for diverse families:

We are in a really high poverty level area. Most of our students are coming from housing, and a lot of our students come from either Micronesian families, and a lot of other families are families who come from the Philippines, and I think they are very shy. They are very reluctant to come to campus, and I think they really feel that education is for the teachers to teach their child, and they are not the teachers. So I think our biggest barrier is getting the parents comfortable, feeling comfortable being [on the] school campus. (Paula Interview, 2013, June 29)

Another teacher said:

Every year you are going to have some parents that [who] work and have two jobs, and they are unable to attend. So during those times, we try to send home the materials that we used at school, whatever supplied, so while they are not able to attend, we try to do what we can to make them still feel that they are a part of this class. Some parents are going to feel shy, and they might not be as expressive, even if they have some questions or they have some comments they want to make, they might be shy and they might be more reserved, hold back. Cultural difference is a big thing with, I know some of our families’ culture is, family life is the family’s responsibility, but when it comes to school, it’s teachers’ responsibility. So while it’s more of a culture, sometimes you might not get that support from home with maybe homework, but we understand, you know, it’s cultural difference. (Erin Interview, 2014, January 14)
**Partnership with the community.** Many teachers mentioned the need to reach out to people in the community as well as community-based organizations (CBOs) to collaborate on efforts to promote family engagement among low-income and diverse families. The teachers’ narratives suggested that their efforts to collaborate with people in the community and the CBOs resulted in successful community partnerships. The interviewees said they developed partnerships with the State library, public housing, churches, and community volunteers. Tanya described two of her school-wide reading programs, Reading Is Fundamental, and Reading Is Simply Essential, that involved volunteers from the community coming to school, and talking to students in grades K-4, about the importance of reading, and giving books to students (Tanya Interview, 2013, June 4). Her narrative indicated that many family engagement strategies employed at her school were collectively planned, and she included community partnership in her definition of family engagement. She also emphasized the role of the PCNC in providing outreach to the community.

Abbie also addressed the important role of the PCNC to interact with parents to find out what interested them and what information they needed. She and the PCNC partnered with a nearby learning center within the community to outreach to students and families who lived in public housing:

In our housing, nearby housing, there is a learning center . . . . It’s a totally different program from school, so what we tried to do is, join forces with them, in a sense that, like during this summer break, we are going to be doing outreach to them . . . and offer kids to attend the afterschool program for homework. And we offer sessions there, so they can have some tutoring, and some learning going on there. We have also had informational
sessions that we planned to there and rather than parents come here [to school], we go there, to them at the learning center. (Abbie Interview, 2013, October 3)

Abbie identified parents who were active in the community who could encourage other parents. She talked with the housing liaison to improve her outreach to families, and sent them flyers that they could post at the housing site and their community center (Abbie Interview, 2013, October 3). As much as the liaison was essential, Abbie emphasized the importance of face-to-face communication to invite and welcome families.

Abbie and Cassy both raised concerns about the learning needs of students who were from lower-SES backgrounds during the summer. Because the cost of the summer school was usually expensive, those students often did not have resources for their summer learning activities:

A lot of the teachers were saying that it’s kind of hard to bridge that summer learning with school learning, and because our parents are low-income, they don’t send out students to summer school because it’s expensive, so we tried to have our workshop at the end of the year where we gave the parents Summer Packs. (Cassy Interview, 2013, June 27)

Summer Packs included books based on the students’ reading levels, and a journal to complete over the summer with activities that students and families could do together. At the workshop, the teachers showed the parents how to use the Summer Packs during the summer. To maximize attendance, Cassy planned the Summer Packs workshop at the same time as the end of the school year award assembly. Using the school’s Title I budget, the school provided food and Summer Packs. The workshop was cosponsored with CBOs, such as the State library and a non-profit social service agency that provided their summer programs and events which students and families could attend during the summer (Cassy Interview, 2013, June 27).
Cassy also mentioned her efforts to address the attendance challenges with a nearby church, where a lot of Micronesian students and families attended:

Some of the parents even say it, if we call and say “How come so-and-so is not at school?” They will say “Because I didn’t have a baby sitter,” or “I had to go to work and she gets to watch her younger siblings.” We have A LOT of absences especially from Micronesian culture, because of that [cultural value]. They have to stay home and they have to watch their siblings and I think they value more family obligations than school obligations . . . . So if school happens to coincide with family thing, even sometimes with church thing, a lot of church obligations come before school. We have instances [in which] parents keep their child because they have to practice for church, something for church . . . . Because they value those things first, they will honor those obligations before school ones . . . .

Actually in the class [with university professor], a couple of teachers from our school went to a church service in the area just to see what it is about, and the students really liked it . . . . I think someone [one of her teachers] did mention “I don’t think if this is something it will work” but kind of partnering with pastors of the churches as far as “Hey, can you tell your congregation that we are having this, so please support it?” . . . But we are also trying to minimize that just because you want to separate school from church, nowadays it’s a touchy subject. But I mean, that is something I have known a teacher [to] call the pastor and say “So-and-so I know he is in your youth group, can you talk to him about these issue, because he is having an issue at school” and it really helped because you know pastors have higher figure in their culture and in their lives, so they really respect their opinions and listen, so that was helpful. (Cassy Interview, 2013, June 27)
In addition to partnering with CBOs, teachers emphasized connections with individuals in the community. Dean, who taught in a Hawaiian language immersion program, shared about his school’s traditional event on Christmas, that had occurred for 20 years. About one month before Christmas, parents, children, and the teachers prepared and decorated floats to parade through the community. On Christmas day, participants marched in the parade, sang Christmas songs, rode on the floats and played the ‘ukulele music. Turnout was always successful, he said, that the event brought families and educators together. He described:

We were singing to one house, and all came to watch, and they were so happy, so they went in the back and the brought a case of saimin [cup noodle], and they gave it to one of the kids saying “this is for you guys.” The case of saimin. You know, they gave it from their hearts, right? That’s how they felt. They were moved, so we were touched, too. You know, we are just doing it for fun, and to thank those guys (in the community). You know, it’s kind of like a community service. But we don’t say that. (Dean Interview, 2013, May 13)

**Providing a wide range of programs to accommodate families’ needs.** Participants reported a wide range of programs to respond to the needs of families from lower SES and diverse backgrounds. Teachers were sensitive to parents’ requests and concerns, employing successful communication with families, that was addressed earlier. Cassy explained the importance of working closely with the PCNC to organize programs for low-income and diverse families:

We survey the parents at the beginning of the school year, and parents kind of input what they want to learn more about, what they would like more information about, and I work really closely with our school PCNC, to plan those workshops, based on their needs and
their interests . . . Because ukus [lice] and bedbugs are problems at our school, because a lot of our students come from the housing, so they all kind of live in like a communal atmosphere, so if one child has bedbugs, most likely another family will have it. So we tried to accommodate that. So we had like a workshop, where our public health nurse came in and talked how you can properly treat the head lice . . . We actually partnered with one of our parents, who works for the extermination company, so he talked about bed bugs and what you can do to get rid of them. A much as possible, especially because we are low-income school, we try to partner with other . . . businesses, or with our parents, we try to get them to share their expertise, when we have our workshop. (Cassy Interview, 2013, June 27)

Cassy also talked about partnering with a local bank to conduct a workshop that introduced parents to different ways to save money. This was in response to their requests to learn more about strategies to save money.

Tanya responded to parents’ concerns about math curriculum, by holding a math night to show parents how they could help their child’s math homework. She also incorporated healthy lifestyle into teaching:

Throughout the year, 6th grade, we teach them how to make healthy choices, what’s healthy and reading food label. We sent home a meal planner, and for three days, students track their breakfast, lunch and dinner, just write it down and record it, and then the parents would do the same. So even if they are at work, they would track their breakfast, lunch and dinner. And then they would come together at the end of the day and talk about what they ate. They also were going to pick one of those days and make a pie chart of how many fruits and vegetables and meats . . . . We added math to that component, and
they figured out their percentages for that one day. . . What were percentages of fruits, vegetables you ate, what were the percentages of dairy, meats? . . . Then they did reflection as a family, what should we be incorporating more into our diet, or what should we be cutting out, like you are having too [much] sugar, or soda. As a family, their reflection was how can we make better choices and be healthier in our diet choices.

Really successful. (Tanya Interview, 2013, June 4)

As mentioned earlier, teachers acknowledged that time and money were major concerns for families from lower SES backgrounds. Erin stated:

Working with low-income families, I think the main thing is we are courteous about the background. . . . You really need to be creative with creating toys for home, too. Last year we had a math fair and that’s when we created our own toys with objects that we had at home or at school. . . . We talked about ABCs through bean bags, and we actually had parents make bean bags themselves, tied with ABCs. I think the main thing when it comes to low-income families, is that you have to understand that money is going to be tight, so it’s not going to be expected that they will have a room for the resources at home. So they may or may not, when it comes to academic, be up to high with the other kids who doesn’t have the disadvantage. So what tends to happen is because they have less resources, that they may not be as high as other kids in terms of academic, so that’s why we need to actually push harder for those families. So I think letting the families know that resources doesn’t necessarily have to be pre-made things from stores. And that can be easily created, easily used at home, too. (Erin Interview, 2014, January 14)

Erin also mentioned her successful “sharing box” in the classroom, where parents could bring items that they were no longer using at home and that other families might be able to. Because it
was “give and take” rather than just being given, parents were more eager to utilize it (Erin Interview, 2014, January 14).

Many teachers mentioned using strategies focused on “fun” rather than academic goals to engage families from lower-SES and diverse backgrounds. Dean said:

I think, the non-intimidating kind, like a movie night. Because no academic involved. I don’t want to profile people, but sometimes, the lower-economic, low-income families, I mean just sometimes, have more of a negative attitude toward school. Because maybe, they had a negative experience at school. So if they as parents, have a negative experience at their school, they can pass it to their children without even knowing it. So if you call them “we have a math night! Come!” and if they say “I hate math” they are not going to come. But if you say “we have a movie night.” . . . And they say “Oh yeah, we will come.” So to me, it’s not about trying to get something out of them, I guess. Just trying to include them. (Dean Interview, 2013, May 13)

Teachers also mentioned their strategies to combine academic workshops with either fun activities and events or award assembly to try to get more participation, with the realization that parents wanted to come to those fun programs more than academic focused programs or informational sessions alone. Every one of the participants mentioned providing refreshments or food (lunch or dinner) as one of the most successful strategies to get more participation at school events.

**Theme Five: School Culture**

The school culture of the teacher’s work environments played a powerful role in their perceptions of family engagement. When teachers recognized their schools as having a welcoming and caring environment, they were more likely to collaborate with other classroom
teachers and school personnel as a team to engage families. On the other hand, when a school emphasized individualism, teachers tended to be more individualistic, and operated only at the classroom level.

Participants generally felt that the school was the one to initiate family engagement versus the families. Most teachers mentioned collaborative efforts with other classroom teachers and school personnel to plan and organize family engagement programs. Committee meetings were the most common place for them to plan the programs and share concerns. The roles of the PCNCs were discussed, and Dean and Tanya stated that because their schools’ PCNCs had strong connections and relationships with families, teachers often collaborated with the PCNCs, as families tended to come to the school-based events more when the PCNCs directly invited them. It is important to note that the culture of the school can promote a family-centered approach. Most of the participants described the administration of the schools as being committed to working with families to improve the outcomes for children.

If the school attitudes did not promote collaborations, teachers tended to enact practices on their own. For example, Sean said:

I hate to say it, but at my school, it’s kind of on my own. I hate to say that, but we just are, I mean, they are okay with whatever we do, but there is not a lot of where they are promoting you to do things. I mean, the school does its things like May Day, and fun run, things like that to try to get the parents to come. But as for our own things, we are kind of on our own. Whatever we want to do is, I guess it’s okay. I don’t know, I have never had problems with it, but it’s just a matter of getting the families there, I think. Whatever we can get the families to do, the school is okay with it . . . . PCNCs are there, they pretty much just run the fundraiser stuff. I mean, we don’t really have much contact with them
unless it’s a fundraiser. They all come and pass out the packet for something to raise money for the school. They do probably five or six fundraisers a year at the most. But that’s about the only contact we have with them. Other than that, they don’t really do anything else except that, fundraising. (Sean Interview, 2013, May 28)

While Maile mentioned a few of her successful collaborative efforts with other teachers, she shared about the academic pressures of her school:

We always try to get it off the ground, but I think we are just under such stringent academic pressures that it kind of takes the back burner, you know, where we can’t use all of the energies to do these things because we are just so burned out on like trying to get the kids to pass the test . . . . Maybe we have to start off real fun and build the relationship with the families, but how do we manage that when there is such a push for the academics and teachers are so burned out. I mean, I can only speak for myself, so even a few evening workshops we have, it’s just “(sigh) What about my [family]?” (Maile Interview, 2013, March 20)

From her narrative, it was clear that Maile struggled with the school-wide pressures to push academic, rather than the “fun” family engagement events that she was interested in adapting. She also shared about her struggles with balancing the pressures she felt from her job with her own family’s needs. If evening workshops were employed, Maile spent less time with her own family.

**Principal support.** Nearly half of the participants mentioned the importance of support by the principal, as one of the key factors for successful family engagement. As mentioned earlier, when teachers recognized their schools as having a welcoming and caring environment, they were more likely to collaborate with one another. Similarly, when teachers received positive
reinforcement such as encouragement and additional support from principals, financially and emotionally, they were more likely to have positive outlooks on family engagement, despite the challenges or difficulties they faced.

In terms of resources such as financial support, Erin stated:

My principal is very willing to open the campus [cafeteria] if we need space. My principal always lets us know that if we do need any funding that we can request through a purchase order . . . . Something else we do is ‘move on’ day. On move on day, the kids are able to move up and meet their next teachers, so if they are in, for example, our preschool class, we get to go and meet the kindergarten teachers. My principal actually made the exception for our class, and she said that our parents are able to come visit, too, just because it’s such a new and big transition for our preschoolers, so our parents are invited to meet the teachers. (Erin Interview, 2013, January 14)

Tanya mentioned her principal, who was selected as the principal of the year at the time of the interview, many times throughout the interview:

She definitely deserves that [being principal of the year]. She is an amazing principal. She supports the kids 110 percent. If they play ‘ukulele at the mall, she is always there. Whatever kids are doing, anything, whether inside the school. A day, or on the weekends, any. Like science fair, 6th graders go to science fair, district and then they go to State. Two years ago we went to State. She was there. She is always there for everything. That is an amazing principal. (Tanya Interview, 2013, June 4)

Kaylie mentioned that the committee meetings which were held once a month to talk about family engagement at her school, included her principal as one of the members:
We have a really good staff, and communication within the staff is really good. Last year I did the Earth Day, and we had the students to create the project out of something recycled, and I was talking to the principal throughout the year, myself and another teacher, we were putting it together, she [the principal] is very good, whatever you need, I had a word so she can sign them all, and she is very helpful. (Kaylie Interview, 2013, October 18)

This also reflected the principal’s effort to interact directly with families:

Our principal is really good at getting out there, and doing the face-to-face, you know, “Nice seeing you today,” being out there and say, “oh you are coming to our event” so I think again, the personal touch is the biggest thing. (Abbie Interview, 2013, October 3)

Dean mentioned the importance of his principal’s encouragement, particularly when there were low levels of participation, “If it’s something to do with a poor participation, our principal encourages us.” (Dean Interview, 2013, May 13)

**Theme Six: School Resources and Funding**

Teachers mentioned that school resources and funding directly affected family engagement by affording or limiting the time and material resources needed. For example, Maile mentioned a grant money that had supported teachers conducting home-visits for a few years, but ended when the funding did, and there was no money to pay stipends to teachers for this extra work. Fundraising was often mentioned by teachers as a way to collect funds for school events (e.g., field trips) or school supplies. However, many of teachers perceived fundraising negatively since families from lower SES backgrounds struggled financially; therefore, teachers stated that it was less likely that families bought tickets for school fundraising. In contrast, Dean’s Hawaiian language immersion program as well as Maile’s elementary school which also had a
Hawaiian language immersion program on campus, had successful fundraising events as school-wide and community efforts. For example, Maile’s school had an all day fundraiser with Hawaiian food tickets. Her school was able to keep the food ticket price affordable for families because the school also invited crafters to sell their crafts and community members from CBOs to set up information booths for students and families, and those crafters and CBOs paid the school.

As mentioned earlier, three teachers (Nicole, Paula, and Erin) were teaching at the Head Start program at participating elementary schools when I interviewed them. They all had bachelor’s degrees in elementary education and special education, and had experiences teaching at upper elementary grades prior to teaching for the Head Start. Reflecting on family engagement programs that funding made possible, they viewed Head Start as more successful in terms of being able to provide various family engagement activities, such as vegetable & fruit baskets and providing these baskets to families to promote healthy eating habits, literacy events, as well as providing Christmas presents to families at the school-based events. Three teachers (Cassy, Tanya, and Maile) who were not Head Start teachers also compared their elementary school funding with Head Start resources, mentioning that Head Start put family engagement as priority more than elementary schools.

For Title I elementary schools, eligibility for the Title I fund was contingent upon the development and enactment of school-family partnerships in which families and schools agreed to assume mutual responsibility for children’s learning and achievement. However, only two participants, who were a Title I coordinator and an ELL coordinator, mentioned Title I funds for family engagement. Abbie said:
Our school has been very fortunate to have those entitlement grants as well as some private grants to help us provide with that kind of opportunities for our families such as interpreters, STEM/school garden, and Title I & Title III [ELL] money to provide food and resources to the families. (Abbie Interview, 2013, October 3)

In addition, Cassy, another one of the two participants who mentioned Title I funds for family engagement, mentioned donations from the CBOs for school:

Luckily our school is very blessed because we do have Title I money so that’s not the barriers that we have, as far as funding of the activities. We are also very blessed in a fact that we get community help, the community partners are usually if we call, if we ask for, you know donations or time or services, they are usually really good at providing that. (Cassy Interview, 2013, June 27)

In contrast, Sean mentioned funding, both in terms of schools to provide family engagement programs and families who may not be able to take off work to attend the programs:

A lot of my families, parents, they work two jobs, or split families, or they don’t live with one or the other. So getting the parents to want to come help and being able to leave their jobs is hard . . . I can’t say . . . they don’t care. And some just can’t get off work so I think . . . the biggest thing is them getting off work if they want to come and help, because of how low-income they are. It’s hard for them to take a day off, they are going to lose money if they take the day off, so they don’t want to do that. So I think it would be funding, fund would be the biggest thing, for the families and the school. (Sean Interview, 2013, May 28)
Discussion

This study provided a rich description of in-service teachers’ attitudes toward, beliefs about, and practices regarding family engagement. Through the study of teachers’ experiences working in elementary schools in low-income areas on the island of O‘ahu, I explored existing challenges and future directions for successful school-home-community partnerships. In the following section, I discuss how my findings fit with the literature and policies on effective practices for family-school partnerships.

Funds of Knowledge

Not always observed. Some participants continued to define and practice family engagement through more traditional ways. Their definitions were similar to strategies described in Lopez (2001) that were geared towards inviting parents to school-based activities or helping parents become more involved with academics. As already demonstrated in the literature, these types of engagement activities often fail to adequately accommodate engagement of families from low SES backgrounds (Bower & Griffin, 2011). In addition, teachers’ responses indicated that they made negative assumptions about families’ lack of interest in their children’s education, based on a lack of attendance at these school-based activities. Families’ strengths and funds of knowledge (Moll, et al, 1993) remained invisible to some participants. This study suggests that educators need to honor ways that low-income and diverse immigrant families are already involved in the education of their children, rather than blaming them for not caring about their children’s education. Rather than seeking to fix parents’ support, teachers should find culturally appropriate ways to build on what exists and provide even greater support to students (Auerbach, 2006). Perceiving family engagement as a shared responsibility requires a shift from an attitude...
of blame – teachers and school staff blaming parents and vice versa, when things go wrong (Weiss, et al., 2010).

**Funds of Knowledge utilized.** In contrast, many teachers from this study recognized the powerful role parents played at home in their children’s education, and took an inclusive approach to honor the families’ linguistic and cultural diversity. Teachers looked at the activities not only as a way for the children to learn from their parents about their culture and language, but also as a learning offered to all the students in the classroom coming from different backgrounds to share and learn from each other.

Teachers in this study also collaborated with community-based organizations (CBOs), which resulted in successful partnerships with the community. Research suggests that CBOs have provided low-income communities with the civic infrastructure in many ways, including health and human services, affordable housing, economic development, and community empowerment (Warren, Hong, Rubin & Uy, 2009). However, other research suggested that few CBOs worked on issues of public education directly (Warren et. al, 2009). Previous research on the development of community involvement in a place-based high school program for at-risk Hawaiian youth (Yamauchi & Purcell, 2009) suggested that collaborations were sustained by open communication among members of CBOs and teachers, the development of a common set of values among a diverse group of people, and flexibility of community members’ schedules. This study also suggested that teachers sought to create partnerships with CBOs with a goal to foster community development for children’s educational opportunities. Successful communication with the CBOs resulted in stronger partnerships. Building relationships between people and between community members and families creates the basis for active participation in school. This aligns with social capital theory because the community partnerships were made
possible by building relations with the people involved (teachers, community members, and families) through successful communication. Moll et al. (1993) suggested that overcoming the racial and cultural divide between educators and families can strengthen the work of schools by engaging families to contribute to children’s education.

**Importance of communication and bonding in creating funds of knowledge.** All the teachers in this study suggested that face-to-face communication was crucial to foster relationships and trusts with diverse families. However, teachers reported that communicating with diverse and low-income families was not easy, because families may not have cellphone or computers, and even if they had communication technologies, they may not return phone calls or email messages. Communication difficulties and lack of attendance at school events frustrated teachers. All teachers emphasized that they struggled with parents’ lack of participation at school events, which may have been due to a lack of communication.

When teachers in this study mentioned communication, it was always between teachers or schools and families. Communication among parents was not mentioned. Past social capital research (e.g., Lareau, 2000; 2001) suggested that parents from middle-class backgrounds acted powerfully in their children’s schools, because they had relationships with each other, including educators and other parents in the children’s classroom or in the same schools. In contrast, they found that parents from lower SES backgrounds were not always connected to other parents at the same school. Lower levels of education and resources led to lower levels of confidence in perceiving teachers as equals. Focusing on communication between educators and families is important, but teachers in this study may not have realized that forms of social capital exist among parents. Research suggests that people who lack other resources may need to create social capital among who are like them before they can bridge to those of different, often higher
status (Warren, et al., 2009). It is important to recognize the supports low-income and diverse parents can find from those who have similar concerns or who share similar challenges in order to foster the confidence parents may need to create partnerships with educators.

**Implications for Practice: Addressing the Needs of Low-Income Families**

In this study, teachers provided examples of activities that promoted family-school partnerships that were different from what was documented in the literature. These practices appeared to address the needs of low-income families and may serve as models for other elementary educators serving diverse students and families from lower SES backgrounds. For example, teachers in this study found it helpful to prepare toys for younger siblings to play with when their students’ families came to the school for a conference or school events, because parents may not have means for childcare or may be single parents. Teachers were cognizant of the fact that parents from lower SES backgrounds often hold positions that do not allow for days off without wage loss, so if parents had to miss the school events, teachers showed support by sending home materials family members could use to enact the activities with their children. In addition, teachers raised concerns about the learning needs of students who were from lower SES backgrounds during the summer, as a lot of families could not pay for the summer school, or did not have resources for other summer learning activities. They collaborated with CBOs to address the needs of students’ summer learning for families who did not have means. More than half of the teachers in this study worked with large ELL student populations who were new immigrants; however, when teachers mentioned their experiences with low-income families, these families were not necessarily immigrant families. It is important to make such distinctions, as past research tended to discuss these populations together.
Teachers in this study also mentioned the importance of building relationships with parents, which was consistent with past research, indicating that relationships between parents and teachers are integral factor in producing social ties between the community and school (Patel & Stevens, 2010). Nine out of 11 teachers in this study taught in schools where the majority of students was from various cultural groups different from their own. In order to build strong relationships and good communication with families, they were vocal about the need to become familiar with a range of culturally-related beliefs about education. It is important to note that what is effective can vary across families and from year to year.

**Policies and Family Engagement: Head Start versus Title I**

Responses from the teachers in this study suggested that the Head Start teachers felt supported to promote family engagement; however, the regular elementary school teachers at the Title I schools did not seem to know about the funding available for family engagement.

**Head Start and family engagement.** Head Start teachers in this study perceived Head Start as more successful compared to elementary school, in terms of being able to provide various family engagement activities through funding and other resources. The Head Start program was created as part of the Johnson’s administration’s antipoverty agenda, for children living in poverty to enter kindergarten prepared with the school-readiness skills necessary for success (Rose, 2007). The Head Start program is considered to be one of the earliest and most well-researched federal programs supporting family engagement (Duch, 2005). According to Duch (2005), “a clear effort to involve parents in the process of their children’s development and education has been a principal goal of the Federal Head Start program since its origins” (p. 24). Even though policy analysts and researchers indicated that there have been modifications to the Head Start model since 1965, family engagement has remained a constant focus. Head Start
educators are required to build relationships with parents, make programs open to parents at all times, involve parents in curriculum development, address classroom volunteer opportunities, provide parenting skills assistance, help parents to access child health care, and involve parents in program decision-making and governance.

**Title I and family engagement.** All of the elementary schools where participants worked were Title I schools. There is federal policy support for family engagement through Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), first enacted in 1965. The ESEA authorizes funds to be spent on instructional materials, professional development, research-based educational support programs, and family engagement in elementary and secondary schools (Rose, 2007). The U.S. Department of Education uses Title I funds to distribute financial assistance to local educational institutions for children from low SES backgrounds. The Clinton administration reauthorized the ESEA, “adding a new provision that required the nation’s poorest schools to spend at least one percent of their Title I supplementary federal funds to develop educational compacts between families and schools” (Domina, 2005, p. 233). The U.S. federal government reauthorized the ESEA approximately every five years since its enactment in 1965, and the current reauthorization of the Act is the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. Title I currently serves over 21 million students, 59 percent of whom are kindergarten through 5th grade, 21 percent in grades 6-8, and 17 percent in grade 9-12 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).

Even though Section 1118 provides Title I schools with funds to be spent specifically on family engagement programs, there are no clear guidelines for using targeted funds for family engagement (Epstein, 2005). From the teachers’ responses in this study, it appears that teachers were making different decisions about how to address NCLB’s requirements for family
engagement and how to spend the funds. At the same time, not all the teachers seemed to be aware of the Title I funds, and it may be due to failing to communicate with other teachers or school personnel who allocated the Title I funds for family engagement. Even with adequate resources, teachers and other educators need to plan and collaborate with each other and other community members to organize effective activities.

Although federal policies and related funds to increase family engagement have been continuous, Epstein (2011) suggested that the emphasis at any point in time reflected the politics of education. As a result, there is “little coherence across federal laws from different departments and no clear way to evaluate progress or problems in federally funded programs of family and community involvement” (p. 302). In the end, federal laws are too distant to act as the main guide to develop partnerships for districts, schools, and families because school, family and community partnerships occur at the school level where principals, teachers, parents, and students meet daily (Epstein, 2011). Federal policies and funds will be more valuable, if they can guide educators, parents, students, and community members to work together to implement effective family engagement. Responses from the teachers in this study suggested that although funds through federal policies were available, federal policies were not effective in guiding family engagement practices.

**Negative consequence of NCLB on family engagement.** Although the law includes important requirements for schools, districts, and states on family engagement, NCLB has also been criticized for “overemphasizing the importance of standardized achievement tests, setting unrealistic timelines for clearly unreachable goals, and underfunding its requirements” (Epstein, 2005, p. 179). Fage (2006) also suggested that even though NCLB implies that the nation, state, community, and parents act together on the information they receive about school performance,
the irony is that the primary focus of schools has been passing the tests and complying with the hundreds of pages of law and policies, rather than on parents, communities, and schools working to create partnerships and improve achievement. Three teachers in this study observed this phenomenon. Even though family engagement has been defined as a shared responsibility, and Title I through NCLB emphasized the development of strong partnerships among educators, families, and communities, public schools and teachers are held accountable for performance (Fage, 2006). It seemed that academic pressures took a lot of energy from teachers in this study as well, resulting in less time to focus on family engagement practices that they wanted to try but had not been able to.

**Hawaiian language immersion program.** As mentioned in the method section, participating teachers were from three different groups: (a) those who worked at regular Title I elementary schools; (b) those who worked for the Head Start program at a participating Title I elementary school; and (c) a teacher in a Hawaiian language immersion program at a participating Title I elementary school. Because only one participant (Dean) was teaching in a Hawaiian language immersion program, note that Dean’s perceptions and practices of family engagement in this study may not represent other teachers’ perceptions and practices in Hawaiian language immersion programs.

Luning and Yamauchi (2010) explored families’ and adolescents’ experiences in a Hawaiian immersion school (Kaiapuni program). They found that student and parent participants emphasized that the program was significant in maintaining and perpetuating the Hawaiian culture, language, values, traditions, and ways of being, which paralleled Dean’s beliefs about his roles as an educator. In terms of family engagement, families in this program were encouraged to become politically active (e.g., providing testimony to the State Board of
Education and legislature). They reported that youths become more confident, and family members appreciated their children learning to advocate for their rights as Hawaiians (Luning & Yamauchi, 2010; Yamauchi, Ceppi, & Lau-Smith, 2000). Another study by Yamauchi, Lau-Smith and Luning (2008) explored ways in which families in the Kaiapuni program were involved, and effects of and barriers to involvement. The authors found that Kaiapuni families participated in school involvement practices that were consistent with Epstein’s typology (Epstein, 1987; Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Their findings also suggested that Kaiapuni families were more involved in school decision-making than has been reported in other settings. Dean’s family engagement practices were not significantly different from the rest of the participants; however, his teaching principles, focus and values were consistent with past research findings (e.g., Luning and Yamauchi, 2010) that he strived to inspire students to learn about themselves, their ‘ohana (family), their land, and Hawaiian values and traditions through his teaching. Future research may include more participants from Hawaiian language immersion programs to explore the patterns and themes of family engagement.

**Needs to Prepare Pre-Service and In-Service Teachers on Family Engagement**

All the teachers in this study stated that they wanted to learn more about family engagement, while some attributed the difficulties they were having with engaging families to the lack of formal preparation on this topic. As suggested in the literature, more attention is currently being given to preparing educators to build strong partnerships with families and community members to increase student achievement (Bartels & Eskow, 2010; Epstein & Sanders, 2006). However, few teacher preparation programs provided comprehensive topics on family engagement in full courses for all undergraduate and graduate students preparing for careers in education (Broussard, 2009). Most programs offered on family engagement were for
preparing teachers for early childhood and special education. Despite increasing national efforts to promote family-school partnerships, teacher preparation programs have not kept pace with these efforts and demands (Brossard, 2000). Findings from this study, combined with past research, suggest that it is necessary to better prepare pre-service teachers in building strong family-school partnerships.

Not only is there an urgent need for pre-service teachers to learn the importance of building strong family-school partnerships, but also findings from this study address the need to provide in-service teachers with resources, including professional development on this topic. Professional development for teachers plays an essential role in educational reform efforts, as teachers are one of the powerful change agents who have the power to make a difference, both individually and collectively (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). However, there are potential tensions between changes that are externally imposed through government policy and changes in professional knowledge and practice that are generated by teachers (Wood & Bennett, 2000). If pressed from a top-down approach (e.g., imposing government policies on teachers, or outside researchers providing professional development to teachers without understanding the local contexts), teachers may feel defensive about their current practices (Gallimore, 1996; Teemant, Wink, & Tyra, 2011).

When providing in-service teachers with professional development to engage diverse and low-income families, it is necessary to be cognizant of the fact that these in-service teachers already have some experiences engaging families as well as their own beliefs and cultural contexts. Gallimore (1996) suggested that professional development must be based on sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) that involves knowing and understanding teachers’ existing belief systems. Bringing about changes requires teachers to be reflective of their current
practices, their cultural backgrounds and values (Le Cornu & Peters, 2009; Gallimore, 1996).

Everything that is claimed important about cultural and contextual effects on student development and performance is true of teachers as well. If educators are rarely encouraged to reflect or challenge their own cultural backgrounds and their belief systems, they may treat students and families who differ from their own in stereotypical manners, as shown by some of the participants in this study. As past research suggests, teachers are more likely to adapt new pedagogy and become more proficient and confident about their teaching through their contacts with peers (Gallimore, 1996; Teemant, et al., 2011). In addition to professional development on this topic, a peer support group may be beneficial for in-service teachers to learn more about how to build strong partnerships with families and community members for children’s achievement and well-being.

**Conclusion**

For decades, educational researchers and policy makers have advocated the importance of family engagement in children’s education, indicating that family engagement leads to higher educational outcomes and great behavioral benefits for children. This study examined teachers’ perspectives on family engagement in low-income areas on the island of O‘ahu, in an attempt to extend our knowledge of family-school partnerships with diverse populations in the State of Hawai‘i. Consistent with the literature, participants in this study perceived family engagement as critically important, while they recognized their lack of preparation and the need to learn more about the topic. Benefits of family engagement are contingent upon relationships and shared understandings of what family engagement means in the local context. I believe this study contributes to our understandings of teachers’ perceptions and challenges in implementing family engagement in the State of Hawai‘i. In response to the rich ethnic, cultural, and linguistic
diversity of Hawai‘i, teachers were vocal about the need for a respectful and inclusive approach to diverse families. The results highlighted the needs for new approaches to family engagement with both low-income families and ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse families, as well as the need to better prepare teachers for family engagement.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study. First, since the participants were selected using purposeful and snowball sampling, the findings may not generalize to larger populations. Also, the sample size was small, and the teachers portrayed here are not necessarily representative of the general population of teachers serving low-income populations in the State of Hawai‘i. However, the purpose of this study was in-depth analysis and understanding in-service teacher’s experiences and perspectives. Although generalization was not necessarily the goal, participating teachers came from various schools with both differences and similarities of school demography and location while obtaining a level of consistency across participants using purposeful sampling, I believe that some of the strategies shared could be applied to other schools.

Another limitation is using FRL as the sole criterion to select public schools in low-income areas, even though FRL is a widely used measure of the SES in educational research. Researchers investigated 356 schools and more than 8,000 students, and found that 15.8% of the students certified as eligible for a free lunch should not have been, and 6% certified as eligible for a reduced priced lunch were actually eligible for a free lunch (Office of Research, Nutrition, and Analysis [ORNA], 2007). The same study indicated that errors in the eligibility information resulted mostly from households’ application errors, such as incorrect income or household size, rather than administrative errors (ORNA, 2007). One of the weaknesses in the measurement of
the SES in the research also relies on the missed responses, and participants’ unwillingness to provide the information. Despite that there are weaknesses in the FRL eligibility information, the strength of the FRL that the information is easily accessible in spite of the fact that the nature of households’ incomes is fairly sensitive, should be emphasized. At the same time, the FRL was described as an indicator of economic advantage in the No Child Left Behind (2002) legislation, and its use has continued in federally funded research and reports with important policy implications (Harwell & LeBeau, 2010). Considering the purpose of this study to understand the phenomenon of family engagement that exists in low-income areas on O’ahu, I believe it was appropriate to use FRL as a measure of families’ SES.
References


## Appendix A

List of public schools for which 50% or more students receive FRL with demographic data of students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School: (Area)</th>
<th>Percent of students receiving free or reduced-cost lunch:</th>
<th>Percent of students with limited English proficiency:</th>
<th>Demographic data of students:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Aiea Elementary School (Aiea, HI) | 84.1 | 22.6 | Filipino: 23.0%  
Native Hawaiian: 22.7%  
Micronesian: 20.7%  
Samoan: 17.0% |
| Ala Wai Elementary School (Urban Honolulu) | 59.3 | 28.0 | Japanese: 14.7%  
Micronesian: 11.4%  
Native Hawaiian: 11.2%  
Chinese: 8.8% |
| Aliiolani Elementary School (Kaimuki-Palolo) | 52.0 | 13.9 | Japanese: 21.2%  
Native Hawaiian: 19.2%  
Chinese: 15.2%  
Indo-Chinese: 11.6% |
| August Ahrens Elementary School (Waipahu) | 60.1 | 21.0 | Filipino: 81.3%  
Native Hawaiian: 6.2%  
Samoan: 3.7%  
Micronesian: 1.6% |
| Ewa Elementary School (Ewa) | 55.2 | 7.6 | Filipino: 45.5%  
Native Hawaiian: 27.1%  
Japanese: 5.2%  
Samoan: 4.4% |
| Fern Elementary School (Lower-Kalihi) | 85.0 | 34.1 | Filipino: 39.9%  
Micronesian: 24.7%  
Samoan: 13.7%  
Native Hawaiian: 11.6% |
| Hauula Elementary School (Kahuku) | 78.7 | 3.7 | Native Hawaiian: 68.7%  
White: 11.2%  
Samoan: 6.5%  
Portuguese: 2.4% |
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<tr>
<th>School Name</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>% Asian</th>
<th>% Native Hawaiian</th>
<th>% Hawaiian</th>
<th>% Japanese</th>
<th>% White</th>
<th>% Black</th>
<th>% Other</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heeia Elementary School</td>
<td>54.5</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>51.4%</td>
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<td>Helemano Elementary School</td>
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<td>5.5%</td>
<td>45.6%</td>
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<td>(Wahiawa)</td>
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<td>Honowai Elementary School</td>
<td>67.0</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
<td>51.3%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
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<td>(Waipahu)</td>
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<td>Jefferson Elementary School</td>
<td>63.2</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
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<td>(Waikiki)</td>
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<td>Kaimiloa Elementary School</td>
<td>65.1</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
<td>57.3%</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
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<td>Kaiulani Elementary School</td>
<td>85.0</td>
<td>41.0%</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
<td>23.0%</td>
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<td>(Kalihi-Palama)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kalihi Elementary School</td>
<td>78.6</td>
<td>46.0%</td>
<td>31.1%</td>
<td>22.0%</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
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<td>(Kalihi Valley)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kalihi-Kai Elementary School</td>
<td>74.8</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>70.2%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
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<td>Kalihi-uka Elementary School</td>
<td>72.9</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>62.3%</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Kalihi Valley)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kalihi Waena Elementary School</td>
<td>85.5</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>About 30% from Kuhio Park Terrace, 15% with Geographical Exception Filipino: 51.3% Samoan: 18.5% Micronesian: 14.4% Native Hawaiian: 7.6%</td>
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<td>Kauluwela Elementary School</td>
<td>83.3</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>Chinese: 43.8% Filipino: 14.9% Native Hawaiian: 11.9% Micronesian: 5.7% Three housing projects for low-income families</td>
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<td>Keolu Elementary School</td>
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<td>6.0</td>
<td>Native Hawaiian: 43.3% Filipino: 16.4% White: 12.9% Samoan: 7.6%</td>
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<td>Kipapa Elementary School</td>
<td>52.9</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>Filipino: 24.5% Native Hawaiian: 25.4% White: 11.2% Japanese: 10.6%</td>
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<td>Kuhio Elementary School</td>
<td>76.8</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>Micronesian: 22.6% Native Hawaiian: 12.5% Japanese: 9.1% Indo-Chinese: 8.8%</td>
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<td>Laie Elementary School</td>
<td>58.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>Native Hawaiian: 30.1% White: 26.0% Samoan: 23.3% Tongan: 6.1%</td>
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<td>Lanakila Elementary School</td>
<td>70.8</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>Filipino: 25.1% Chinese: 20.4% Native Hawaiian: 13.6% Micronesian: 10.7%</td>
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<td>Leihoku Elementary School</td>
<td>73.2</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>Native Hawaiian: 65.0% Filipino: 13.2% White: 4.8% Micronesian: 4.4%</td>
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<td>School Name</td>
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<tr>
<td>Likelike Elementary School</td>
<td></td>
<td>80.1</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Kalihi-Palama)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Filipino: 37.5%</td>
<td>Micronesian: 20.9%</td>
<td>Native Hawaiian: 11.2%</td>
<td>Samoan: 10.2%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lincoln Elementary School</td>
<td>Pre-K – K-1</td>
<td>93.6</td>
<td>77.8</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(Pre-K – K-1)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Micronesian: 57.0%</td>
<td>Samoan: 25.1%</td>
<td>Native Hawaiian: 9.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lunalilo Elementary School</td>
<td></td>
<td>54.8</td>
<td>14.5</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(Waikiki, urban Honolulu)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Japanese: 23.2%</td>
<td>Filipino: 11.9%</td>
<td>Native Hawaiian: 11.1%</td>
<td>Chinese: 10.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maili Elementary School</td>
<td></td>
<td>84.1</td>
<td>7.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Waianae – Leeward)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Native Hawaiian: 56.2%</td>
<td>Filipino: 11.3%</td>
<td>Samoan: 8.6%</td>
<td>Micronesian: 4.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Makaha Elementary School</td>
<td></td>
<td>84.6</td>
<td>1.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Waianae)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Native Hawaiian: 70.8%</td>
<td>Filipino: 6.0%</td>
<td>White: 5.7%</td>
<td>Samoan: 5.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nanaikapono Elementary School</td>
<td></td>
<td>89.2</td>
<td>9.1</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Nanakuli)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Native Hawaiian: 59.7%</td>
<td>Samoan: 13.3%</td>
<td>Filipino: 9.7%</td>
<td>Hispanic: 2.7%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Nanakuli Elementary School</td>
<td></td>
<td>81.3</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Nanakuli)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Native Hawaiian: 95.7%</td>
<td>Samoan: 1.1%</td>
<td>Hispanic: 0.9%</td>
<td>Partnerships with many organizations including Kamehameha schools and UH</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Name</td>
<td>Races</td>
<td>Languages</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palolo Elementary School (Palolo-Kaimuki)</td>
<td>84.3 36.0</td>
<td>Micronesian: 49.3% Native Hawaiian: 21.5% Samoan: 8.0% Indo-Chinese: 6.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pauoa Elementary School (Pauoa Valley)</td>
<td>58.0 7.8</td>
<td>Native Hawaiian: 52.1% Chinese: 11.6% Japanese: 7.7% Micronesian: 2.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pohakea Elementary School (Ewa)</td>
<td>60.7 9.8</td>
<td>Filipino: 37.7% Native Hawaiian: 28.4% Samoan: 9.6% White: 7.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pope Elementary School (Waimanalo)</td>
<td>85.0 1.3</td>
<td>Native Hawaiian: 87.3% Samoan: 2.5% Hispanic: 1.6% Japanese: 1.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Puohala Elementary School (Puohala village)</td>
<td>62.6 4.1</td>
<td>Native Hawaiian: 62.4% White: 10.0% Filipino: 9.6% Japanese: 4.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Royal School (Downtown Honolulu/Kakaako/Punchbowl)</td>
<td>71.4 17.9</td>
<td>Filipino: 16.3% Micronesian: 15.5% Chinese: 15.2% Native Hawaiian: 14.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wahiawa Elementary School (Wahiawa)</td>
<td>70.9 11.5</td>
<td>Native Hawaiian: 24.0% Filipino: 20.3% White: 16.6% Micronesian: 9.2%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waiahole Elementary School (Waiahole Valley)</td>
<td>72.1 2.9</td>
<td>Native Hawaiian: 54.1% White: 10.8% Filipino: 8.1% Japanese/Hispanic/Black: 5.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Waianae Elementary School (Waianae)</td>
<td>88.9 6.2</td>
<td>Native Hawaiian: 72.9% Micronesian: 7.4% Filipino: 5.1% Samoan: 4.2%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>School Name</td>
<td>Grade</td>
<td>Improvement Rate</td>
<td>Native Hawaiian</td>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>Samoan</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waimalu Elementary School (Aiea)</td>
<td>53.5</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>32.4%</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Waimanalo Elementary &amp; Intermediate School (Waimanalo)</td>
<td>86.0</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>59.2%</td>
<td>18.0%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waipahu Elementary School (Waipahu)</td>
<td>84.3</td>
<td>43.1</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>35.1%</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data: School Status and Improvement Reports, School Year 2011-2012, State Department of Education, Hawai‘i
Appendix B

Demographic Survey Questions

Written survey questions include;

1. What is your name?
2. What is your age?
3. What is your cultural/ethnic background?
4. How many years have you been teaching in US _____ and Hawai‘i _____?
5. How many years have you lived in US _____ and Hawai‘i _____?
6. Please list the professional development workshops or training sessions related to family engagement you have participated during the last or current school year.
7. Please describe your role as a teacher. What are your goals and how do you strive to achieve them?
8. How do you define family engagement in schools? Please explain them below.

Note: The demographic data survey was taken from the teacher’s survey on AFFECT project.
Appendix C

Interview Questions

1. How do you define family engagement in schools?

2. What is the importance of family engagement in schools?

3. What kind of family engagement activities do you implement in your teaching?

4. What kind of support do you receive to promote family engagement in school?

5. What kind of barriers have you faced in implementing family engagement in schools?

6. What are some of the things about family engagement you did not learn while preparing to be a teacher that you wished you have learned?

7. Are there any ideal family engagement practices you would like to try but have not been able to? (Why?)

(Focus on the socio-economic status of families/students)

8. What are the family engagement strategies that you have used and worked well with at your current school?

9. Have you worked at other public schools, serving different populations of students and families? If yes: what are the differences in implementing family engagement from the previous school to the current school?

10. From the family engagement strategies you mentioned, or strategies you know about, but have not yet implemented, are there any that you think would be especially helpful when working with students that come from low-income families?

11. Are there any family engagement strategies that you have tried but did NOT bear the outcomes you expected? If so, which strategies are those and what do you think prevented the strategies from being successful?
12. Are there any family engagement strategies that you have found to be especially limited in terms of working the families of students from low-income background? Have you had any success addressing those shortcomings to successfully engage the families?

Note: The first seven questions were taken from the teacher’s interview questions on AFFECT project.
Appendix D
An example of the template for transcripts and theoretical memos.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Who</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Memo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15:00</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>I think most of the stuff is communication. The logs and things. I send home a weekly report, where the child fills out how they feel they did that week, and I fill out the same report how I feel they did that week, and the parents kind of write comments back, so we are communicating that way. Getting them involved, I have offered them things to come and help. I used to run a store after school where it sells slushy to raise money for, fundraise money for field trip and things like that to buy stuff for the school, and I have asked parents, and some of them said yes they would help, but then they never do. So, we try. Field trip, I always offer them to come, it’s just… for the past 5 years I just 2 parents showed up for the field trip, so it’s hard. But it all goes back to taking off work, but we try to get them. I try to communicate with them as much as possible, let them know what’s going on, I call home a lot more. I have my own website that I use for the homework so that they can go on and check the homework every day. That’s great. The school doesn’t use it. I’ve told the school about it many times, the other teachers they don’t want to do it, so, it takes two minutes to fill out at the end of the day. Some teachers feel like it’s too much work. To me it’s real simple. I go on and type the homework and then, automatically email all the parents, so the parents can get the email tells them what the homework is for the day. So I communicate that way with them. You know, hopefully, it gets the parents to see the work and they can check it, and they can be more involved with their child. That’s my hope.</td>
<td>Communication</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(Worked Well)</td>
<td>Two-way Written</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>School-based, Organized by the teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Parents not able to join</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>K</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>That’s great.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The school doesn’t use it. I’ve told the school about it many times, the other teachers they don’t want to do it, so, it takes two minutes to fill out at the end of the day. Some teachers feel like it’s too much work. To me it’s real simple. I go on and type the homework and then, automatically email all the parents, so the parents can get the email tells them what the homework is for the day. So I communicate that way with them. You know, hopefully, it gets the parents to see the work and they can check it, and they can be more involved with their child. That’s my hope.</td>
<td>School doesn’t use website.</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>On his own, Teachers very busy</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Frustration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E

An example of open coding.

Note: **Codes/labels** and **[conceptual names]** are in bold print.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Who</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Memo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15:00</td>
<td>S</td>
<td><strong>Q8-S-1</strong> I think most of the stuff is communication</td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>[communication]</strong>. The logs and things <strong>[Logs/report, written]</strong>. Q8-S-1-2 I send home a weekly report</td>
<td>(Worked Well)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>[Communication / written]</strong>, where the child fills out how they feel they did that week <strong>[Communication / children included]</strong>, and I fill out the same report how I feel they did that week, and the parents kind of write comments back, so we are communicating that way <strong>[Communication / written / two-way (with parents &amp; child)]</strong>. Q8-S-3 Getting them involved, I have offered them things to come and help</td>
<td>Two-way Written</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>[Teacher inviting families to school]</strong>. Q8-S-4 I used to run a store after school where it sells slushy to raise money for, fundraise money for field trip and things like that to buy stuff for the school <strong>[Fundraiser organized by a teacher / for field trip]</strong>, and I have asked parents, and some of them said yes they would help, but then they never do <strong>[Parents not participating]</strong>. Q8-S-5 So, we try <strong>[Still try for participation]</strong>. Q8-S-6 Field trip, I always offer them to come</td>
<td>School-based, Organized by the teacher Parents not able to join</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>[Teacher inviting families / field trip]</strong>, it’s just… for the past 5 years I just 2 parents showed up for the field trip, so it’s hard <strong>[Field trip / attendance low / struggle]</strong>. Q8-S-7 But it all goes back to taking off work, but we try to get them <strong>[Parents not able to take off work]</strong>. Q8-S-8 I try to communicate with them as much as possible, let them know what’s going on, I call home a lot more <strong>[Communication / phone call]</strong>. Q8-S-9 I have my own website that I use for the homework so that they can go on and check the homework every day</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>[Communication / website]. That’s great.</td>
<td></td>
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<td>----------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>Q8-S-10 The school doesn’t use it [Website / on his own].</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Q8-S-11 I’ve told the school about it many times, the other teachers they don’t want to do it, so, it takes two minutes to fill out at the end of the day [Website / on his own / not collaborating with other teachers / Time issue].</td>
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<td>Q8-S-12 Some teachers feel like it’s too much work [Teachers feel too much work – website].</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Q8-S-13 To me it’s real simple [Simple / convenience / strategy].</td>
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<td>Q8-S-14 I go on and type the homework and then, automatically email all the parents, so the parents can get the email tells them what the homework is for the day [Email communication / homework / academic].</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Q8-S-14-2 So I communicate that way with them [Communication / one-way].</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Q8-S-15 You know, hopefully, it gets the parents to see the work and they can check it, and they can be more involved with their child [Website – hoping it will work for everyone / academic].</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Q8-S-15-2 That’s my hope [Hoping it will work for everyone / academic].</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

School doesn’t use website.  
On his own, Teachers very busy  
Frustration