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# Family Engagement Interpretations: A Comparison of Primary Classroom Teachers and Chinese Families

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FAMILY ENGAGEMENT INTERPRETATIONS:  
A COMPARISON OF PRIMARY CLASSROOM TEACHERS AND  
CHINESE FAMILIES

by

Bridget Bergeson Gagnelius

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English as a Second Language.

Hamline University

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To my mom for instilling in me a love of learning and for inspiring me to become a teacher. To my husband for his endless love, dedication, and support. Thank you to my committee members for their assistance and encouragement as I completed this capstone. And finally, to the students and families I work with every day, thank you for inspiring me, challenging me, and for making my work not just a job, but a calling.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

As schools across the United States become increasingly diverse, school districts and educators recognize cultural differences as an asset in schools and strive to make education meaningful, affirming of cultural differences, and reflective of all children. Although educators recognize that differences are an asset, it is also challenging to educate diverse children and communicate with their parents and families. In order to accomplish these tasks effectively, teachers must be culturally responsive. One example of cultural responsiveness is the work being accomplished by the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) Consortium. Thirty-five states are now members of WIDA. According to its mission statement, WIDA exists to provide academic language support and establish high standards and educational equity for linguistically diverse children, and its philosophy is that these learners contribute to a rich educational experience and bring strength to a school (WIDA, 2014). In addition, some schools are also working toward teaching culturally relevant pedagogy by using diversity as a teaching tool (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). However, in the district where I work, culturally relevant teaching practices are not yet being transferred to family engagement practices and meaningful engagement is difficult to achieve for my school as well as other schools (King & Goodwin, 2002).

Family engagement is a key component to children's success at school; it is instrumental to a child's success. In fact, some researchers make the strong argument that engagement and partnerships between families and teachers are not a luxury, but a necessity (Henderson et al., 2007). Parents and families can offer a wealth of knowledge to teachers as they are the ones who know the children best (King & Goodwin, 2002). Findings indicate that parent and family engagement in a child's education leads to improvements in reading, math, and social skills (Van Voorhis, Maier, Epstein, & Lloyd, 2013). Therefore, engagement and communication between families and educators is improving as research emerges confirming the positive impact between engagement and academic success. Most teachers agree with the statement that engagement is important to a child's education (Henderson et al., 2007). However, despite efforts to engage families in education, it seems that less progress has been made in successfully involving diverse parents and families in their children's education (Henderson et al. 2007). Teachers report that growing ethnic diversity creates a greater disconnect between themselves and families (Casper, Lopez, Chu, & Weiss, 2011).

An example of this disconnect can be seen in the school where I work. Our district's growth and development plan for teachers includes performance standards around the domains of planning, instruction, environment, professional responsibilities, and recently added, cultural competence. The district has worked for about ten years now on improving relationships with diverse families, spending countless hours on professional development for teachers and staff, and implementing standards for

engaging diverse children and families. Despite these efforts, the participation for diverse families is proportionally lower than the white middle class majority families.

As a way to try to lessen the disconnect, schools stress the importance of engagement and communication with parents and families through Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) standards at the national level, state standards for effective teachers, and district initiatives using resources such as Danielson's Framework. The InTASC standards, although not specifically referencing family engagement, stress the value of all teachers understanding family differences, values, norms, and culture; emphasize the family's important role in shaping the child; highlight the family as a valuable resource; and reference the necessity of school and family alignment ("Council", 2011). States have individual expectations and standards for teachers to communicate with families, such as the Minnesota Standards of Effective Practice for Teachers ("Standards", 2016). Danielson references the necessity to communicate effectively with families in Domain 4c: Professional Responsibilities – Communicating with Families (2007). However, involving families who are culturally and linguistically diverse has been difficult for schools. Because the dominant, white, middle-class has set the standards for expectations of behavior in education for more than one hundred years, it has been difficult for schools to interrupt the system and effectively meet the needs of families who may not understand the school system (Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013).

In recognition of both the importance and challenge of parent and family engagement, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and the Every Student

Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA), both reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), have brought the issue to the forefront. NCLB, although no longer law, was a major force in bringing what was then termed “parent involvement” to the forefront in education and compelled many schools to develop parent involvement plans and policies. NCLB defined parent involvement and provided guidelines for schools to effectively engage parents in their children’s education (NCLB Act of 2001, 2002). Therefore, schools became more intentional in their parent involvement practices, especially with culturally and linguistically diverse families; however, since the time of implementation, it appears that there has been little research conducted to evaluate the impact of these practices on immigrant families, especially recent immigrants (Ji & Koblinsky, 2009).

More recently, President Barack Obama reauthorized ESEA by signing into law ESSA in 2015, replacing NCLB. Under ESSA, states have been given more power to make decisions about education. Several sections of ESSA refer to parent involvement, or the term “parent and family engagement,” which is the current term used for this concept as stated in section 1010, and the term that will be used in this research study. Under section 1112, schools are required to practice effective outreach to parents and families of English Learners (ELs) by informing those families about how they can be involved and actively participate in supporting their children as they achieve in academics and English language. This emphasis on academic success and performance is also seen in section 1010. This legislation also places an emphasis on meaningful and effective involvement, challenging states to identify barriers to engagement, such as the economically

disadvantaged, disabled, Limited English Proficient (LEP), those with limited literacy skills, and racial or ethnic minorities. It also requires states to assess these families' needs and to use evidence-based strategies to support both the families and educators to foster engagement. The legislation continues to emphasize regular, two-way, meaningful communication between the school and family (ESSA, 2015).

However, simply identifying barriers to engagement and offering families resources, as ESSA proposes, may not ensure meaningful engagement for all families. Similar to teaching children, family engagement practices must also affirm cultural identities and recognize that the diversity of families is valuable and can greatly contribute to a child's success. As schools develop culturally responsive education systems, they must also develop diverse and culturally responsive engagement practices for families who may view their roles and responsibilities in their children's education differently than educators do. Simply being aware of cultural and linguistic differences will not allow schools to effectively engage families in participation. Schools must take action and see difference as an asset (Berger & Riojas-Cortez, 2012).

### **Purpose of the Research**

Schools with higher concentrations of culturally and linguistically diverse children and families, have sought improvement in how they reach out to these families, attempting to move away from "random acts of involvement," as Gil Kressley calls it, (as cited in Weiss, Bouffard, Bridglall, & Gordon, 2009, p. 4) to a partnership with mutual feelings of respect and connectedness.

In my experience, despite the best efforts on the part of educators to include all families, barriers continue to leave some groups of families disconnected from schools. A perceived lack of engagement from the educator's point of view persists. The perceived lack of involvement and engagement is a problem that must be solved. Often, the tone between parents or families and educators when discussing engagement is one of blame. A perceived lack of involvement causes teachers to view the parent as a problem rather than an asset (Weiss et al., 2009) or as a bystander rather than a partner (Weiss, Lopez, & Rosenberg, 2010).

The problem may actually be that parents and families do not understand that their roles matter nor do they know how to be engaged. These families, who may be uninformed, are not able to participate in engagement activities, nor should they be expected to by teachers or punished for not participating (Henderson et al. 2007; King & Goodwin, 2002). Feelings of shared responsibility and ownership in policies alleviate the blame and finger-pointing that often occurs during the family engagement discussion (Weiss & Stephen, 2009). This skewed view is the reason to work to create a sense of shared responsibility, to affirm both roles, family member and teacher, as a means to children's success. It is the reason that both educators and families must interrupt the current state of family engagement and recognize the strength that can come when both groups become partners in education (Weiss, Lopez, & Rosenberg, 2010). To accomplish this, the first step is to gather input from families about their perceived roles and how they want to be involved in their children's education.

One group of families that I want to engage more meaningfully and effectively is the Chinese population at the school where I work. Therefore, my study focused on Chinese families' input about engagement in education. This is a group of families whose children attend school in the U.S. for one to two years while a family member, usually a parent, is a visiting scholar at the local university. As short-term residents, it is essential to successfully engage these families quickly in order to maximize their time at my school. Although historically, Asian children perform well in school, there is also a lack of engagement by Asian families because they have a different framework for family engagement (Henderson et al., 2007). My goal was to discover more about this framework. The participants are described in more detail later in the study.

In this study I gathered data in order to put together a comprehensive view of what family engagement looks like and constructed a description of effective and meaningful family engagement practices from the perspective of both the classroom teacher and family. Although a definition of family engagement is provided to schools by legislation, the way that definition is carried out may vary widely in different schools, causing uncertainty for both teachers and families. In addition, construction of roles for different groups may be based on culture. Therefore culturally and linguistically diverse families will likely have very different views of their own roles in family engagement than teachers will.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As an ESL teacher in a large suburban elementary school, I work closely with classroom teachers and culturally and linguistically diverse families. I teach children in

kindergarten through third grade, and my research centers on families and teachers in these grade levels. Of the total student population, 17% are identified as ELs, speaking at least 30 different home languages. Families who attend this school are often visiting scholars at the local university and therefore the population is transient.

A consistent population of families who fall into this category are from China. Currently, about 31 children attending the school speak Mandarin and are from China, out of 700 students total in the school. This is the second largest minority language group in the school. Due to their high levels of education and roles at the university, these parents are proficient in English; however, their children are not. The comment I hear the most often from these families is that their children do not speak English and they want their children to learn English, opening up a quick relationship between the families and myself. In addition to having positive relationships with the Chinese families involved in this study, I also have developed strong relationships with the teachers at this school, as I have worked collaboratively with them over my ten years of teaching experience in this school.

The research conducted on this unique population of highly-educated Chinese families living in the United States on a short-term basis is important work that will impact my school. In addition to this group of families, there are many other culture groups in the same situation at the school where I teach, attending the local university and living in the U.S. for one to two years, who will benefit as I learn how to most effectively implement a system of expectations for family engagement for families new to the country so that families can become part of our school community as quickly as possible.



## **Background of the Researcher**

As I began my career as an ESL teacher, I found myself well-equipped to teach ELs but ill-equipped to communicate with their families, let alone meaningfully engage families in school activities. This is true of many new teachers according to a survey conducted by the University of Minnesota (Casper et al., 2011). In addition to feelings of unpreparedness in this area, I also struggled with what family engagement was, even confused over the varying terms I heard colleagues use to describe the concept: parent involvement, family involvement, parent engagement, and family engagement.

I was aware that there was a legislative definition of family engagement, but I was also aware that the definition could be put into practice in many different ways and that differences in cultures between families and teachers could result in varying interpretations of the definition. Carreon, Drake, & Barton (2005) have found inconsistencies in family engagement interpretations to exist, noting that a common understanding does not exist between researchers, parents and families, teachers, administrators, and policymakers. Weiss & Lopez (2009) argue that there needs to be a broader interpretation of engagement because family engagement policies and programs lack a common framework for implementation of practices. These researchers believe that a clear and shared interpretation of family engagement is needed, along clarification of what is meant by the definition in policy and practice (Weiss & Lopez, 2009). King and Goodwin (2002) also believe that schools often have too narrow of an interpretation of family engagement.

The school that I work in has developed some strong and effective family engagement practices. These practices include more frequent communication with families; compacts that describe roles of teachers, students, and parents or families; family nights that teach families about the curriculum and standards and strategies for helping children at home; and fun community-building events. However, despite recent efforts to increase family engagement, my school continues to be less successful in reaching our EL families than in reaching our white, middle-class families who are likely familiar with and comfortable in a school setting.

As we put into practice more family engagement activities and write family engagement plans and policies, are they equitable and inclusive? In order to answer this question, educators need to understand the families' perspectives. Educators often do not seek out the perspective of the parent and family in the activities that are implemented to improve engagement, nor do teachers determine if families are able to use these activities to promote educational success for children. Families may not view current family engagement practices as a means to effectively and meaningfully participate in their children's education (Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005). We need input from families to create environments that will allow them to thrive in engagement practices, thereby increasing a child's success.

If EL families do not participate in school events and activities, is it due to the fact that they do not view the activities as beneficial? Is it due to the fact that teachers marginalize families with a lack of culturally relevant family engagement practices or that the definition of parent and family engagement is too narrow, as studies have claimed

(Theodorou, 2008; Weiss & Lopez, 2009)? My goal was to use the interpretation of family engagement practices and roles given by both teachers and families in order to draw teachers' attention to ways that they may marginalize Chinese families and to create more equitable and useful family engagement practices that will impact student achievement. In order to gather this information, I surveyed classroom teachers and Chinese families. I asked these two groups to rank according to importance family engagement practices currently in place. The survey also asked families to list ways in which they had been invited by the school to become involved and asked teachers to list ways in which they have invited families to become involved. Finally, the survey gave the definition of family engagement to both groups and asked them to write the interpreted roles of families based on that definition.

Despite the possible differences in perception of meaningful and effective family engagement among the players in a child's education, it is also important to seek out commonalities. We must also explore the possibility that there may be a set of shared beliefs, goals, interests in, and investments in student success, albeit hidden, on which effective parent and family engagement programs can be built (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). After all, the purpose of family engagement programs is to assist families in developing the skills that contribute to their children's academics and support the efforts of the school (Alexander, Entwisle, & Bedinger, 1994). I believe that understanding not only differences, but also similarities among family engagement interpretations between teachers and Chinese families will allow a more effective program to be built.

### **Biases of the Researcher**

I have never met a family that doesn't want the best for its children. I believe that all families want their children to be successful, and research supports this opinion. Families want their children to succeed and to support their children by being engaged (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; King & Goodwin, 2002). All families want what is best for their children and have high expectations for them, and all families can play a role and make contributions to their children's education (Henderson et al., 2007). However, I also understand that educators cannot assume that the family's definitions of success and high expectations are the same as their own; teachers should work with families to determine goals and aspirations for children (King & Goodwin, 2002). The belief that all families want to be engaged and have high expectations for their children is the basis of my work as both an educator and a researcher.

### **Guiding Questions**

One reason that family engagement practices have been so difficult for schools to implement effectively is that there are varying interpretations of the roles of parents and families in engagement practices. I wanted to clarify the perceptions of family engagement activities from the perspective of classroom teachers of primary-aged Chinese EL students as well as from the perspective of those children's families. This led me to seek answers to several questions: How do primary classroom teachers interpret the roles of families in engagement in education? How do the families of primary-aged Chinese children interpret their own roles in engagement in education? How are these interpretations similar and different?

As I sought answers to these questions, I aimed to gain more insight into possible barriers to engagement and ways to improve family engagement for this particular group of families, and other families in general who may be in a similar situation.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I have focused on the importance of discovering families' perceptions of engagement in schools based on the fact that as schools become culturally and linguistically diverse, family engagement practices must become more culturally responsive. We will need diverse family engagement practices in order to reflect our diverse community as well as impact student success and build respectful communities and relationships between families and schools.

As I gathered data about family engagement practices and perceptions of Chinese families as well as classroom teachers, I looked for similarities and differences in descriptions given by both groups in order to find potential barriers and to create more culturally responsive family engagement practices.

### **Chapter Overviews**

In Chapter One, I introduced my research by discussing the importance of developing culturally relevant family engagement practices. I briefly described my role and background as a researcher, explaining why this research is important to me. In Chapter Two, I review literature regarding family engagement descriptions and how they are formed. Some questions I address in this chapter are: How can family engagement be described and categorized? How does the concept of capital contribute to role beliefs in family engagement? How does Chinese culture contribute to the way in which Chinese

families participate and engage in education? In Chapter Three, I present the methods of data collection I use in this study. In Chapter Four, I review the results of the surveys I conducted and highlight trends in the data. In Chapter Five, I reflect on the research and the data I collected and consider implications for meaningful family engagement.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study is to compare and contrast the perspectives of the primary elementary teacher and the families of primary-age Chinese children in regards to family engagement. I wanted to discover perceived roles and effectiveness of engagement practices. Through surveys of the two groups, I looked for common ground on which to build more effective practices to quickly and meaningfully engage Chinese families and incorporate them into the school community.

In this chapter, I cover literature essential to the understanding of effective family engagement. I begin by defining family engagement and discussing how varying interpretations of the definition result in inconsistencies in the action of engaging families. I also overview the NCLB Act that has been influential in schools' current practices around parent involvement policies and plans, and highlight the new ESSA legislation. I explain family engagement in terms of categories of involvement and then move into specific information about how families determine their own roles in schools using multiple forms of capital. I explain how this can be difficult for culturally and linguistically diverse families, EL families, and Chinese families. I conclude the chapter by mentioning a gap in the current research. Each of these themes prepares me to seek answers to the questions: How do primary classroom teachers interpret the roles of

families in engagement in education? How do the families of primary-aged Chinese children interpret their own roles in engagement in education? How are these interpretations similar and different?

### **Defining Family Engagement**

#### **Definition**

NCLB legislation used the term parent involvement, and defined involvement as “the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities” (NCLB, 2001, p. 538). This definition continues in the new ESSA legislation with a change in the label from parent involvement to parent and family engagement (ESSA, 2015). Because this is the definition mandated by law, it is the definition that must be used. However, descriptions of effective family engagement may vary widely and interpretations of how family engagement should be put into practice may differ from state to state, district to district, and even school to school.

#### **Interpretations of the Definition**

Ho (1995) describes family engagement as a process used to generate parent potential both in the home and at school so that families, children, and the school benefit. Ji & Koblinsky (2009) assert that it is a family’s activity in the home and at school which serves to promote the child’s education and development. Additionally, Theodorou (2008) describes family engagement as families, schools, and children working together to advance children’s education and future success.



In comparison to these concise descriptions of family engagement is a more comprehensive description given by Weiss and Stephen (2009). These authors encourage families to be viewed as full partners in the education of their children, with schools setting up supports to assist families in playing this role in their children's learning. This description recognizes that both schools and families have a role, but removes a barrier that parents and families may face about how to be involved by placing the responsibility on schools to set families up for success (Weiss & Stephen, 2009).

Weiss et al.'s (2009) family engagement description stresses co-creating a coherent, comprehensive, equitable engagement plan, meaning each collaborative group should have an individual description of roles. Sharing the responsibility of creating a description results in more meaningful and effective practice for all involved. The behaviors, practices, and attitudes of families and teachers that highlight the expectations and interactions between the two groups should be considered. The essential consideration is that creating mutually respectful relationships should be an active process for all involved (Weiss et al., 2009).

Another description of engagement focuses on becoming more family-centered. This means that schools need to shift their own ideas about what parents and families *should* do to accommodate what parents and families *want* to do. It means letting families decide how involved they want to be and then respecting that decision, regardless of the teacher's opinion of how family engagement should be put into practice based on the American school culture. Family-centered family engagement means accepting a range of parental roles, parents being present in some way in their children's

education (Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005; McWilliam, Maxwell, & Sloper, 1999). This practice also emphasizes supporting whole families, developing relationships with families, effective communication, and meaningful involvement opportunities (McWilliam, Maxwell, & Sloper, 1999). In this way, engagement could take place in a formal school setting or in home spaces (Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005). Berger and Riojas-Cortez (2012) suggest allowing families to participate in a variety of ways that will allow them to utilize their talents, be available at different times throughout the day, and to become comfortable in the school setting.

Many schools and family engagement organizations are acknowledging and validating the fact that children learn everywhere, including at school, in the home, and in the community (“Presidents”, 2016; Weiss et al., 2009). Therefore, some are acknowledging the multiple contexts in which children learn as well as more culturally relevant practices in their family engagement policies. Three principles should direct family engagement policies and practices. First, family engagement is a shared responsibility of the family, school, and community that requires active and meaningful support. Secondly, engagement spans the life of a child from birth to adulthood, with changing roles within the family. Finally, children can learn anywhere and at anytime, in multiple contexts (“Presidents”, 2016; Weiss et al., 2009).

Family engagement may be defined through a concise definition given by the government, but the way it manifests itself in schools is much more complex. Family engagement practices are influenced by culture and beliefs. Culturally and linguistically diverse families may, therefore, interpret the definition of engagement differently (Zhong

& Zhou, 2011). For example, parental expectations for a child's achievement and academic success, frequency of communication with educators, participation in school activities and volunteering, as well as a family's role in education activities at home are all aspects of family engagement that may be implemented differently for different families (Zhong & Zhou, 2011; Zou et al., 2013). Many families may not even be aware of the definition of family engagement. For this reason, execution of family engagement practices may be viewed differently by the many players involved in a child's education.

### **Culture and Family Engagement Interpretation**

Government leaders, educators, and families all may have different interpretations about how effective family engagement is put into practice because family engagement preferences are constructed based on culture. According to Hofstede and Hofstede (2005), culture is a way of thinking and acting that is learned through social interaction with family, friends, community, and colleagues, which influences patterns of thought and behavior (as cited in Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010, p. 2). Hall (1981) adds that culture is the way people express themselves, show emotion, think, move, or problem solve (as cited in Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010, p. 2). There are many layers of culture and culture can vary from setting to setting (Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010). As schools become more culturally diverse, it is apparent that the school culture may not align with other cultures, causing conflict and stress. Schools should respect, value, and appreciate cultural diversity and multiple ways of thinking and should be working to preserve multiple cultures. As the ones in power in the dominant culture, educators need to be advocates for preservation of diverse culture (Parrish &

Linder-VanBerschoot, 2010). In addition, without respect and appreciation, it is not possible to develop a system of family engagement that includes all families (King & Goodwin, 2002). The concept described here of involving multiple cultures in a system of family engagement is what culturally responsive family engagement entails. It includes the recognition of various ways that families can and want to be involved in their children's education (King & Goodwin, 2002).

The dominant culture of educational norms and structures in the United States coincides best with white, middle-class, English speakers who were born in the U.S., and this is the population that feels most comfortable in the school setting (King & Goodwin, 2002). So, why is it that educators expect all families to understand and agree with the norms of school (Henderson et al., 2007)? Culturally and linguistically diverse families who do not fit into the educational norms are sometimes viewed as indifferent; they don't care about or value education (Henderson et al., 2007). However, the norms of the American educational system are implicit and cultural (King & Goodwin, 2002), so it makes sense that families unfamiliar with the culture would also be unfamiliar with the school system. These families do not understand how the school works and have difficulty navigating the educational system without familiarity with the system or social networks that can link them with the information they need to do so (Henderson et al., 2007).

For my research here, I have worked with two particular culture groups, elementary teachers and Chinese families, to understand the interpretation of family

engagement by each group in order to seek common ground for more effective and meaningful engagement for the future.

### **Family Engagement and Legislation**

#### **No Child Left Behind**

Family engagement has become an important topic in the field of education. It first seemed to come to the forefront during the No Child Left Behind era. Specifically for schools receiving Title I funds, NCLB legislation defined and set parameters around what constituted effective parent involvement as well as set requirements that needed to be met by schools in order to receive funding (NCLB Act of 2001, 2002).

According to section 1118 of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, parent involvement had been defined as “the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities” (NCLB Act of 2001, 2002, p. 538). Schools were required to write a parent involvement plan, which would describe activities and strategies for parent involvement that would improve academic achievement, improve both the schools’ and the families’ capability for effective involvement, and limit the barriers to involvement for families who may be disadvantaged due to socioeconomic status, English language proficiency, or racial or ethnical diversity. Without addressing all areas of legislation, Title I funding would not be granted (NCLB Act of 2001, 2002).

Another component of the NCLB legislation required a written compact, which gave more specific tasks for each party involved in the child’s education (See Appendix A). For example, schools would provide high-quality instruction and an effective

learning environment, as well as use high-quality curriculum; families would support learning, ensure attendance at school, monitor homework completion, limit television watching, volunteer at the school, and participate in decision making (NCLB Act of 2001, 2002).

A final piece of the legislation worth noting was one regarding capacity-building for parent involvement. This stated ways that schools would ensure family participation. Schools were required to provide information and training to families regarding academic expectations, content standards, and assessments. Additionally, schools needed to train staff in the importance of communication and relationship-building with families so as to learn to value families' contributions and partnership (NCLB Act of 2001, 2002).

### **Every Student Succeeds Act**

The 2016-2017 school year will be a transition year for schools to switch from NCLB policies to ESSA policies. ESSA uses the term "parent and family engagement," but maintains the emphasis of regular, two-way, meaningful communication between the school and family. ESSA legislation highlights meaningful partnerships between schools and families to develop district education plans and the state report cards. One percent of funds for Title I schools remains intact for use towards parent and family engagement activities. In addition, Title I schools must still write a parent and family engagement policy that draws attention to welcoming all families and strengthening the partnership between school and home. The legislation gives power back to individual states, but supports states with the Statewide Family Engagement Centers (SFECs) grant program. The program assists districts in engaging families through professional development. It

also provides services to families to learn about engaging the school and working with their children on educational goals (National PTA, 2016).

This legislation, although giving guidance to schools about requirements for family engagement, also gives a lot of responsibility to families. The trend is to shift the focus on family engagement from the school to the home (Ho, 1995). This means recognizing the importance of family in a child's life as the child's first teacher. The law recognizes the importance of parent and family engagement in the academic aspect of a child's life, from early in the child's life and throughout the school years (DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, & Duchane, 2010).

### **State Mandates**

Using the new legislation, states are charged with implementing family engagement practices in their schools. Maryland, Alaska, and Minnesota are examples of culturally diverse states that have begun to implement more culturally responsive family engagement practices. According to each of their state report cards, Maryland's student population includes 60% students of color and 7.5% EL ("Maryland State", 2016); Alaska's student population includes 51% students of color and 11.5% EL ("Alaska Department", 2015); Minnesota's student population includes 30% students of color and 8% EL ("Minnesota Department", 2015).

The Maryland Family Engagement Coalition has been a force in shifting family involvement practices to more authentic engagement in which schools partner with families to become more responsive to the needs and opinions of families rather than just providing them with information and services that the schools believe that families need.

Maryland's description of engagement includes multiple facets. First, family engagement is a shared responsibility between the school and family, and also includes community resources with the goal of achievement. Secondly, Maryland acknowledges the family as a child's first teacher and recognizes that engagement happens in multiple settings beginning at birth, including home, childcare settings, community, and school. In addition, this description focuses on building relationships between schools, families, and communities that will support the family as a whole, fostering strong parent-child relationships, promoting lifelong learning for both families and children, and supporting families as lifelong teachers. Finally, Maryland seeks a culturally competent understanding of engagement that will affirm the beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and activities of all families, not just the culturally dominant (Driskell, 2014).

Alaska teacher standards also address family engagement. Standard 7 directs teachers to promote regular, meaningful communication between the school and families, to advance student learning *with* parents, and to incorporate families in both goal-setting for students as well as tracking progress of those goals ("Alaska Educator", 2013). Like Maryland, Alaska has also worked to expand its family engagement practices beyond traditional views. Alaska incorporates culturally responsive family engagement practices. This can be seen in Standard 7D and in the Alaska Cultural Standards and Indicators for Teacher Evaluation. Standard 7D states that teachers link home cultures with school activities ("Alaska Educator", 2013). The Cultural Standards address family engagement in Standard D, stating that culturally responsive teachers have the responsibility to work persistently to create "complementary" expectations between the child's home and school



so that both are mutually supported and can enrich the qualities of the other. Educators accomplish this by building relationships with families in a culturally sensitive way and by communicating with families to gain insight into the child's strengths and needs.

For Minnesota, there are standards that reflect responsibilities of teachers for family engagement. These are referred to as the Minnesota Standards of Effective Practice for Teachers ("Standards", 2016). Standard 10 references family engagement and states that effective teachers must communicate and interact with families in order to support student learning. This includes understanding how family circumstances and culture, as well as outside factors, may influence learning and being able to effectively communicate and build productive relationships with families to support children ("Standards", 2016).

### **Family Engagement Categories**

Family engagement is often classified by types of activities or role of the family. Epstein & Dauber (1991) created a model that classified family engagement activities into six different categories. This model has been widely used as a foundation for other research that has emerged in more recent works and is a recognized framework for classifying family activities (Berger & Riojas-Cortez, 2012; Zou, Anderson, Sorin, & Hajhashemi, 2013). Epstein & Dauber (1991) grouped activities into different types of involvement that contribute to a thorough family engagement program. The first was labeled "basic obligations of families," or "parenting," which is the responsibility of the family at home. It includes preparing children to be successful at school through parenting, supporting learning, and providing a safe and healthy environment (Epstein &

Dauber, 1991). For many families, this is the role that they believe to best demonstrate their investment in education. Supplying basic needs and providing a caring home is the family's support of and engagement in educational success (King & Goodwin, 2002).

The second category was "basic obligations of schools," or "communicating." Here, the responsibility is on the school to communicate through various formats to families regarding a child's progress and school events and activities. The third category was described as "involvement at school," or "volunteering," referring to parent or family volunteers at school as well as parent or family attendance at sporting events, a child's performances, or other school activities at various and flexible times throughout the day.

Fourthly was "involvement in learning activities at home," or simply "learning at home," meaning parents and families participate in home learning experiences that contribute to school work and standards. These are often activities suggested by or provided by the school that reinforce concepts being learned at school. Another category of family involvement was "involvement in decision making." This type of involvement requires active participation by families in leadership roles and school governance, such as advocacy, parent-teacher organizations, and committees that may occur in schools, in the community, or even in state government. A final category identified was "collaboration and exchanges with community organizations," in which families couple with outside agencies or businesses that can support children and families with services that the schools may be unable to provide, such as child care and health services (Epstein & Dauber, 1991).

Based on Epstein and Dauber's work, Berger and Riojas-Cortez (2012) classify family engagement into nine categories, some overlapping with Epstein and Dauber's categories, and some additional categories. These nine categories all describe the roles of parents and families in their children's education. The first category is the "parent as an active partner and educational leader at home and at school." Epstein and Dauber include part of this description in their category titled "involvement in learning activities at home." This includes having the capital (financial, social, or cultural) to be involved in both realms of education, school and home. Secondly is the "parent as a decision maker," which is similar to Epstein and Dauber's "involvement in decision making" role, where families have power to try to affect change and make decisions on the school board, committees, and PTA. Another category is the "parent as an advocate to help schools achieve excellent educational offerings," in which parents or families advocate for the schools and raise funds in the community. This could be compared to Epstein and Dauber's "collaboration and exchanges with community organizations" role. The fourth category is the "parent actively involved with the school as a volunteer or paid employee," which is similar to Epstein and Dauber's "involvement at school" role, which allows parents and families to be privy to a deeper level of information regarding things such as curriculum and staff. The "parent as a liaison between school and home to support homework and to be aware of school activities" becomes a bit less involved on the forefront and is mostly concerned with the school offering a solid education. The sixth category is the "parent, though not active, supporting the educational goals of the school and encouraging the child to study," describing families who are not likely to

become actively involved for any number of reasons, but who support the child's academic efforts at home. The "parent as recipient of support from the school" refers to families who receive family education that can strengthen the family unit, such as literacy classes, crisis help, food, supplies, and clothing donations, as well as referrals to community organizations. The eighth category is the "parent as member of parent education classes" that teaches basic child development concepts. Finally is the "parent as a representative and activist in community" who is able to coordinate other families with community organizations and offerings (Berger & Riojas-Cortez, 2012).

Another way of classifying parent and family involvement activities is Ho's (1995) Dimensions of Parent Involvement, which places categories of family involvement along a continuum from passive to active. The emphasis here is on the family's actions. The first is "parents as audiences" which is the most passive and involves parents and families attending major events like parent-teacher conferences or open houses. Secondly is "parents as learners," in which families learn about child development and parenting skills in school-taught workshops. Another category is "parents as teachers," referring to supervising and helping children with homework. "Parents as volunteers or para-professionals," is when teachers recruit and train family members in volunteer or paid positions within the school. The most active role is "parents as decision makers." This category refers to families who participate in the many aspects of school governance (Ho, 1995). Each of these approaches to classifying family engagement activities can play a role in increasing engagement for culturally and linguistically diverse families.

### **Role Beliefs and Their Influences on Family Engagement**

Understanding the types and levels of family engagement is not enough to actually get families involved. In order to accomplish effective family engagement, we must also understand the motivations parents and families have for being or not being involved or staying involved. Parental involvement is dynamic, meaning that the context, resources, and needs of various groups influence how those different groups implement family engagement practices (Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005). How parents or family members view appropriate roles in the education of a child varies across culture, influencing their levels of involvement and engagement (Weiss et al., 2009).

In the case of engagement, families construct their perceived roles in schools based on many factors. These factors include past school experience, teacher behaviors, and what teachers, other members of the school community, other parents in the school, family members, and their children communicate to them about what they are supposed to do as parents and families of school-age children (Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013). However, the communication to families about these engagement expectations is rarely overt (King & Goodwin, 2002). Communication between schools and families seems to most often detail behavior or academic expectations, rather than how families are expected to support their children's learning. The lack of clear instruction to families about these expected roles may be one of the reasons that families are not engaged in ways that teachers expect.

According to both Whitaker and Hoover-Dempsey (2013) and Carreon, Drake, and Barton (2005), a family's motivation to be involved stems from different variables

including personal, contextual, and life-context motivators. Personal motivators refer to families having a personal belief that they are able to help their children to be successful at school and viewing themselves as teachers. It also refers to their “role construction,” discussed at length below.

Contextual motivators refer to parent and family perception of the school and school climate, as well as invitations from children and teachers to participate. Positive school environments and direct invitations to become involved result in higher levels of engagement. Teacher and child invitations, strong leadership, along with an overall positive school environment and climate greatly influence families’ role beliefs regarding parent and family engagement expectations in their children’s education (Berger & Riojas-Cortez, 2012; Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013).

One type of contextual motivator is direct invitation. Direct invitations from teachers and children prove to be the most effective way to get families involved in their children’s education (Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013). Teacher invitations are powerful because teachers hold the primary responsibility of conveying norms and expectations of the school as well as relaying information about a child’s progress and school events (Henderson et al., 2007; Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013). This communication can influence parents’ and families’ beliefs and attitudes regarding their roles in their children’s education. A child’s invitations are powerful since children are the most closely connected physically and emotionally with parents and families. Children prompting families to attend school functions, help with homework, discuss school problems, or engage in academic conversations or learning activities at home has a

huge impact on how parents and family members view themselves as active and essential to their children's education (Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013).

Another type of contextual motivator is a positive school environment. Positive school environments can encourage family engagement and contribute to role beliefs. This type of climate encourages relationships between parents and teachers and among families. It encourages families to engage in school decision making (Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013). Schools need to work at welcoming parents and families by learning about the cultures of the families attending school and by being aware of how their own cultures may conflict (Berger & Riojas-Cortez, 2012).

Life-context motivators include the culture of the family, encompassing families' knowledge, skills, time, and energy. These factors can greatly influence how families engage with their children's academic education. The life-context factors are often culturally based, meaning that different cultures may have different engagement skill sets and expectations (Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005; Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013).

The perceptions and beliefs that parents and families have regarding how they are expected to be involved and what they think they are supposed to do to help their children is predictive of their levels of engagement (Bartel, 2010; Henderson et al., 2007). These beliefs are what make up "role construction." This term stems from Biddle's (1979, 1986) and Wheelan's (1994) Role Theory which proposed that roles, duties, rights, obligations, norms, attitudes, and expected behaviors are socially constructed based on context and relationships with others (as cited in Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013, p. 74). Generally individuals with power set the standards of behavior (Whitaker &

Hoover-Dempsey, 2013) but roles are constructed by determining what is acceptable by family and friends within one's own culture (Henderson et al., 2007). Culturally and linguistically diverse families have constructed their own roles, but have limited power to define their roles in school engagement expectations in the United States. The structures of the school are already in place and families are expected to comply or be viewed as uninvolved, or worse yet, difficult. This shows a lack of equity in family engagement roles (Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005).

### **Concept of Capital**

Capital in the sphere of education can be financial, social, or cultural. Capital is referred to as a "resource of power" (Ho, 1995) and can include material resources, social networks, beliefs, and personal life orientations used to guide decisions and actions. Capital privileges some families to more successfully participate in schools through the financial ability to provide resources for children, the relationships and social connections that can teach the desired roles for families in education, and the cultural knowledge to successfully navigate the U.S. school system (Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005).

Culturally and linguistically diverse families likely define their roles in engagement differently than teachers. Because expectations are learned through experience and interactions, families who may not have experiences and interactions in a U.S. school setting are at a disadvantage, especially since the roles of families in education may be expressed formally or informally, expressively or implicitly, and individually or as a shared belief by a group, all very culturally-based means of communicating (Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013). Often, American schools are



intimidating for families without experiences in an American school setting or who lack experiences of the dominant middle class society, such as ethnic minorities. The rules and expectations are unfamiliar to them and leave them secondary to the middle class majority (Alexander, Entwisle, & Bedinger, 1994; Gu, 2008; Weiss et al., 2009), often because these families lack the social and cultural capital to successfully navigate schools (Weiss & Stephen, 2009).

Families who possess financial capital, or are of higher socioeconomic status, are able to possess the material resources and learning materials that can be used to support curriculum at home, such as books and computers (Alexander, Entwisle, & Bedinger, 1994; Bartel, 2010; Ho, 1995). These families also have the ability to arrange work schedules to attend school functions at various times throughout the day. Childcare and transportation are not barriers for involvement for these families (Ho, 1995). In addition, these families have the means to engage their children in extracurricular activities, community functions, tutoring, and other activities. The inequity that results from varying degrees of possessing financial capital is what is meant by the phrase that the achievement gap is actually an opportunity gap. Research supports the notion that higher socioeconomic status generally results in higher parent and family engagement (Ho, 1995). Ho (1995) discussed one such study done by Lareau in 1987. This study found that all parents and families desired to support their children's education. However, lower socioeconomic status meant a "separated" relationship with the school and higher socioeconomic status meant a more "connected" relationship (Ho, 1995).

Social capital refers to relationships that facilitate a better understanding of family engagement. It refers to the social connections and networks that parents have with other families, friends, and neighbors which allow the families to have a more clear understanding of engagement expectations (Diamond, Wang, & Gomez, 2006; Ho, 1995). These relationships offer benefits to individuals who participate in certain groups, such as human resources that can directly support a child's education, and a social position within the school society that allows families to negotiate and advocate (Ho, 1995; Whitaker & Hoover Dempsey, 2013). Again, higher socioeconomic status often means social capital that is more directly linked with individuals that can strongly support a child's education, such as educators and professionals, whereas lower socioeconomic status means social capital that is likely based within family groups, which may include individuals who are not familiar with school expectations (Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013).

Cultural capital is a huge arena that encompasses a myriad of cultural factors, including but not limited to, race or ethnicity, home language, level of education, and past experience with school. Cultural capital is defined as attitudes, preferences, knowledge, and behaviors that are "institutionalized," or widely shared and valued among a dominant culture and in dominant institutions, such as schools, that can be used to exclude other groups (Diamond, Wang, & Gomez, 2006; Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013). Therefore, members of the majority culture possess a huge advantage in that their own experiences in school likely reflect the current educational experience whereas minority cultural groups experience a "mismatch" between their own experiences and the experiences of their children, as well as in the area of beliefs about family engagement

roles and expectations (Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013). Not only could there be a mismatch, but there could also be negative attitudes toward school if the families themselves had negative school experiences (Weiss, Lopez, & Rosenberg, 2010). This is reflected in Berger and Riojas-Cortez's (2012) parental roadblock labeled the "I don't belong" role in which parents and families avoid schools due to feelings of inadequacy. This causes marginalization and distancing between the home and school, exactly the opposite of effective family engagement (Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005).

One area of cultural capital is familiarity with curriculum. Since most school curriculum reflects the dominant American culture, lack of understanding of the curriculum prohibits some families from being able to help their children with homework, which in turn, limits the families' confidence and competence. This particular area of cultural capital is sometimes referred to as academic capital, the family's own knowledge (Ho, 1995). This refers not only to understanding the content, but also in diverse families seeing themselves reflected in the curriculum, a principle of culturally responsive classrooms which also affects family engagement.

Another aspect of cultural capital is communication and language. Language often gives identity and power. Families who speak a language other than English, then, lack power. Even families who do speak English as an additional language often lack the nuances, educational language, or body language to fully communicate (Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005). Families who speak a language other than English at home lack access to the curriculum or even in the ability to communicate effectively with teachers (Ho, 1995). Language can extend to other families besides ELs as well. The field of

education is filled with jargon and there is an academic register that teachers expect families to use in professional communication.

Effective family engagement requires two-way communication, as stated in ESSA (2015) legislation. Often, communication in schools looks like teachers displaying a child's work, imparting information about the child, informing families about the education that their children receive, and notifying families about events and how to help children (Theodorou, 2008). This is similar to the "authority figure" role in which teachers are eager to give information, but less receptive to receive it. Communication should be a shared role (Berger & Riojas-Cortez, 2012). What is missing in family engagement practices is the "two-way" element that is required by law. True communication is more than simply an exchange of information. It is active, requires feedback, and must convey meaning and understanding.

Communication includes words, body language, interpretation of a message, and other symbols, such as appearance, gestures, clothes, body posture, manners, and other nonverbal cues. These symbols contribute to nonverbal communication and are often learned cultural customs (Ho, 1995). Communication is culturally based because all messages are examined and analyzed through one's beliefs and experiences (Berger & Riojas-Cortez, 2012), and therefore, a form of cultural capital.

Members of non-dominant groups are often viewed as lacking capital. However, they do not lack capital; rather, they lack the valued forms of capital in the dominant society. All families have forms of capital and those forms of capital are of value and importance within their families and communities and can contribute to a rich education.

Instead of focusing on dominant culture as the solution to successful family engagement or focusing on what is lacking, educators need to perceive non-dominant forms of capital as valuable and as potential resources that can be built upon to strengthen the home/school connection and encourage participation. School-based expectations regarding family engagement is only one perspective, one set of cultural beliefs about appropriate roles of families in their children's education (Diamond, Wang, & Gomez, 2006).

### **Family Engagement and EL Families**

Lack of valued capital in the dominant society can affect EL families in their abilities to participate in family engagement practices. Ethnically and linguistically diverse families participate less in schools (Bartel, 2010; Ho, 1995). They have limited experience in basic school protocols and expected roles. Their limited English skills prohibit them from participating in both activities at school and homework (Bartel, 2010; Ji & Koblinsky, 2009). They may not understand the purposes of particular family engagement activities (Bartel, 2010). Many parents and families may not even understand that it is their right and responsibility to be actively involved in their children's education (Gu, 2008).

Cultural differences are often either unrecognized or undervalued in the American education system. Teachers view differences from a deficit model, or at best, as interesting but irrelevant to education and family engagement (Theodorou, 2008). Home language and culture are often not seen as an asset (Li, 2006). Therefore, these cultural differences are not reflected in the school system, let alone sought after. This leaves many groups left out.

Culturally and linguistically different families are often criticized for not being involved in the way that teachers expect. Teachers may have a more difficult time getting to know these parents and families. Unfortunately, this often leads to the inaccurate assumption that they do not value education, are disinterested and uninvolved, or cannot be involved in supporting their children's education (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Weiss & Stephen, 2009). This causes teachers to make fewer attempts to try to involve and communicate with these parents and families, while simultaneously creating a sense that lack of engagement makes it difficult to do their jobs (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Weiss & Stephen, 2009). Teachers who do not engage parents and families also tend to make stereotypical judgments about them regarding their engagement and involvement practices (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Teachers will do well to change this attitude. Goals of teachers and families are often similar for children, and teachers who believe this are more successful at contacting parents and families and involving them (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). A sense of inclusiveness, respect, and appreciation of different cultures, as well as an attitude that all families can contribute, will result in more successful and productive family engagement, imparting feelings of empowerment to parents and families, and giving them confidence about their potential to influence their children's achievement (Ho, 1995).

Parents and families need help in knowing how to be involved; they must be explicitly taught. Because they enter the school system having different or little experience in the school culture or in formal education, they may have different expectations or be unfamiliar with the roles they are expected to take on in order to

influence their children's education (King & Goodwin, 2002). Studies have shown that parents and families with diverse backgrounds are able to become better engaged with their children's learning when they are given clear direction, instruction, and ideas regarding activities that can help; this leads to academic achievement (Van Voorhis et al., 2013).

Often, family engagement practices are viewed as neutral, but as seen from the research above, this is not true (Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005). Certain types of engagement are seen as more desirable, such as volunteering at the school. Traditionally, more active roles are valued by teachers while passive roles are less valued. Families who are more actively involved in their children's education are often viewed as caring more about education. Dominant descriptions of family engagement include physical presence in the school and reading to children daily. However these descriptions stem from middle class norms (King & Goodwin, 2002). This benefits a particular social group: white, high socioeconomic status families. Because family engagement is so culturally specific, the less powerful groups, the culturally and linguistically diverse, are restricted (Theodorou, 2008).

Often EL families who fail to participate fall into one of the following categories. "Self elimination" occurs when families deliberately remove themselves from uncomfortable or unfamiliar situations in the school. "Over selection" occurs when all families are expected to engage in the same ways, regardless of capitals. "Relegation" occurs when families possessing a less valued capital are also given a less desired position. Finally, "direct exclusion" occurs when a particular cultural capital is

considered subordinate and contributions from that group are considered inconsequential, and so the group is excluded from involvement (Ho, 1995). EL families need to develop efficacy if they are to successfully engage in their children's education. Efficacy is the belief that families are able to help their children, that they have the skills and knowledge to do so, that they have information and wisdom to share, and that they can make a positive impact on their children (Henderson et al., 2007).

The research in this section highlights family engagement for EL families, but not specifically Chinese families. One must be cautious not to classify all EL families into one group. If we want to reach all families, it will require knowledge about all families.

### **Chinese Culture and Education**

In order to better understand the Chinese perspective of family engagement practices in American schools, one must understand some important characteristics about the Chinese culture and Chinese education. Because I have discussed above the fact that culture varies from person to person based on social factors, in this section I will make broad statements and generalizations about the Chinese culture, understanding that these concepts may not apply to every Chinese person and that they may be affected by length of stay in the United States and extent of assimilation to American culture (Siu, 1996). Due to cultural differences between the U.S. and China, the results are differing ideas about learning and the role of the family, in turn prompting variances in family engagement practices.

Traditional Chinese education practices stem from Confucianism. In this tradition, one respects elders, has an obligation to family, works hard and is disciplined,



and holds learning and education in high esteem (Siu, 1996). Education is believed to be the path to a better life and will decide a child's future, allowing him or her to advance to a high social status and to gain wealth and respect (Gu, 2008; Ho, 1995; Zhong & Zhou, 2011). In addition, children who gain a better life for themselves will also be able to care for their parents in old age (Gu, 2008). This translates into Chinese learners defining their cultural identity by academic achievement as the highest form of accomplishment and valuing education as a moral undertaking (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2011; Siu, 1996). All educational activities are viewed through a lens of academic achievement. Therefore, some American family engagement activities, such as festivals, extracurricular activities, performances, and celebrations are viewed as nonacademic and may be poorly attended by Chinese families (Ji & Koblinsky, 2009). Physical, emotional, and social health is less valued (Gu, 2008). Families of Chinese learners are protective, emphasize obedience and loyalty to family, teach respect, responsibility, and self-control. They can also, therefore, blame themselves for parental failure, especially when children do not achieve academic standards since grades are highly valued (Siu, 1996). This point is reflective of one of Berger and Riojas-Cortez's (2012) parental roadblocks to communication, the "My Own and My Child Guardian" role in which families regard their children as extensions of themselves and so faults of a child are taken very personally. Families seek to protect themselves and their children (Berger & Riojas-Cortez, 2012). Because their children are held to such high standards, they are often less satisfied with children's accomplishments than American parents are (Siu, 1996).

Chinese families view teachers and educators as professionals and experts. Because the teacher is the player who holds the authority, the family's role belief is that they are not to intervene in school procedures and methods (Berger & Riojas-Cortez, 2012; Gu, 2008; Henderson et al., 2007; Huang, 1993) or that they should support only passively (Gu, 2008; Zhong & Zhou, 2011). This attitude stems from a deeper cultural factor in that China is a hierarchical country. There is always someone in a higher position making decisions, be it a boss at work or a teacher at school. Therefore, Chinese culture values following rules and not expressing personal opinions (Zhong & Zhou, 2011). Teachers are authority figures and families may be intimidated by them (King & Goodwin, 2002) which creates an uneven balance of power (Henderson et al., 2007). In fact, these families may even view teachers who do seek more engagement from the family as inept and unqualified (Huang, 1993). Education is the responsibility of the teacher solely and is conducted at school (Gu, 2008). Because Chinese families view teachers as experts and have high levels of trust in them, families may take limited initiative to communicate with teachers and prefer one-way communication (Ji & Koblinsky, 2009; Zhong & Zhou, 2011).

Confucian beliefs result in two basic types of family engagement in Chinese education: no family involvement or home-based family engagement. The first is self-explanatory; families do not involve themselves in their children's formal education (Gu, 2008). In China, families are not expected to be a physical presence in the school. Families do not volunteer at school or participate in fundraisers (Zhong & Zhou, 2011). Instead, families may participate in home-based family engagement, which includes a

focus on academics over physical, emotional, and social development. Public schools in China prefer that families are involved passively, at home only. Partnerships between families and teachers are not valued (Gu, 2008).

Strong engagement in academics takes place in the home. Chinese families may not hold the American value of autonomy in high regard and instead take on a more directive or controlling role in homework (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2011). Families check homework and prepare children for tests or provide additional homework (Gu, 2008; Zhong & Zhou, 2011). Chinese families often engage in literacy and structured educational experiences outside of school (Li, 2006). In addition, families who may not trust the educational system in the United States are likely to take matters into their own hands by solving the problem at home with their own teaching. For example, Chinese families may feel that the amount of homework assigned to their children is insufficient, so they assign their children additional homework (Li, 2006; Zhong & Zhou, 2011).

This mismatch between parenting values of independence versus control can transfer into the educational system in another way as well. Because teachers who are immersed in the dominant culture of U.S. schools value independence and autonomy, they hold these expectations for families as well as students. Teachers may assume that families who want to be engaged will take the initiative to come to the school or volunteer for events and activities (Zhong & Zhou, 2011).

Communication styles also differ between American and Chinese culture. American communication is low-contextual, meaning it is direct and elaborate, needing little situational interpretation. Chinese communication is high-contextual, meaning it

relies on non-verbal signals, such as head-nodding and lack of eye contact, as well as the situation to convey meaning (Huang, 1993). Other characteristics of Chinese communication include maintaining harmony in a relationship and avoiding conflict using techniques such as verbal hesitancy, ambiguity, and avoidance of comments that could be construed as critical (Gu, 2008; Huang, 1993). Because communication styles differ so greatly between the two groups, the authority, the teacher, often dominates conversation, but fails to actually communicate effectively.

These beliefs hold true for longer-term Chinese Americans and immigrants as well as those who are new to the country. Despite cultural and language differences, Chinese families want their children to succeed in American schools, believing it will lead to better living. These families are aware that cultural and language differences can be problematic, yet they encourage their children to strive for academic achievement (Ho, 1995). However, despite the desire for academic achievement, Chinese families may still appear to be less engaged than American families because they continue to participate in home-based family engagement. They may communicate less with teachers and have difficulty understanding school communications in their various forms, resulting in discontent with American schools' communication style. They may not attend school events or meetings unless invited by teachers (Ji & Koblinsky, 2009; Zhong & Zhou, 2011). Unfamiliarity with the school systems and culture of the school can be intimidating for Chinese families who do not know how to participate in an appropriate way (Zhong & Zhou, 2011).

Currently, Chinese schools are slowly developing different attitudes toward family engagement as well. Public schools in China are beginning to offer more opportunities such as athletics, school events and nonacademic activities, and field trips. Families and teachers are communicating more through the use of technology, phone calls, and newsletters (Gu, 2008). These attitudes may soon be carrying over to Chinese-American families.

Despite a historical lack of engagement on the part of EL families, many aspects of the Chinese culture point to a strong disposition toward family engagement. High achievement, high expectations, and involvement in home learning are outlets that can be used to encourage more active family engagement. Parents and families are already doing a lot to motivate their children at home, and may simply need encouragement and training by the school to take engagement to the next level. One study has also focused on the cultural capital that Chinese families may possess. A main focus of the study is the Chinese family's connection with the larger community. Extended family networks, religious institutions, and communal child-rearing orientations contribute to social capital for Chinese families (Diamond, Wang, & Gomez, 2006). Schools will do well to make the most of this social capital. If families already appear to be engaged, we need to be careful of counting engagement as parents and families simply showing up to events. Despite many Chinese families' efforts to attend activities, they may still feel that they are not valued, they are outsiders, or that the events are not truly meeting their needs (Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005). We still need to be working towards culturally relevant family engagement practices.

## The Gap

As this chapter indicates, research highlights family engagement as a component of a child's education. Indeed, family engagement is a major force in a child's success both in and out of school. The aim of this investigation will be to discover what the School Parent Involvement Plan, as the state of Minnesota refers to it ("Title I", 2016), looks like in practice from the perspectives of the classroom teacher and the families of primary-aged Chinese children. It appears that little research has been done regarding the effectiveness of parent and family engagement practices (Van Voorhis et al., 2013). Not only is there simply a lack of research around effective practices, but the perspective of EL families (Ji & Koblinsky, 2009), especially Chinese families, is missing. As Zou, Anderson, Sorin, and Hajhashemi (2013) point out, there is substantial research regarding family engagement in western settings, but a deficit of research about Chinese family engagement in the context of U.S. schools. Because of this deficit, educators in U.S. schools are left wondering how Chinese families engage in their children's education and how they would like to be engaged in U.S. schools (Zou et al., 2013). We may know that Chinese families are active in home-based engagement, but less is known about their involvement in school-based engagement (Zhong & Zhou, 2011). Gaining the perspective of both Chinese families and teachers can impact school practices to more effectively and meaningfully engage EL families in their children's education. Since engagement is culturally based, understanding one perspective, the Chinese perspective, is essential to improving engagement practices in schools.

One such group I would like more information from is the Chinese population in my school. What does this group believe about family engagement and how can we use research about family engagement to encourage this group to participate?

### **Research Questions**

A starting place for engagement of the Chinese population in schools is to seek answers to the following questions: How do primary classroom teachers interpret the roles of families in engagement in education? How do the families of primary-aged Chinese children interpret their own roles in engagement in education? How are these interpretations similar and different? Seeking this common ground will impact my school's ability to build relationships and work with families for the success of their children.

### **Summary**

In this Chapter, I outlined current research regarding descriptions of family engagement that already exist while also pointing out that there is a lack of common understanding about engagement because of the many variables that go into creation of a role belief about family engagement. These role constructions are influenced by capital and cultural and linguistic differences between teachers and families. I also discussed some important understandings about Chinese culture that influence role beliefs in American schools. These cultural understandings guide my research about this group of families. Chapter Three will discuss the research paradigm and the methods used to collect the data about this group of families, as well as teachers, in order to compare and contrast descriptions of family engagement given by both groups.

### **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

Student success is positively influenced when teachers and families are partners in education. To achieve this collaborative relationship, there must be a common understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the home and school in a child's education. With culturally and linguistically diverse schools come differences in family engagement norms for diverse families. Therefore teachers must develop culturally relevant family engagement practices. This study is designed to gain the perspective of one group of families regarding their family engagement beliefs. That perspective can then be compared to the ideas that teachers have about the same subject. In this study I seek information to answer the following questions: How do primary classroom teachers interpret the roles of families in engagement in education? How do the families of primary-aged Chinese children interpret their own roles in engagement in education? How are these interpretations similar and different? This chapter will describe the methods used to collect data about family engagement interpretations for families and teachers of primary-age Chinese ELs.

This study was conducted through the use of two similar surveys: one designed for Chinese families and the other for teachers. The surveys were administered to families of Chinese children in kindergarten, first, second, and third grades, along with



teachers of the same grade levels. Both surveys asked for input on perceived effectiveness of current family engagement practices and how effectiveness is determined, how expectations of engagement are communicated, and a description of perceived family engagement roles based on the definition given by ESSA. The results of the surveys could then be compared and contrasted to notice trends in family and teacher perspectives of family engagement success at the school.

### **Overview of the Chapter**

This chapter details the methodologies used to collect data in this study of interpreting family engagement roles. The chapter begins by describing the research paradigm used to design the study and is followed by the data collection techniques used. Identification of the participants and setting are covered as well. Finally, the chapter highlights the details of the study, including the procedure for implementing the study and analysis of the data gathered.

### **Mixed Methods Research Paradigm**

My data collection was in the form of a survey, which commonly contains characteristics of both qualitative and quantitative research. As Mackey and Gass (2005) point out, qualitative research can often be more descriptive than overtly qualitative. In fact, Brown (2003) classifies survey-based research as a distinct category labeled interpretive and statistical methods (as cited in Mackey & Gass, 2005, p. 167). This positioned my study to be a mixed methods paradigm. Using a combination of research paradigms allowed me to gain insight that would not have been possible to obtain had I used only a qualitative or quantitative paradigm. This is because the quantitative data

clarified the qualitative data in that the patterns in the data could be made more comprehensible. The information gained from the quantitative data helped to confirm the validity of the themes found in the qualitative data (Mackey & Gass, 2005).

The survey I used included both open-ended and closed questions. Open-ended questions on surveys are used for rich description and gathering information on feelings, experiences, perceptions, attitudes, opinions, beliefs, and motivations. While conducting my research, I gathered information through open-ended questions that would give me insight into the perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and motivations of families and teachers regarding family engagement that could not be measured or observed directly. I sought to understand interpretations of family engagement roles from multiple perspectives (Key, 1997; Lyon, 2008; Mackey & Gass, 2005; Saris & Gallhofer, 2014).

Since I wanted to learn from participants about their perception and point-of-view regarding current family engagement practices, my role was that of a learner rather than an evaluator (Lyon, 2008). My goal was not to evaluate family engagement activities, judge participants on their effectiveness in participating in family engagement practices, or convince them of the importance of family engagement. When a researcher remains open to participant outlook, it is referred to as being emic (Lyon, 2008). With an emic perspective, I was able to interpret the meaning that families and teachers attach to family engagement activities, and determined meaningful categories that emerged from the data (Mackey & Gass, 2005).

Closed item questions on this survey created data that was quantitative and could verify and complement the qualitative data (Mackey & Gass, 2005; Saris & Gallhofer,

2014). This section of the survey had predetermined categories that were used to tally the views of the respondents using a Likert-type scale (Mackey & Gass, 2005). I used a five-point Likert-type scale in order to evidence opinions of relative importance of family engagement practices and activities (Mackey & Gass, 2005). This benefited my research as it provided more concrete data to support my qualitative findings regarding family engagement roles.

### **Questionnaire**

The data for this study was collected via survey in the form of a questionnaire. Survey research seeks answers to questions regarding a topic from a population of people rather than individual people (Saris & Gallhofer, 2014). Questionnaires are a branch of survey research. Questionnaires are concise, preplanned questions intended to provide specific information regarding a topic from respondents. They are more standardized than interviews, which are another branch of survey research, because the same questions are asked of all participants without the ability to be flexible in questioning (Key, 1997).

The questionnaire was used as I intended to determine patterns, trends, similarities, and differences between Chinese families and teachers to determine reasons for participation or non-participation in family engagement activities and events at my school. Because motivations and beliefs could not be directly observed, the questionnaire was designed to gather facts that would allow me to understand feelings of both teachers and families as well as to give an outlet for respondents to share free responses about their perceptions, experiences, and motivations in regards to family engagement at school. A questionnaire allowed me to gather information about a population that

couldn't otherwise be gathered from observation or productive data (Mackey & Gass, 2005; Saris & Gallhofer, 2014).

A questionnaire was also a practical way to gather data in this study.

Questionnaires can be completed in as much or as little time as needed. For the Chinese participants, the questionnaire was provided in both English and Chinese so families had the opportunity to work in their own language. To ensure high participation, the length of the questionnaire was short, and the questions simple rather than complex. I also made sure that participants were aware of the purpose of the questionnaire by informing them of the purpose in the email and written notes that invited them to participate. Being aware of the purpose provided greater buy-in from participants as they share the common goal of achievement (Key, 1997).

In the questionnaire, my intent was to discover how Chinese families and teachers described roles of families in engagement, as well as to gain insight into their opinions about existing engagement practices. A series of needs assessments provided by the Minnesota Department of Education guided my work in developing this questionnaire, as they challenge educators to determine the effectiveness of family engagement policies and plans according to national and state legislation (Families as Partners, 2015). These needs assessments were designed for teachers to determine strengths and weaknesses in engagement practices, with statements asking about family awareness of high expectations and learning activities at home, school accommodations to allow all families to engage, and teachers' communication of clear expectations to families. In addition, Lyon's (2008) work greatly influenced my questionnaire. Lyon carried out a study

similar to my own and conducted interviews with families and teachers that addressed similar questions to mine (Appendix D).

## **Data Collection**

### **Participants**

Participants for this study included two groups, families and teachers. The family group included Chinese nationals who have children in kindergarten and grades one, two, and three. In order to ensure a higher number of participants, all families that had attended the school at some point during the 2015-2016 school year were invited to participate. This included 25 families. In addition, understanding that many cultures may include family members other than parents in a role of direct involvement with the education of children, I invited any family member who wanted to participate to do so.

The Chinese participants were unique to the school where the survey was conducted. The attendance area of the school includes a university where many international families attend. This means that children attending this elementary school are often from highly educated families and living in the United States on a short-term basis, usually between one and two years while a parent does work at the university. One population in this situation are Chinese families who speak Mandarin. This group accounts for about 4.5% of the student body, the third largest language group in the school. The majority language group is English-speaking, who comprise 68.6% of the population. The second largest group is Spanish-speaking, who comprise 8.1% of the population. Although this cohort of Chinese families is very concerned with academic success, it is often less involved in some of the other family engagement practices that

occur at the school with a more community-building focus, as seen through sign-in sheets used at activities throughout the year.

Another set of participants included the teachers of those children described above. Each of the teachers surveyed had been teaching at this elementary school for multiple years, giving them experience in working with international students, and Chinese children in particular. All teachers who taught kindergarten, first grade, second grade, and third grade were invited to participate in the questionnaire, which included seventeen teachers.

### **Setting**

The setting for this study was a large elementary school located in a suburb of a metro area in the Midwest. The school serves a student population of about 700 students in kindergarten through grade six. It is a Schoolwide Title I school, meaning that at least 40% of students are from low-income families; therefore, the school qualifies for federal funding to ensure that all children have access to high-quality education. About 17% of the population is EL with at least 30 different home languages spoken. The school's attendance boundary encompasses a family housing unit for international students attending a local state university. This means that visiting scholars who bring their families to the United States for the duration of their studies will send their children to this elementary school.

The family engagement policy in the district I work in states that families are encouraged to be involved through organized, systematic, ongoing, informed, and timely engagement outlined in a school plan. The district is also working toward a more

culturally responsive approach to family engagement. Teacher evaluation is based on Danielson's (2007) domains; however, an additional domain that my district has added apart from Danielson's model is Domain 5: Cultural Competence. Component 5c addresses building relationships with culturally diverse families. Teachers are expected to consistently and effectively use knowledge about culture and to use cross-cultural communication skills for enhanced communication and active engagement of families in supporting academic success.

In my particular school, the goal of the school as described in the Parent Involvement Plan is to provide quality education to children through partnerships with families. The plan acknowledges the important role of the family as the child's first teacher and as a support for children throughout their education, which results in success and achievement.

### **Data Collection Technique**

Questionnaires are a form of survey research that ask respondents preplanned questions. A questionnaire can include two types of questions: open-ended and close-item. Open-ended items encourage participants to express themselves in their own words, sharing insights, beliefs, opinions, attitudes, and motivations through free responses. A unique perspective is gained for the researcher by using open-ended questions. In addition, the results and answers are often unpredictable and unexpected because respondents can provide more depth in their answers. However, this makes open-ended responses more difficult to interpret and summarize. Closed-item questions generally offer more straightforward data that can be quantified and analyzed. They may

include yes/no questions or item checking responses. They are easier to interpret and summarize and are, therefore, more reliable than open-ended items (Key, 1997; Mackey & Gass, 2005).

The questionnaire format would prove advantageous in this study. First, the questionnaire format generates more comparable data as questions are the same for all respondents (Key, 1997). In addition, contrary to an interview, the person conducting the study is not present at the time of questioning, compelling participants to answer more honestly and directly (Saris & Gallhofer, 2014).

Disadvantages also exist for questionnaire format. First is the difficult task of developing clear questions that will elicit the responses that the researcher is seeking. Dillman refers to this as “the art of asking questions” (as cited in Saris & Gallhofer, 2014, p. 7). For example, it is important that one does not make assumptions about common knowledge and interpretation of concepts or meanings that are written into questions.

In addition, because the questionnaire is given once at one particular point in time, there is a possibility of time reference interfering with accuracy. For example, questions may be answered based on how a respondent feels at that time, in that moment, in that context. Different answers, therefore, may be given at different times, which could result in variation. Answers may also vary depending on the topic knowledge or interest in the topic. This is referred to as saliency. Another aspect of time reference is a concept called telescoping, when respondents believe that events regarding the past that are referred to in a questionnaire have happened closer to the date of the survey than is actually true, affecting the way they respond to those questions. It is, therefore, essential



that the questions asked are clear in regards to the time period in which the researcher wants the participants to reflect on (Saris & Gallhofer, 2014).

Another disadvantage of a survey is the role of social desirability. Respondents may feel obligated to answer questions in a particular way so as to please the researcher or make a good impression. This leads to biased answers. However, this is less likely to occur with a questionnaire format due to the fact that the interviewer is not present for questioning and if the questionnaire is being conducted online (Saris & Gallhofer, 2014).

Other potential difficulties with administering questionnaires exist. For example, because questionnaires are structured and therefore, inflexible, participants may feel that they are unable to express themselves accurately and thoroughly. Insight from the participants may not be expressed to the researcher if the opportunity is not given to express those beliefs and opinions in the set of questions provided (Mackey & Gass, 2005). A potential solution to this problem is to provide adequate space for comments to be shared regarding each question and space for thoughts that participants had during the survey to be expressed. This is exactly what I did in the survey I administered.

Following each question was a comment box and the end of the survey invited all participants to share any other important information with me regarding their beliefs, opinions, motivations, and attitudes regarding family engagement.

Another potential problem with questionnaires is that they are text-based. Participants read questions and script answers. A participant for whom English is not his or her first language may find this task daunting or may be unable to express himself or herself as clearly and completely in a less familiar language. Therefore a whole picture

may not be conveyed. Participants who feel uncomfortable writing and expressing him or herself in a second language may provide condensed answers, which does not contribute to the goal of rich description (Mackey & Gass, 2005). A solution to this issue is to administer questionnaires in the native language.

For this study, I ensured that family participants would be able to participate in a manner in which they felt comfortable, be it online or paper-based, in English or Chinese. I provided all participants with a secure link to the Survey Monkey questionnaire, which was in English only. Only those who received an email from me were able to take the survey, which secured the data gathered. I also provided all participants with a paper copy of the questionnaire in both English and Chinese with a prepaid return envelope. A Chinese translator was used to translate all documents, and for those participants who returned the questionnaire in Chinese, the translator was used again to share responses with me.

## **Procedure**

### **Participants**

Two groups of participants were involved in this study: families of Chinese children and those children's teachers. I wanted to discover trends in similarities and differences in answers given by each group individually as well as among the two groups. I wanted to see if most Chinese families gave similar answers and if most teachers gave similar answers to survey questions. I then wanted to compare and contrast the trends from the two individual groups of participants with each other to discover what differences might contribute to lack of perceived engagement as well as similarities that

could serve as a foundation to create more meaningful family engagement practices at the school.

Family and teacher participants were invited to take a questionnaire describing their individual perspectives on family engagement at school. Initial contact was made with both groups via email and/or written notes. Participants were informed of the purpose of the questionnaire they would receive as well as made aware of the fact that participation was voluntary. The questionnaires were administered to both groups of participants on June 30, 2016. The participants were given a two week window to complete the survey. During the survey window, I spent several hours at the university housing unit community center where many of the Chinese families live. I notified all families about when I would be there and made myself available to answer questions, collect documents, hand out extra documents, and even take surveys at that time using ten iPads that I had available. Several families utilized this service I provided to them.

Of the 25 families invited to participate, there were 14 respondents. Of the 17 teachers invited to participate, there were 10 respondents.

### **Pilot Study**

A pilot study was done to ensure that survey questions were clear and measured what they were intended to measure. The pilot study also confirmed the amount of time it would take participants to complete the questionnaire. This pilot survey was administered to five teachers and one Chinese parent of a former student, and suggestions were taken from them to make slight changes so as to clarify the questions. I worked with a Chinese interpreter and translator to clarify questions for the family questionnaire.

## **Materials**

The materials used in this study included two separate, but similar questionnaires. One questionnaire's audience was families of primary-age Chinese children and the other's audience was the teachers of those same children. The family questionnaire was provided in multiple formats to ensure that participants were able to engage in a format which was comfortable. Therefore, the questionnaire was conducted via Survey Monkey, as well as paper format in both English and Chinese. The teacher questionnaire was conducted through Survey Monkey. Participants were first contacted via email and written notes inviting them to take part in the study. A two week window of time was allowed for participants to complete the questionnaire. The family questionnaire consisted of seven questions and the teacher questionnaire consisted of six questions, with the first corresponding question containing 20 examples of activities that needed to be rated on importance to family engagement for a child's success with the opportunity to provide comments, and the other questions being open-ended. Both surveys asked for a description of the family's engagement role given the definition of family engagement. The questionnaire was designed to take about twenty minutes to complete.

The questions for families included rating events on importance on a Likert-type 5 point scale (Mackey & Gass, 2005), listing ways in which they had been informed about events, as well as writing a description of their role in family engagement. The questions for teachers were similar, including rating events on importance on a Likert-type scale, listing ways in which they communicated with families their expectations of them for engagement, as well as writing a description of what they believe a family's role in

engagement is based on the given definition. See Appendix B for the teacher survey and Appendix C for the family survey.

My questionnaire was similar to a study done by Lyon (2008). See Appendix D for this survey. Lyon also wanted to discover perceptions of both parents and teachers regarding family engagement. He interviewed parents and teachers to discover what about the school context motivates parents to become engaged and how to better equip teachers. Some of his research questions mirror my own questions and the questions on my questionnaire, including types of engagement that already occur in school and preferences of those activities, the way that communication about activities takes place, and the awareness of families for engagement opportunities (Lyon, 2008).

In designing my questionnaire, I used documentation provided by the school that outlines policy and action taken to improve family engagement. This included the Parent Involvement Plan, the Schoolwide Title I plan, the Parent Handbook, and the school-home compact for the 2015-2016 school year (Appendix A). The documents provided information regarding the expectations of teachers to engage families, the ways that families can support their children's education, as well as various activities and events that would happen throughout the year to engage families with the school.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed through both coding as well as through inductive data analysis. Number coding was used for the closed responses. Coding includes classifying and categorizing data, noticing patterns while doing so (Mackey & Gass, 2005).

Inductive data analysis was used for the open-ended responses. That data was

categorized by themes that emerged without predetermined categories by me. This is sometimes known as open coding. I determined the themes and categories based on phrases and words that emerged and fit together (Mackey & Gass, 2005). I then used those themes to determine frequency of response, which allowed me to create tables and figures showing most frequent responses. I finally used those themes to determine which fit in to the categories of family engagement proposed by Epstein and Dauber (1991), Ho (1995), and Berger and Riojas-Cortez (2012).

After receiving the data from the questionnaires, I first began by analyzing the closed item question, which asked both families and teachers to rate the importance of various family engagement practices already in place. The items in this question were determined based on the family engagement practices that are in place at my school. These practices were taken from the compacts (Appendix A) and the Parent Involvement Plan used in my school for the 2015-2016 school year. Number coding was used for this section. This needed to be done for the two separate questionnaires administered to families and teachers. I could then compare and contrast the effectiveness of each activity from the family perspective and the teacher perspective. This was the quantitative piece of my work.

I printed two blank copies of the closed item question, one to record family responses and one to record teacher responses. I then looked at all of the family questionnaires, both the Survey Monkey questionnaires and the paper-based questionnaires, and tallied the results for each item. I did the same for the teacher

questionnaires on the second blank copy. I then averaged the responses for each item in order to more easily compare the responses of families and teachers.

I then began the work of reading through the open-ended questions on the family surveys and the teacher surveys separately. Inductive data analysis was employed for the open-ended questions in this study. This type of data analysis aims to seek out the frequent and dominant themes within the data and the categories are created based on the data rather than on categories predetermined by the researcher (Mackey & Gass, 2005). For the open-ended questions, the data were also coded. As I noticed similarities, I was able to determine major themes and patterns that could allow inferences and relationships to be noticed (Sarlis & Gallhofer, 2014). This was the more qualitative piece of my work. Qualitative, or open coding allows the data to determine categories and the data to drive the researcher to observe possible relationships between those categories (Mackey & Gass, 2005). I first looked for data that would relate directly to my research questions. Outlier data that didn't seem to match dominant categories was not dismissed, but separated out to determine if it would contribute to the bigger picture after major themes were dissected.

The process I used was to first copy and paste all answers for each question into a word document. I used separate documents for parent responses and teacher responses. I then read over the responses for each question multiple times. I looked for similar words, phrases, or concepts and used color coding to help me see those similarities. For example, for one of the questions I noticed many answers referring to either the child's achievement or improved communication. I highlighted responses related to

achievement in yellow and responses related to communication in orange. As I grouped the information, I was able to create several categories that most data fit into.

For qualitative research, reliability is established through the characteristics of confirmability and dependability. To ensure confirmability in this study, I worked carefully at accurately representing the data from the research and made available the data that confirms the inferences I made regarding perceptions of family engagement from the perspectives of Chinese families and teachers (Mackey & Gass, 2005). In addition, a variety of stakeholders were included in the study, both teachers and families from multiple grade levels (Lyon, 2008). Finally, dependability was achieved in this study through use of Survey Monkey as the data recording technique, which converts all data from the questionnaire into table and figure formats (Lyon, 2008; Mackey & Gass, 2005).

### **Verification of Data**

To establish validity, reduce researcher bias, and strengthen accuracy, investigator triangulation was utilized. Triangulation is the use of multiple techniques or sources of data to ensure that findings are valid and accurate. Investigator triangulation, then, is the use of multiple investigators in examining the data (Mackey & Gass, 2005). I worked with a colleague to analyze data gained from the questionnaires and to be sure that I communicated accurate depictions of the data in my results. This fellow educator examined the data and confirmed categories that had been developed.



## **Ethics**

Due to the nature of this research involving human subjects, some precautions needed to be taken in order to protect the rights of those involved in this study. The following safety measures were taken:

1. Permission to do human research was granted by both Hamline University as well as the school district in which I did the study.
2. Written permission to gather data from each participant was obtained in a signed informed consent document.
3. Objectives of my research (improving family engagement and shared understanding of family engagement for both teachers and Chinese families) were shared with all participants through email and either phone or face-to-face conversations, in addition to being stated again in the informed consent letter.
4. Participation in the survey was voluntary for both teachers and families, and this fact was communicated to them, as well as the ability to discontinue participation anytime.
5. The survey was administered via Survey Monkey, which ensured anonymity.
6. Data was kept confidential through the use of Survey Monkey, which would require access through my personal account, using my password. Paper data was kept in a locked file cabinet until the end of the study.
7. Those involved in the questionnaire were given the ability to view the final report if they wanted.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I gave the rationale for the research paradigm used in this study. The research paradigm used was a Mixed Methods paradigm, including both qualitative and quantitative research. I summarized the setting and participants involved in my research. I outlined the qualitative nature of data collection and specified the data collection technique of questionnaire. I also outlined those questions I asked of Chinese families and classroom teachers in order to develop a description of family engagement from two different perspectives. In Chapter Four, I will discuss the results of data collection using the questionnaires.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

This study took place over the course of two weeks at the beginning of July 2016. Questionnaires were administered to two sets of participants, including families of primary-age Chinese children as well as those children's classroom teachers. Twenty-five families were invited to participate. These families included any Chinese family whose children had attended the school during the 2015-2016 school year. The questionnaire to families was provided in three different formats: an online Survey Monkey questionnaire, a paper-based English questionnaire, and a paper-based Chinese questionnaire. I invited anyone who had a major role in the life of the child to participate, not just a parent. Of those invited, there were 14 total respondents, with an equal number of mothers and fathers responding. Three respondents chose the Chinese format and a translator was utilized to interpret the data.

In addition, 17 teachers were invited to participate, with 10 total respondents. The teacher questionnaire was administered through Survey Monkey. The questionnaires asked similar questions to both sets of participants in order to gain insight into two perspectives on parent and family engagement. The questionnaires can be found in Appendices B and C.

As I share the data collected, it should be noted that all misspellings and errors are those of the participants, and included in order to maintain authenticity of written responses. In addition, participants were able to skip any of the questions; therefore some questions may not include answers from each respondent.

Through the data collected in these two sets of questionnaires, I sought to find the answer to the following questions: How do primary classroom teachers interpret the roles of families in engagement in education? How do the families of primary-aged Chinese children interpret their own roles in engagement in education? How are these interpretations similar and different?

### **Question One: Rating Engagement Practices**

The first question asked of both sets of participants required respondents to rate current family engagement practices on a Likert-type scale according to how important they are to successful family engagement. My reason for including this question was twofold. First, I wanted to build background knowledge for respondents so that they would be aware of the activities that are already in place at the school for families to engage in. Second, I wanted to compare and contrast the perceptions of what is deemed worthwhile and meaningful to this subset of families as well as note what is not considered worthwhile and meaningful to the families. Below are the results of this question for family respondents and teacher respondents. In Table 1, family responses are displayed. The first number in the data reflects how many different respondents indicated that rating for each item, and the second number reflects the percentage of

respondents who indicated that rating. Participants were able to skip any of the items and questions on the survey.

Table 1  
*Families' Responses to Question One: Please rate the following items on how important they are in your opinion to the success of your child.*

	1 Unnecessary	2 Somewhat Unimportant	3 Neutral	4 Somewhat Important	5 Essential	0 I don't know what this is.
Meet Your Teacher	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	4 28.57%	8 57.14%	0 0%
Back-to-School Picnic	0 0%	0 0%	2 14.29%	7 50%	1 7.14%	2 14.29%
PTA Pumpkin Carving	0 0%	1 7.14%	1 7.14%	8 57.14%	1 7.14%	1 7.14%
PTA Bingo Nights	0 0%	0 0%	3 21.43%	6 42.86%	2 14.29%	1 7.14%
Achievement Fair	0 0%	1 7.14%	0 0%	3 21.43%	7 50%	1 7.14%
Read-a-Thon Participation	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	3 21.43%	7 50%	2 14.29%
Attendance at evening music concerts	0 0%	0 0%	1 7.14%	7 50%	4 28.57%	0 0%
International Festival	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	3 21.43%	8 57.14%	0 0%
Volunteering at school	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	4 28.57%	8 57.14%	0 0%
Teacher websites and blogs	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	3 21.43%	9 64.29%	0 0%

	1 Unnecessary	2 Somewhat Unimportant	3 Neutral	4 Somewhat Important	5 Essential	6 I don't know what this is.
Monthly school newsletter	0 0%	0 0%	2 14.29%	4 28.57%	6 42.86%	0 0%
Parent Information Night	0 0%	0 0%	1 7.14%	4 28.57%	6 42.86%	1 7.14%
Parent/Teacher Conferences	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	11 78.57%	1 7.14%
Talking to children about school	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	12 85.71%	0 0%
Assisting children in homework	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	3 21.43%	9 64.29%	0 0%
Encouraging children to read	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	12 85.71%	0 0%
Limiting screen time at home	0 0%	0 0%	1 7.14%	3 21.43%	8 57.14%	0 0%
Making sure children get appropriate sleep	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	12 85.71%	0 0%
Reading/responding to school communication	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	1 7.14%	11 78.57%	0 0%
School decision making (PTA)	0 0%	0 0%	2 14.29%	7 50%	3 21.43%	0 0%

N=14

Note: Some respondents chose not to answer this question.

The items *Talking to children about school*, *Encouraging children to read*, and *Making sure children get appropriate sleep*, received the most Essential responses from families. Twelve respondents, or 85.71% of families, reported this. The items *Parent/Teacher Conferences* and *Reading/responding to school communication* received the second most Essential responses. Eleven respondents, or 78.57% of families, reported this. In addition to these items, the activities of *Meet Your Teacher*, *Read-a-Thon Participation*, *International Festival*, *Volunteering at school*, and *Teacher websites and blogs* were items that also scored highest overall, meaning that these items had only Somewhat Important or Essential ratings. Each of the items mentioned were ones that were scored most similarly by respondents and showed the most agreement among participants.

None of the items were deemed unnecessary by families. However, when examining items in terms of responses of Neutral or lower, *PTA Bingo Nights* received the lowest percentage, 21.43%, making this event the least important in the opinion of families. Rated second least important were the items *Back-to-School Picnic*, *PTA Pumpkin Carving*, *Monthly school newsletter*, and *School decision making (PTA)*, with about 14.29% of respondents indicating Neutral or lower. *PTA Pumpkin Carving* was the item that resulted in the most disagreement among respondents and the widest spread of responses, ranging from Somewhat Unimportant to Essential.

In Table 2, the teacher responses to Question One are displayed. Again, the first number in the data reflects how many different respondents indicated that rating for each item, and the second number reflects the percentage of respondents who indicated that

rating. Participants were able to skip any of the items and questions on the survey;

however, in the case of teachers, none skipped any items.

Table 2

*Teachers' Responses to Question One: Please rate the following on how important they are in your opinion to successful family engagement for our Chinese population.*

	1 Unnecessary	2 Somewhat Unimportant	3 Neutral	4 Somewhat Important	5 Essential
Meet Your Teacher	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	3 30%	7 70%
Back-to-School Picnic	0 0%	0 0%	4 40%	6 60%	0 0%
PTA Pumpkin Carving	1 10%	2 20%	6 60%	1 10%	0 0%
PTA Bingo Nights	0 0%	1 10%	7 70%	2 20%	0 0%
Achievement Fair	0 0%	1 10%	3 30%	4 40%	2 20%
Read-a-Thon Participation	0 0%	0 0%	3 30%	6 60%	1 10%
Attendance at evening music concerts	0 0%	0 0%	3 30%	4 40%	3 30%
International Festival	0 0%	0 0%	1 10%	6 60%	3 30%
Volunteering at school	0 0%	1 10%	1 10%	7 70%	1 10%
Teacher websites and blogs	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	5 50%	5 50%
Monthly school newsletter	0 0%	0 0%	1 10%	4 40%	5 50%



	1 Unnecessary	2 Somewhat Unimportant	3 Neutral	4 Somewhat Important	5 Essential
Parent Information Night	0 0%	1 10%	0 0%	4 40%	5 50%
Parent/Teacher Conferences	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	10 100%
Talking to children about school	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	2 20%	8 80%
Assisting children in homework	0 0%	0 0%	1 10%	2 20%	7 70%
Encouraging children to read	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	1 10%	9 90%
Limiting screen time at home	0 0%	0 0%	2 20%	5 50%	3 30%
Making sure children get appropriate sleep	0 0%	0 0%	2 20%	2 20%	6 60%
Reading/responding to school communication	0 0%	0 0%	1 10%	3 30%	6 60%
School decision making (PTA)	0 0%	1 10%	4 40%	4 40%	1 10%

N=10

Teacher responses indicate that the most important item was *Parent/Teacher Conferences*, with 100% of teachers agreeing that this activity is essential. The second most important item was *Encouraging children to read*, with 90% of respondents indicating that this was essential and 10% indicating that it was somewhat important.

The third most important item was *Talking to children about school*, with 80% of respondents indicating that this was essential and 20% indicating it was somewhat important. In addition to these items, *Meet Your Teacher* and *Teacher websites and blogs* showed the most similar responses, all receiving a rating of either Essential or Somewhat Important.

When examining scores that received scores of Neutral or lower, teachers indicated *PTA Pumpkin Carving* to be least important, with 90% of participants responding in that way. *PTA Bingo Nights* scored Neutral or lower by 80% of respondents and *School decision making (PTA)* was scored in this way by 50% of respondents. However two of those events, *PTA Pumpkin Carving* and *School decision making (PTA)*, also had some of the most variance in answers, with responses crossing four rankings. The items *Achievement Fair* and *Volunteering at school* also showed disagreement among teachers, with responses crossing four rankings on the scale.

In order to determine how important each item was to both sets of respondents, I used the number scale on the questionnaire to determine how many points each item received. Unnecessary rankings received 1 point per respondent who indicated in that manner, Somewhat Unimportant ratings received 2 points per respondent, Neutral ratings, 3 points, Somewhat Important ratings, 4 points, and Essential ratings, 5 points. Those who indicated that they did not know what an item was received 0 points for that indication. I then added the number of points each item received. Those items that received the most points were determined to be most important; those items that received the least points were determined to be least important. I listed the items in order from

most important to least important according to how many points each received. Any items that resulted in a tied score in points received were grouped together and I created three approximate groupings of high scores, mid-range scores, and low scores. Results can be seen in Table 3. Raw data can be found in Appendix E.

Table 3

*Comparison of most important to least important items as determined by total points*

	Families	Teachers
High Scores	Talking to children about school	Parent/Teacher Conferences
	Encouraging children to read	Encouraging children to read
	Making sure children get appropriate sleep	Talking to children about school
	Reading/responding to school communication	Meet Your Teacher
	Teacher websites and blogs	Assisting children in homework
	Assisting children in homework	Teacher websites and blogs Reading/responding to school communication

	Families	Teachers
Mid-range Scores	Meet Your Teacher Volunteering at school  Parent/Teacher Conferences Limiting screen time at home  International Festival Monthly school newsletter  Attendance at evening music concerts	Monthly school newsletter Making sure children get appropriate sleep  Parent Information Night  International Festival  Limiting screen time at home  Attendance at evening music concerts
Low Scores	Achievement Fair Parent Information Night School decision making (PTA)  Read-a-Thon Participation  PTA Bingo Nights PTA Pumpkin Carving  Back-to-School Picnic	Read-a-Thon Participation Volunteering at school  Achievement Fair  Back-to-School Picnic  School decision making (PTA)  PTA Bingo Nights  PTA Pumpkin Carving

In examining this data, we can see areas of agreement between families and teachers. Families rated *Talking to children about school* and *Making sure children get appropriate sleep* as two of the most important items, as did teachers who rated those items as their number three and number two most important items respectively. In addition, *PTA Bingo Nights* and *PTA Pumpkin Carving* were rated in the bottom three

least important items by both families and teachers. These two activities both have a social focus and are both in the same family engagement categories referenced in Chapter Two. According to Epstein & Dauber's (1991) model, these two activities fall into the category of "involvement at school;" according to Ho (1995), they fall into the category of "parents as audiences," which is the most passive of Ho's categories; and according to Berger and Riojas-Cortez (2012), they fall into the category of "parent as an active partner and educational leader at home and at school."

We can also see areas of disagreement between families and teachers. For example, families rated *Making sure children get appropriate sleep* as the most important item, while teachers rated this item in the middle. This activity is more passive, labeled as "parenting" (Epstein & Dauber, 1991) or the "parent, though not active, supporting the educational goals of the school and encouraging the child to study" (Berger & Riojas-Cortez, 2012). Teachers, on the other hand, rated *Parent/Teacher Conferences* as the most important item, while families rated this in the middle. This item is a "basic obligation of schools" (Epstein & Dauber, 1991), where the family is most passive: "parents as audience" (Ho, 1995). Families rated *Reading/responding to school communication* as the second most important item; although teachers' scores put this item in the group with the high scores, the item was close to the cutoff for the middle.

An easier way to compare and contrast the results of Question One is to convert the point values into weighted averages, so as to see the average rating on the scale of 1-5. To calculate this data, I only considered those who answered the question by rating the items from 1-5. This data is displayed in Table 4.

Table 4  
*Question One: Weighted Averages for each item*

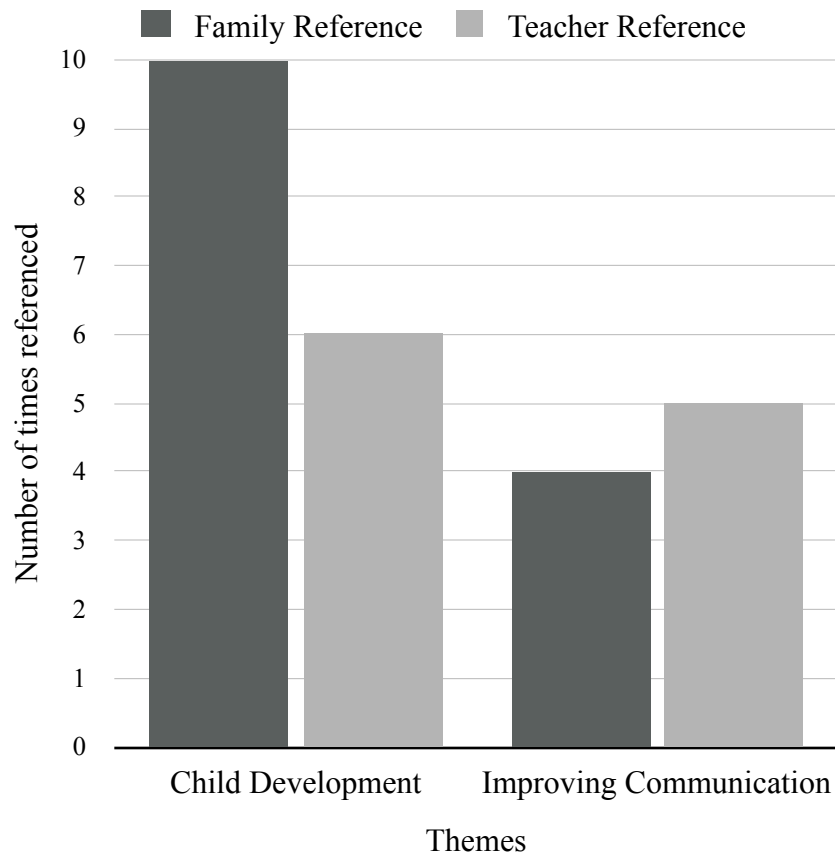
Question One Items	Weighted Average of Family Responses	Weighted Average of Teacher Responses
Meet Your Teacher	4.60	4.7
Back-to-School Picnic	3.90	3.3
PTA Pumpkin Carving	3.82	2.7
PTA Bingo Nights	3.91	3.1
Achievement Fair	4.45	3.7
Read-a-Thon Participation	4.70	3.8
Attendance at evening music concerts	4.25	4.0
International Festival	4.73	4.2
Volunteering at school	4.67	3.8
Teacher websites and blogs	4.75	4.5
Monthly school newsletter	4.33	4.4
Parent Information Night	4.45	4.3
Parent/Teacher Conferences	5.00	5.0
Talking to children about school	5.00	4.8
Assisting children in homework	4.75	4.6
Encouraging children to read	5.00	4.9
Limiting screen time at home	4.58	4.1
Making sure children get appropriate sleep	5.00	4.4
Reading/responding to school communication	4.92	4.5
School decision making (PTA)	4.08	3.5

According to this data, families' averages are higher for every Question One item except for *Meet Your Teacher* and *Monthly school newsletter*. Items that scored the most similar averaged score between the two groups were *Parent/Teacher Conferences* and *Monthly school newsletter*. Items that scored the most different averaged score were *PTA Pumpkin Carving* and *Read-a-Thon Participation*. It is interesting to note that family responses also indicated that *PTA Pumpkin Carving* also had the widest spread of answers, while *Read-a-Thon Participation* and *Parent/Teacher Conferences* had more similar responses of only 4s and 5s. Teacher responses showed *PTA Pumpkin Carving* as having the most spread and *Parent/Teacher Conferences* as being more similar with ratings of only 4s and 5s. Therefore *Parent/Teacher Conferences* had the most similar averaged score, as well as most agreement by both families and teachers with ratings of only 4s and 5s. *PTA Pumpkin Carving* had a wide range of ratings given by both families and teachers and also showed the largest difference in averages.

### **Question Two: Determining Importance of Practices**

The second question I asked of both families and teachers was how they determined which events were important or unimportant. Ten family participants and ten teacher participants responded to this question. Many offered lists or multiple determinants for deciding if events were important or unimportant. Based on common keywords, phrases, and ideas, families' answers revealed two themes: a focus on the child and his or her development, and improving communication between families, teachers, and students, including opportunities for communication between families. Some teacher responses fit into those themes as well. Figure 1 shows the number of times the

connection to child development and improving communication was referenced by both families and teachers. If participants included multiple answers or lists for this question, I counted each item separately when tallying the data. Table 5 records responses by families and teachers which allude to those themes.



*Figure 1.* Comparison of themes found when describing importance of engagement items

N=10



Table 5  
*Parent and Teacher Responses alluding to the Themes*

Theme	Parent Responses	Teacher Responses
Child Development	<p>Which one is good to solve the problem that the children meet.</p> <p>The involvement of children.</p> <p>The children only will be a participants or to be a facilitator.</p> <p>Relevant to social and academic development of children.</p> <p>Activities, which ones have close relationship with forming good habits of study and reading, and practicing social skills.</p> <p>Basing on the importance for children's personal development.</p> <p>All of them are important, but the child do not like some thing, so they need the help from parents or teacher.</p>	<p>Others I said were important because it directly involves their children.</p> <p>Are the students excited, are they talking about the event?</p> <p>Also how much the event directly connects to academic success.</p> <p>Provide parents opportunities to connect with their child either at school or about school.</p> <p>Empowers parents to be partners in their child's education.</p> <p>An event or activity is important if it increases the academic success of the student.</p>

Theme	Parent Responses	Teacher Responses
	<p>Based on my experiences and the children's benefit from these events.</p> <p>Communication with my kid.</p> <p>Whether the activity can foster my child's reading ability, expressive ability, cooperation, and critical thinking skills, etc.</p>	
Improving communication	<p>Which one is good for parents to know the school and children's school life.</p> <p>Which one is good to help the communication among parents, teacher, and children.</p> <p>Communication with teacher/school</p> <p>The events involving interaction between parents and teachers are important.</p>	<p>Some I think are important because it gives them a voice at school (PTA).</p> <p>I make that determination based on how much the event allows families to engage with staff and the community.</p> <p>Also how much the event directly connects to ... the development of positive relationships.</p> <p>Give families opportunities to connect with other families.</p> <p>An event or activity is important if it ... increases the social connections of the student and family to the school, staff, and other ... families.</p>

The data reveal several references to the child, and his or her development in multiple areas. Teacher references to children are usually in reference to academic achievement, while family references to the children may vary more. For example, two families describe helping children solve problems and activities that are for the “children’s benefit,” which are vague statements that could apply to many areas of children’s lives. Others, however, are more specific in describing what they deem to be important to a child’s development, which includes academic achievement, social skills development, communication skills, and critical thinking skills.

In addition to the themes of child development and communication, families revealed a few outlier answers as well. Two families mentioned relying on their experience and judgment regarding the activities and if they were important or not. Another family member made decisions about the items by “reading content related to activity.”

When referencing the items from Question One, all activities are child-focused, as that is the purpose of parent and family engagement. Some of the activities focus on academic achievement, including *Achievement Fair*, *Read-a-Thon Participation*, *Parent Information Night*, *Parent/Teacher Conferences*, *Talking to children about school*, *Assisting children in homework*, and *Encouraging children to read*. Other items focus on social development, such as *Meet Your Teacher*, *Back-to-School Picnic*, *PTA Pumpkin Carving*, *PTA Bingo Nights*, and *International Festival*. Many items focus on providing communication opportunities for families to communicate with teachers, their children, and other families. These can be activities that are social rather than academic in nature,

such as *Back-to-School Picnic*, *PTA Pumpkin Carving*, *PTA Bingo Nights*, and *International Festival*. However, there are also many opportunities for communication regarding a child's academic success, such as *Parent Information Night*, *Parent/Teacher Conferences*, and *Reading/responding to school communication*.

In Question One, family responses support the data gathered that speaks of families calling for activities that develop their children and improve communication in some ways. However, items such as *Parent Information Night*, *PTA Bingo Nights*, *PTA Pumpkin Carving*, and *Back-to-School Picnic*, which satisfy the desire for both child development and improving communication, still score in the category of being less important than the other items. It is interesting to note that three of those items, *PTA Bingo Nights*, *PTA Pumpkin Carving*, and *Back-to-School Picnic*, are all social events rather than academic. Although families do desire the development of their children in both academics and social areas, academics appears to be the greater focus. This data makes sense when referring back to what is known about Chinese culture. Education and academic achievement is highly valued (Cheung & Pomeranz, 2011; Siu, 1996) and engagement activities are viewed through that lens. This means that the more social, nonacademic engagement activities are poorly attended (Ji & Koblinsky, 2009).

When considering the call by families for more opportunities for communication among teachers, families, and children, one must remember how role beliefs influence interpretations of engagement. Roles in engagement are constructed based on what is communicated to families by other families, children, and teachers (Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013) and greater social capital allows parents to have more knowledge and

power in the education system (Diamond, Wang, & Gomez, 2006; Ho, 1995). Therefore, it makes sense that families wish for more communication opportunities in which to build networks and gain more capital to improve their children's educational experience.

Teacher responses also revealed other answers as well. Again, based on common keywords, phrases, and ideas, the ten teachers' answers revealed two other themes: ability for families to access the event (accessibility) and meaningfulness of the item to families. Figure 2 shows the number of references to these two further themes. Table 6 records the teacher responses that alluded to the two themes.

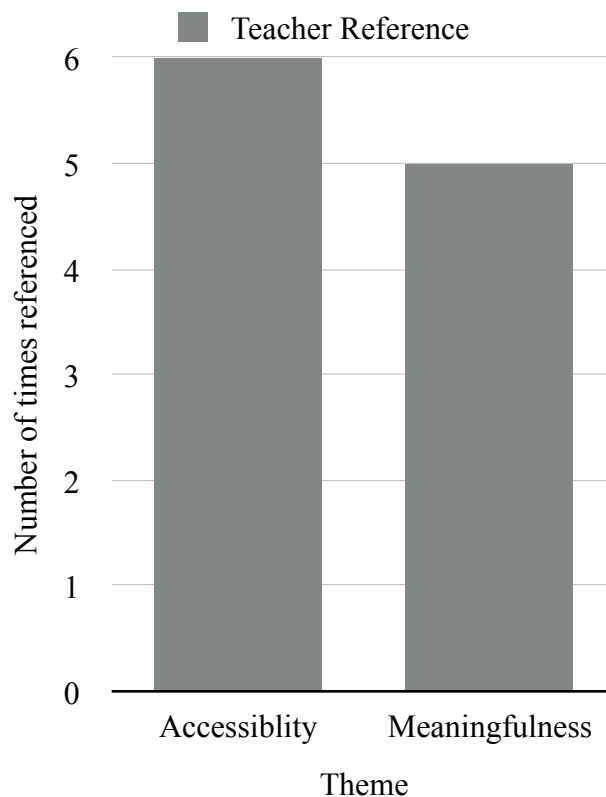


Figure 2. Teacher themes for successful family engagement

Table 6  
*Teacher responses alluding to the themes*

Theme	Teacher Responses
Accessibility	<p>Is it communicated in multiple forms, have they shown up in the past, do they have to ask multiple questions to understand the event?</p> <p>Family knowledge of what is happening at school.</p> <p>Who is likely to be able to attend or engage in the activity</p> <p>If they have the time to participate</p> <p>I think how inclusive and “accessible” the activity to the families is important</p> <p>I also try to understand that families are busy and while some events are fun and would benefit students socially, they are not essential to success in school.</p>
Meaningfulness	<p>Parent feedback and interest</p> <p>Purpose of the event</p> <p>If they find it meaningful</p> <p>Does it draw most or all families in? Is it equitable?</p> <p>I look at what is bare essential for families to know and to participate.</p>

Accessibility, according to teacher responses, refers to families knowing what is happening at the school, understanding the events, and being able to attend despite time demands. One teacher pointed out that the events must be communicated in multiple forms in order for parents to be able to access the knowledge that will allow them to

participate. Accessibility, then, refers to life-context motivators (Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005; Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013) and financial and cultural capital (Ho, 1995).

Meaningfulness, according to teacher responses, refers to things such as understanding the purpose of the activity, being interested and drawn in to an activity, and family interest in the activity. This reflects Bartel's (2010) statement that families sometimes do not understand the purposes of engagement activities.

### **Question Three: Communication of Family Roles**

Following the questions regarding engagement activities already in place, I wanted to determine ways that these events are communicated to families. I wanted to determine the ways that teachers communicate the roles and expectations of involvement in these events to families. Teachers identified 15 different ways in which they communicate with Chinese families, while families identified 6 ways in which teachers communicate with them. Of all the ways that families and teachers identified as means for communication, only 5 methods overlapped: parent/teacher conferences, face-to-face meetings, email, notes home, and class blogs.

Table 7  
*Ways that teachers identified as methods for communicating engagement expectations to Chinese families*

Method of communication	Number of times referenced by teachers	Number of times referenced by families
Volunteer invitations	1	0
Handbook for the classroom	1	0
Class blog	1	1
Communication based on family preference as described by the parents	1	0
Beginning of the year welcome letter	1	0
Meet the Teacher	1	0
Suggesting ways to support children at home	2	0
Notes home	2	3
Curriculum notes	2	0
Parent Information Night/ Kindergarten Orientation	4	0
Phone calls	5	0
Personal contacts (face-to-face or meetings)	5	2
Parent/Teacher Conferences	6	3
Email	8	10
Class newsletters	8	0



Of these multiple ways that teachers have indicated that they communicate engagement expectations with families, families identified far fewer ways that they receive engagement expectation information. The methods that coincide with what teachers indicated included, parent/teacher conferences, referenced by 3 families; face-to-face meetings, referenced by 2 families; email, referenced by 10 families; notes home, referenced by 3 families; and class blogs, referenced by 1 family. One family member indicated receiving information from the school website, and 7 families referenced the weekly Wednesday folder sent home with each child or other forms of teacher/home folders.

Teachers were asked to comment on if and how communication differed for Chinese families in regards to conveying engagement expectations. Eight teachers indicated that they differentiate their communication for Chinese families, while 2 indicated that they do not differentiate communication for Chinese families. Those who differentiate for Chinese families referenced using translations and interpreters, using simplified language, meeting face-to-face, using written language rather than verbal, and more frequent communication.

#### **Question Four: Interpreting Family Roles**

The next question on the survey gave the definition of parent and family engagement as provided by ESSA and asked families and teachers to describe the role of the family in engagement based on the definition. There were 10 family respondents and 10 teacher respondents to this question, but similar to other open-ended questions on this survey, many respondents gave multiple ideas within their answers. Each idea was taken

into consideration when interpreting the data. While reviewing data from this question, the most apparent theme that surfaced was that of active and passive family roles in engagement. Teacher responses pointed to the expectation that families play an active role in engagement, taking initiative to be involved. Family responses, on the other hand, pointed to the understanding that they take a more passive, responsive role in engagement. Table 8 shows responses to this question given by families. Table 9 shows responses to this question given by teachers.

Table 8

*Question Four Family Responses: The definition of parent and family engagement is “the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other activities.” Based on this definition, how would you describe your role in engagement?*

Family Member	Response
Parent 1	I’m the participator, to do the job according to teachers’ advice.
Parent 2	I mainly took part in my kid’s academic learning activities, such as helping him to finish homework, and reading stories. His dad mainly attended his other school activities. Regarding school activities, I have limited time since I have to take care of a younger child. This is something I can improve on.
Parent 3	I strengthened the student academic learning at home and attended several school activities.
Parent 4	help the children follow the teacher’s instruction [instruction]
Parent 5	participation in the school events or communication according to the school notice, but not on my own initiative
Parent 6	Receive messages/communication from school communicating with teachers based on my child’s performance

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Family Member	Response
Parent 7	Because of language barrier, understanding my child's school life is mainly through mail and written info. Communication is passive and not immediate. When a problem occurs with my child it is communicated through mail and parental involvement seems less.
Parent 8	Parent's participation is important to help children to solve the problem they meet and make progress. I need more participation.
Parent 9	I will let the teacher know how my child behaves at home, and what he needs to improve upon at school. I will also listen to the teacher about my child's behaviors at school, and discuss with my child about how to do better.
Parent 10	Parents' participation is very good way to know children's progress and help kid growth.

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Table 9

*Question Four Teacher Responses: The definition of parent and family engagement is “the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other activities.” Based on this definition, how would you describe the role of families in engagement?*

Teacher	Response
Teacher 1	Ask questions when they don’t understand, support the learning/curriculum at home when possible or in their home language
Teacher 2	It seems that most families show up and sometimes volunteer for roles that are prescribed to them. I don’t see a lot of family input besides those that go to PTA meeting
Teacher 3	Families need to make efforts to be knowledgeable about school events regarding their students and be receptive to all our efforts at family communication. Families need to let the teacher and school know if we need to refine or expand our efforts at communication.
Teacher 4	Families stay connected to school by receiving communications and then sending messages of their own as needed. Families display an awareness of school activities and learning which is apparent to their students.
Teacher 5	The role of families in engagement is essential to student success in school. Only when families are communicating with me as the teacher and I am clearly communicating with the families, do the students see the connection between home and school and success follows that connection.
Teacher 6	I see the role of the families as showing interest in how their child is doing academically and socially at school. Families respond to school and teacher communication. Families initiate communication with the school and teacher as necessary. Families support the learning and social activities at the school and in the classroom.

Teacher	Response
Teacher 7	This makes me wonder how to make sure it's two way and meaningful. I feel like it's mostly one way, me giving them information and it's fairly general unless they ask a specific question. I do try to provide positive communication as often as possible about students. I would like to see families more engaged, all families.
Teacher 8	Parent engagement in their child's education is highly important for the success of the child. For some parents this comes easy, some need a little assistance, and for others it is a struggle. We spend a tremendous amount of time working with parents and families to ensure their children have a successful school year.
Teacher 9	Families should have an equal role in engagement with the teacher. With both parties working together a healthy partnership can form.
Teacher 10	It is crucial. If a family is active and involved in a student's learning, it reinforces everything that we do at school. The student understands the value of education because they are hearing the same messages at school and at home.

In order to interpret this data, Ho's (1995) Dimensions of Parent Involvement, referred to in Chapter Two, can again be referenced. Ho describes parent actions along a continuum from passive to active, beginning with "parents as audiences," to "parents as learners," to "parents as teachers" to "parents as volunteers," and ending with the most active, "parents as decision makers" (Ho, 1995). Not each of the descriptions of family roles in engagement can neatly fit into one of these categories, but several can be categorized. For example, the parent responses, "His daddy [daddy] mainly attended his other school activities," "attended several school activities," and "participation in the

school events,” demonstrate the “parents as audiences” category. This category is the most passive; although families are participating in events, it is still considered passive since they are attendees and audiences. Other statements, such as, “I mainly took part in my kid’s academic learning activities, such as helping him to finish homework, and reading stories,” and “I strengthened the student academic learning at home” indicate the “parents as teachers” category, which is the midpoint for passivity and activity.

Teacher responses also demonstrate Ho’s (1995) categories. For example, the statement, “It seems that most families show up,” alludes to the category of “parents as audiences,” the most passive. Several statements also point to the category termed “parents as teachers,” which is the midpoint for passivity and activity, such as, “support the learning/curriculum at home when possible or in their home language,” and “they [the students] are hearing the same messages at school and at home.” One teacher also referenced the second most active category, “parents as volunteers” by stating that families “sometimes volunteer for roles.”

When taking into consideration that Ho (1995) considers attendance at events to be passive, it shifts how one views the data. Even if parents are doing an action, the action could be considered passive if it is responsive. To interpret the results of this question, I looked for keywords and phrases that pointed to a parent taking initiative, and labeled that response as active; I looked for keywords and phrases that pointed to a parent responding to the teacher or school, and labeled that response as passive. See Appendix F for the list of keywords and phrases.

For families, the ratio of active to passive comments is 4:8. Families made comments describing taking an active role in four instances; they made comments describing taking a passive role in eight instances. Comments that describe an active role include statements, such as, “I need more participation,” “This is something I can improve on,” “I will let the teacher know how my child behaves at home, and what he needs to improve upon at school,” and “communicating with teachers based on child’s performance.” The statements that describe more passive roles still require families to be doing something, but rather than taking initiative, they are acting more in an “audience” role and responding to teachers. Three of the eight comments describing a passive role are regarding attendance at events in that audience role. The other comments describe reactive roles: “to do the job according to the teachers’ advice,” “listen to the teacher,” “communication according to the school notice, but not on my own initiative,” “receive messages/communication from the school,” and “Communication is passive and not immediate. When a problem occurs with my child it is communicated through mail and parental involvement seems less.”

For teachers, the ratio of active to passive comments is 8:7. Teachers’ comments describe families taking an active role eight times, and describe families taking a passive role seven times. See Table 10 for teachers’ responses sorted into descriptions of active roles and passive roles.

Table 10

*Question Four: Teachers' Responses by Active and Passive Descriptions*

Statements about Active Roles of Parents	Statements about Passive Roles of Parents
Ask questions when they don't understand	families show up
volunteer for roles.....	...that are prescribed to them
Families need to make efforts to be knowledgeable about school events regarding their students	be receptive to all our efforts at family communication
Families need to let the teacher and school know if we need to refine or expand our efforts at communication.	receiving communications
Families stay connected to school by... sending messages of their own as needed.	I see the role of the families as showing interest in how their child is doing academically and socially at school.
families are communicating with me as the teacher	Families respond to school and teacher communication.
If a family is active and involved in a student's learning, it reinforces everything that we do at school.	Families support the learning and social activities at the school and in the classroom.
Families initiate communication with the school and teacher as necessary.	

N= 10

Teachers show a more equal number of comments describing the two different roles of families in engagement: being active and passive participants.

### **Question Five: Other Comments**

The final section of the questionnaire asked participants to include anything else that they wanted to add regarding family engagement. Five teachers and five parents responded. See Appendix G for family and teacher responses. One teacher touched on being more inclusive of culturally and linguistically diverse families ("It serves mostly



white families who tend to be vocal”), and another suggested better planning to serve those families (“It seems that pre planning and thought needs to happen. As usual, a lot of decisions seemed to be made at the last minute.”). Teachers also shared the following suggestions ideas for improvements that could be made to current engagement practices:

1. “Also, more committees...should look into having more families sit at the planning table.”
2. “This really starts with being a good listener first and not dictating to families.”
3. “I think we need to look for more translating of written materials. We also need to cut back on relying heavily on written communication.”

Two themes emerged in family responses, and were highlighted by one teacher as well based on keywords and phrases. Those themes included more opportunities for families to participate in parent/teacher conferences and more opportunities for families to engage with other families at the school. Two family respondents asked for more conferences:

1. “more teacher conference”
2. “Adding more opportunities to communicate with teachers, like teachers/parents conference.”

Two families also asked for opportunities to meet other families from the school.

1. “Adding more chances to talk with other parents whoes [whose] kids are in the same class.”
2. I hope that parents can tour the school building and meet other parents at school.

One teacher also touched on the theme of creating opportunities for families to meet each other, stating, “Many cultures are much more community oriented and would welcome more informal times to talk with teachers and other families. We need to build community throughout the whole school. Not just using the ‘white culture’ thinking of what engagement looks like.”

Finally, two families had suggestions for how to better engage them in their children’s education. One family participant suggested a daily communication journal between teacher and parents, in order to “improve the interaction between teachers and parents, in terms of frequency.” Another family participant suggested that more information be provided to new-to-the country parents “so we can understand more of school, class, rules, system, etc.”

### **Summary**

The importance of family engagement is agreed upon by both groups of participants as seen in the Likert-type scale used to determine importance of activities already in place. Themes such as focus on a child’s development and communication opportunities emerged from data from both families and teachers regarding how ratings were assigned on the Likert-type scale. Teachers also reported on making the activities meaningful to families and allowing all families to be able to participate by making the events accessible to families. Differences can be noted when it comes to how engagement expectations are communicated. Teachers identify many forms of communication that they use, while families identify far fewer forms of communication that they receive from teachers. There are also differences to note when examining the

data about the roles of families in engagement based on the ESSA definition of parent and family engagement. Families stated that they do not take on an active role unless directed by the teacher while teachers expect parents to be active, responsive, as well as take initiative. The final question revealed suggestions by both sets of participants for how to improve engagement practices. Two families called for more frequent parent/teacher conferences. Two families and one teacher mentioned opportunities for more frequent communication between the teachers and families and among families. Outlier data that did not fit into the categories and themes that emerged will be discussed more in Chapter Five, as they may not have provided evidence to the themes discussed in Chapter Four, but were still helpful suggestions and comments related to family engagement practices at this school.

In this chapter, I presented the results of my data collection. In Chapter Five, I will discuss major findings, implications, the limitations of the study, and suggestions for further research.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

In this study, I sought to answer the questions: How do primary classroom teachers interpret the roles of families in engagement in education? How do the families of primary-aged Chinese children interpret their own roles in engagement in education? How are these interpretations similar and different? In this chapter, I will address major findings in my research study, limitations of my study, implications for teachers, suggestions for further research, and my conclusion.

### Major Findings

This study revealed several findings that are key to answering my research questions as well as to improving family engagement at the elementary setting for Chinese families. In this section, I will describe how the findings of this study answer my research questions.

#### **Research Question One: How do primary classroom teachers interpret the roles of families in engagement in education?**

Classroom teachers showed that they have a good handle on understanding family engagement to be two-way. In question four of the questionnaire, families and teachers were given the ESSA definition of family engagement and asked to discuss what the role of the family was according to that definition. As I looked for themes in the data, I

noticed references by both teachers and families to families either taking initiative or responding to the school, roles that I labeled active or passive according to Ho's (1995) work. Teachers' answers were balanced: 8 responses pointed towards families taking action and being more active; 7 responses pointed towards families responding to the school and being more passive. Teachers indicate a belief that in order to have successful communication, engagement, and partnership, families need to take initiative as well as be receptive to teacher communication.

Teachers at this school also understand that family engagement is important. Two teachers specifically commented about how essential family engagement is, while two others mentioned the need to continue to improve in this area. In addition, the fact that teachers identified 15 ways that they attempt to reach families shows that they want the families to be engaged. One teacher wrote, "We spend a tremendous amount of time working with parents and families to ensure their children have a successful school year" and another wrote, "I believe that we work to make personal connections with all families. Those connections are not all the same as we try to be sensitive to the needs of each family. This really starts with being a good listener first and not dictating to families. I feel like we strive to be as open and available as possible." Teachers at this school know that engaging families is important, work hard at it, desire to improve, and want communication to be two-way. These are all very positive attitudes to have in order to improve engagement practices at the school.

One final note about teacher responses is that they also seek to be culturally responsive in engagement practices. Eight out of ten teachers responded that they try to

differentiate their communication methods regarding engagement with Chinese families. One teacher commented, “Many cultures are much more community oriented and would welcome more informal times to talk with teachers and other families. We need to build community throughout the whole school.” The fact that teachers seek to be culturally responsive to Chinese families attending this school shows that teachers will be open to improving their engagement practices.

**Research Question Two: How do the families of primary-aged Chinese children interpret their own roles in engagement in education?**

Families of primary-aged Chinese children interpret their roles to be more passive and responsive than active. They wait for teacher directions or instructions about what they should or could be doing to support their children. In my experience interacting with this population, families have communicated to me their fear of teaching their children wrong. They don't want anything that they do or say at home to contradict what the teachers are teaching at school. They fear speaking English to their children because they lack confidence in their skills and pronunciation. This may be a reason for the fact that they are more likely to follow the teachers' instructions rather than taking initiative. Another reason that this may be true is due to cultural differences.

Chinese families, as stated in Chapter Two, tend to engage in learning activities at home (Zhong & Zhou, 2011). Multiple family responses mentioned the activities that take place at home. Another cultural difference is the fact that Chinese culture considers the teacher to be the expert and the authority. Because the teacher is the player who holds the authority, the family's role belief is that they are not to intervene in school procedures

and methods (Berger & Riojas-Cortez, 2012; Gu, 2008; Henderson et al., 2007; Huang, 1993) or that they should support only passively (Gu, 2008; Zhong & Zhou, 2011).

These cultural differences are confirmed through comments regarding waiting for instruction from the teachers about what they should do to help children. Statements supporting this belief include, “to do the job according to teachers’ advice,” “communication according to the school notice, but not on my own initiative,” and “help the children follow the teacher’s inducition [instruction].”

**Research Question Three: How are these interpretations similar and different?**

These families’ and teachers’ interpretations of roles show both similarities and differences. This is something for educators to be aware of. Similarities will create a foundation for a true partnership that can be built upon so that the differences do not become barriers. Knowledge of the interpretations will allow teachers to determine ways to engage families and to teach families about the school system and how they can be involved.

Similarities include maintaining a focus on children and their academic achievement, success, and social/emotional growth. That is, after all, the purpose of parent and family engagement. Ten parent and six teacher respondents demonstrated their child-centered beliefs in question two, through statements such as, “Parent’s participation is important to help children to solve the problem they meet and make progress,” and “Parents’ participation is very good way to know children’s progress and help kid growth.”

Another similarity is the importance of communication and community-building in meaningful ways. In question two, three families mentioned opportunities to communicate, be it with teachers, their children, and other families, as ways that they determine the importance of engagement activities. Two families also asked for more frequent parent/teacher conferences and two families asked for more opportunities to interact with other families. Teachers identified 15 different ways in which they try to communicate with families. In addition to those identifications, statements confirm their belief in the importance of communication and community-building:

1. "how much the event allows families to engage with staff and the community"
2. "Important activities: -give families opportunities to connect with other families - provide parents opportunities to connect with their child either at school or about school"
3. "increases the social connections of the student and family to the school, staff, and other...families"
4. "Many cultures are much more community oriented and would welcome more informal times to talk with teachers and other families. We need to build community throughout the whole school. Not just using the 'white culture' thinking of what engagement looks like."

If communication and community-building are priorities among both groups and both groups are committed to improvement in these areas, the outcome will be positive. Many of the activities already in place at this school are geared towards opportunities for communication and community-building; however, these are some of the activities that



are not as important to families, such as *PTA Bingo Nights*, *PTA Pumpkin Carving*, and the *Back-to-School Picnic*. Therefore, the families need to become aware of the purpose of these activities. Teachers need to communicate to families that these activities will benefit their children, that they are networking and community-building activities, as well as find ways to make families more comfortable attending.

The biggest difference that exists is the fact that teachers expect parents to be not only passively engaged (through listening, responding, and being an “audience”), but also to be active in taking initiative in engagement. Teachers made statements supporting families taking a more active role, such as, “ask questions when they don’t understand,” “I don’t see a lot of family input,” “families need to make efforts to be knowledgeable about school events...families need to let the teacher and school know if we need to refine or expand our efforts at communication,” “sending messages of their own as needed,” “families initiate communication with the school and teacher as necessary,” and “only when families are communicating with me as the teacher and I am clearly communicating with the families, do the students see the connection between home and school.” These statements made by teachers are true; it is essential to have two-way communication, for families to communicate questions and concerns with teachers. However, due to cultural differences, this is a very difficult thing for families to do. Chinese families, in their questionnaires, refer to taking a more active role only four times, while describing more passive engagement roles eight times. Chinese families come from a culture where the teacher is the expert and he or she is not to be questioned (Berger & Riojas-Cortez, 2012; Gu, 2008; Henderson et al., 2007; Huang, 1993; Zhong

& Zhou, 2011). It is a huge cultural shift for families to enter a new educational culture, without any instruction regarding the differences, and be expected to take initiative in communicating with a teacher in a second language. Because teachers are part of the dominant culture, we must make every effort to shift to meet the needs of families and ensure the families that their input and communication is welcomed and valued. Families need to be taught this; they cannot be expected to just know their role in the U.S. education system. While assisting families in the questionnaire at their housing unit, one mother spoke to me about this idea. She said that she wanted an opportunity for teachers to teach parents about the school routines and school practices so that she could, in turn, be aware of the culture of the school and help her child to learn the culture of the school. She suggested parent classes in order to convey these things.

### **Conclusions**

While conducting this study, it was apparent to me that both sets of participants were very passionate and intense regarding family engagement. Both groups consider it essential to a successful educational experience for children. This passion and commitment to engaging families in meaningful activities and communication will serve schools well as they make conscious efforts to improve parent and family engagement, thereby improving academic achievement and success. The results of this study will be shared with the Title I coordinator at my school as well as the principal, who has asked me to share the results of the study with her. Both of these people are responsible for writing the Parent Involvement Plan for the school, so results and implications of this study can influence the policy. In addition, the principal has asked me to share results

with the staff of the school as well, as the goals for the upcoming school year include culturally responsive family engagement practices.

### **Limitations**

This study, although overall successful and informational, was subject to certain limitations. One limitation was that my sample size was low. Included in the study were 14 family participants and 10 teacher participants. With lower numbers of participants, it is more difficult to make generalizations when interpreting data and the findings can only be applied to this group. In addition, some of the participants skipped questions, which meant that some of the questions did not result in answers given by every participant.

Another limitation when considering the low sample size was that the study was done during the summer break from school. It was difficult attempting to contact both teachers and families over their summer break. Although I wanted to complete the study after the school year had ended so as to ensure that the participants had had experience with each of the engagement activities offered throughout the school year, it was also difficult to expect teachers and families to be available for the study on their vacations from school. Some were out of town during the survey window, while other families were preparing to move back to China. Although I had a good turnout for the number of participants, the timing of the survey was a concern and I speculate that had the survey been administered at a different time during the year, I would have had more successful participation and a higher number of participants, both families and teachers.

Finally, the data collection tool of questionnaire worked well. Providing the questionnaire in multiple formats allowed more people to participate in the study. If I

were to do this study again, I might also hold focus groups to allow participants to discuss their ideas and answers to the questions in a more conversational format. Focus groups would yield more data.

### **Implications**

This study provided many insights into improving parent and family engagement for Chinese families at my school. From the findings I was able to infer possible barriers to effective family involvement as well as possible common ground on which to begin discussions about culturally relevant family engagement practices. These findings can lead to a discussion with colleagues at my school regarding how to better communicate family engagement expectations to families, especially new-to-the-country families who are living in the U.S. on a short-term basis, in order to maximize their time here. In this section, I will highlight some of those implications.

### **General Recommendations for Engagement**

One of the first steps that needs to be taken is to better prepare teachers for their responsibility to communicate and effectively engage families, especially EL families, in their children's education. This is not something that often comes naturally for educators. There is a lack of training for new teachers. Teacher education programs struggle to incorporate enough family engagement curriculum, especially in an authentic way. The effect is that new teachers report feeling unprepared to engage families in their children's education, even if those teachers acknowledge the importance of doing so (Casper et al., 2011). Additionally, continuing education and professional development is needed for more seasoned teachers. Teachers report that a major barrier for their successful

involvement of families is a lack of training (Weiss et al., 2009). Teachers at this school are working hard at communicating with Chinese families and being culturally responsive, but differences noted in the findings indicate that there still could be barriers to engaging this population and teachers must be better prepared to engage with Chinese families.

Due to legislation and research that continues to support the role of families and schools as partners in education, schools are beginning to adopt more inclusive family engagement plans. Schools are learning that parents and families who feel respected, welcomed, and validated by the school, and who view themselves as capable participants and “teachers” are more likely to participate (Berger & Riojas-Cortez, 2012). Schools can communicate that they not only recognize, but honor other forms of capital, cultural differences, families’ knowledge and skills, as well as varying forms of engagement (“Dual capacity,” 2013).

This can be accomplished in many ways. Language used should be clear and easy to understand. One teacher mentioned using translations and cutting down on written communication. Parents and families need to become familiarized with the functions of schools. Families can begin to feel more comfortable when schools also recognize the value of diversity by including all families in curriculum, planning, and celebrations that reflect their cultures. Schools can offer meals, childcare, and translation and interpretation to include more families. Mentor families can also be used to acclimate new families into the school culture (Ji & Koblinsky, 2009). These recommendations are confirmed through the findings of the survey. For example, besides the mother who

spoke to me about providing classes for parents to learn about school culture, a questionnaire response noted, “When my child first started school, because of the language barrier, he didn’t understand much of school. I hope there could be more provided to parents and students so we can understand more of school, class, rules, system, etc. so my child can overcome his fears and adjust to new environment.”

Because there are some differences between interpreted roles of families in engagement, it is important to remember that the teacher, being the one in power, will have to shift in order to meet the needs of families. Teachers must initiate family engagement and determine how to best engage families so all are welcomed (Berger & Riojas-Cortez, 2012; King & Goodwin, 2002) and need to communicate their expectations for family engagement to families who may be unaware of their expected roles. “Reaching out to parents is easier for educators than ‘reaching in’ to teachers and other staff is for parents. The principal and teachers must take the first step, especially when parents already feel intimidated by school staff” (Henderson et al., 2007, p. 40). One teacher mentioned the need for better planning ahead of time. Purposeful planning is needed in order to have meaningful engagement for all families.

### **Utilizing Family Engagement Categories**

In Chapter Two, many family engagement categories were discussed. It is important to keep these different categories in mind as an educator. It is easy to value certain types of involvement over others, but to work toward culturally responsive family engagement means providing ways for families to be involved from multiple categories

and finding value in each category. If family engagement is planned from each category, more families will have the opportunity to be involved.

Not all families will respond to the same strategies for engagement; schools must offer a range (King & Goodwin, 2002). While conducting this research and study, I found that many of the activities and events that we have in place at my school fit into the different categories discussed above. In addition, both families and teachers agree that each is important. However, that doesn't mean that every single family participated actively in every single event. I don't believe that teacher can expect families to do so. It is important to include many different forms of engagement from many different family engagement categories so different families can engage in the activities that they find meaningful. I believe that we need to continue to include many events and activities and continue to add more meaningful events and actives as well.

There are certain activities that are essential for families to attend. As part of a possible instructing of parents about the culture of the school, perhaps the events could be described to families as well. In that way, they will know which actives are most essential that they participate in. In addition, perhaps some of those essential events, like *Parent Information Night*, need to be restructured in order to better meet the needs of families.

The results of this study, as well as the implications will be shared with the Title I coordinator and principal at my school. These two people are responsible for writing Parent Involvement Plan at the school and the research may aid them in decision making regarding activities and policies to include.

### Further Research

As I reviewed this data, I became interested in how the results of the survey transferred into actual attendance at the events. Therefore, I reviewed sign-in sheets for several events that occurred during the 2015-2016 school year, although this was not part of my study. These sign-in sheets do not cover every event, and it must be taken into account that families may not have signed in. I found that 52% of Chinese families attended *Meet Your Teacher*, 25% attended *Parent Information Night*, 93% attended *Fall Parent/Teacher Conferences*, and 100% attended *Spring Parent/Teacher Conferences*. This information leads me to wonder how role beliefs in engagement transfer to actual attendance and participation in events. This is an area for further research.

After completing this study regarding the roles of parents and families in engagement, several other questions arose that indicate a need for further research as well. One of those questions that was generated was what do families mean when they refer to achievement and success versus what do teachers mean by achievement and success? These terms can refer to academic, social, and emotional factors. Therefore, a further area of study would be to discover the differences between families and teachers in goals for children in education.

Another question that arose was how this information regarding a specific population of EL families could be generalized to other populations as well. Which cultures have similar beliefs regarding parent and family engagement? How can we use the data from this study to reach other cultures? This is an area for further research.



Another question that arose was the “how” of improving parent and family engagement. This study highlighted similarities and differences in perceived roles, but aside from a few suggestions given by participants, did not address how to go about making the necessary shifts and changes in the school culture to apply the knowledge. Are there programs that have more culturally sensitive family engagement practices in place? How do we take the data and make improvements in the Parent Involvement Plan?

A final question that needs to be addressed is similar. Practically, how does a school reach each population of families and children that it serves to effectively engage every family? For example, the school in which this survey was conducted serves a population speaking at least 30 different home languages. How does a school staff learn about each of those culture’s preferences and beliefs regarding engagement and then put it into practice? Although highly important, it seems like an overwhelming task. These questions refer to the concept of transferability. Transferability is the ability to extend findings to similar contexts. Can this research be transferred to other populations at my school who may be in similar situations as the Chinese population? Can it also be transferred to other schools who have new-to-the-country Chinese families? The description of the context and results of this study will allow other educators to compare the information with their own settings. Although this particular situation may not parallel other settings, the need to involve and engage more families in education is a need that others have (Mackey & Gass, 2005).

## **Conclusion**

As I began my research, my goal was to improve parent and family engagement practices at my school. More specifically, I wanted to improve in an area where I had always felt ill-prepared to act on: partnering with families. Therefore, I made it my own personal goal to stretch myself by working with a specific cultural group that I interact with often, the Chinese population. I wanted to determine similarities and differences between families and teachers in the perceived roles of these families in engagement in hopes of making the Chinese population at my school feel more welcomed and supported. As I go forward in the coming years with the knowledge gleaned from my research and this study, I feel hopeful that improvements will be made and partnerships will be strengthened. I am eager to begin the practical work of creating change at my school.

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## Appendix A - Compact

### Student-Family-Teacher Agreement

This school community will value, affirm and nurture families, students and staff. To promote student achievement, we will accommodate individual learning and have high expectations for all students. High achievement results in feelings of success, improved performance, responsible citizenship, respect for self and others, and a desire to learn.

#### **As a student, I will strive to:**

- Attend school regularly.
- Share what I am learning at school with my family at home.
- Ask questions when I do not understand something.
- Read at home every day.
- Be responsible for completing homework and assignments.
- Give my best effort.

#### **As a family, we will strive to:**

- Talk with our children about school activities.
- Find time in our household schedule for assigned homework completion.
- Encourage our child to read by reading to him/her and by reading myself.
- Limit our child's screen time.
- Ensure our child gets enough sleep every night.
- Involve ourselves in our child's school by attending conferences, school events and meetings, and participating in classroom and volunteer activities.
- Read and respond to school communications.
- Communicate with our child's teacher when we have concerns or questions.

**As a teacher, I will:**

- Provide a variety of high quality learning experiences in my classroom.
- Communicate regularly with families and students regarding progress, including at least two family-teacher conferences, report cards, and other progress reports.
- Provide necessary assistance to families so you can work with your child at home.
- Provide ways to participate in decisions about your child's education through communication and sharing information.
- Provide opportunities for families to volunteer and participate in classroom activities.
- Maintain a positive and supportive learning environment.
- Have high expectations for student achievement.
- Value, affirm, and nurture all children.

This agreement is a promise to work together. We believe this agreement can be fulfilled by our team effort and that by working together we can improve teaching and learning.

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Student

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Family

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Teacher

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Date

## Appendix B - Teacher Survey

1. Please rate the following items on how important they are in your opinion to successful family engagement for our **Chinese population**:

	1 unnecessary	2 somewhat unimportant	3 neutral	4 somewhat important	5 essential
Meet Your Teacher					
Back-to-School Picnic					
Pumpkin Carving					
Bingo Nights					
Achievement Fair					
Read-a-Thon Participation					
Attendance at evening music concerts					
Community Fair					
Volunteering at school					
Checking teacher websites and blogs					

Reading monthly school newsletter (Barometer)					
Parent Information Night					
Parent/Teacher Conferences					
Talking to children about school					
Assisting children in completing homework					
Encouraging children to read					
Limiting screen time at home					
Making sure children get appropriate sleep					
Reading and responding to school written communication					
Participating in school decision making (PTA participation)					

2. How do you determine what makes the family engagement events at our school important or unimportant?

3. What are some ways that you communicate with parents regarding how you expect them to be involved in their children's education?
4. Does your communication differ for Chinese parents? If so, how? If not, what are some ways you communicate with parents?
5. The definition of parent and family engagement is "the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities." Based on this definition, how would you describe the role of families in engagement?
6. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding family engagement practices at your school?

## Appendix C - Family Survey

1. How many years have you resided in the United States?

0-1 years

1-3 years

more than 3 years

2. What is your relationship to the child?

mother

father

other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

3. Please rate the following items on how important they are in your opinion to the success of your child:

	1 unnecessary	2 somewhat unimportant	3 neutral	4 somewhat important	5 essential	0 I don't know what this is
Meet Your Teacher						
Back-to-School Picnic						
Pumpkin Carving						
Bingo Nights						

Achievement Fair						
Read-a-Thon Participation						
Attendance at evening music concerts						
Community Fair						
Volunteering at school						
Teacher websites and blogs						
Monthly school newsletter-Barometer						
Parent Information Night						
Parent/Teacher Conference						
Talking to children about school						
Assisting children in completing homework						
Encouraging children to read						
Limiting screen time at home						



Making sure children get appropriate sleep						
Reading and responding to school written communication						
Participating in school decision making (PTA participation)						

4. How do you determine which events are important and which are unimportant?
5. What are some ways that your child's teacher has communicated with you about events and ways to be involved and engaged at school.
6. The definition of parent and family engagement is "the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities." Based on this definition, how would you describe your role in engagement?.
7. Is there anything else you would like to add about family engagement practices at school?

#### Appendix D - Lyon's Interview Questions

Question 1: What types of parent involvement occur in schools?

Question 2: What are specific types of parent involvement teachers prefer?

Question 3: Are there specific types of parent involvement that teachers deem intrusive or inappropriate?

Question 4: What types of involvement do parents prefer?

Question 5: What types of involvement in schools do parents find distasteful?

Question 6: How do teachers communicate parent involvement needs?

Question 7: How aware are parents of opportunities for involvement?

## Appendix E - Raw Data: Points received for Family and Teacher ratings of Question One

## Family Ratings

Points Received	Items
60	Talking to children about school Encouraging children to read Making sure children get appropriate sleep
59	Reading and responding to school written communication
57	Teacher websites and blogs Assisting children in completing homework
56	Meet Your Teacher Volunteering at school
55	Parent/Teacher Conferences Limiting screen time at home
52	International Festival Monthly school newsletter
51	Attendance at evening music concerts
49	Achievement Fair Parent Information Night Participating in school decision making (PTA participation)
47	Read-a-Thon Participation
43	PTA Bingo Nights
42	PTA Pumpkin Carving
39	Back-to-School Picnic

## Teacher Ratings

Points Received	Items
50	Parent/Teacher Conferences
49	Encouraging children to read
48	Talking to children about school
47	Meet Your Teacher
46	Assisting children in completing homework
45	Teacher websites and blogs Reading and responding to school written communication
44	Monthly school newsletter Making sure children get appropriate sleep
43	Parent Information Night
42	International Festival
41	Limiting screen time at home
40	Attendance at evening music concerts
38	Read-a-Thon Participation Volunteering at school
37	Achievement Fair
36	Back-to-School Picnic
35	Participating in school decision making (PTA participation)
31	PTA Bingo Nights
27	PTA Pumpkin Carving

## Appendix F - Keywords and Phrases Found in Question Four Responses

	Families' Responses	Teachers' Responses
Keywords and Phrases Indicating Active Role	I need more participation	ask questions
	This is something I can improve on	volunteer make efforts
	let the teacher know	let the teacher and school know
	communicating with teachers	stay connected...sending messages families are communicating
		active...involved
		initiate

	Families' Responses	Teachers' Responses
Keywords and Phrases Indicating Passive Role	<p>to do the job according to the teachers' advice</p> <p>attended his other school activities</p> <p>attended several school activities</p> <p>listen to the teacher</p> <p>but not on my own initiative</p> <p>receive messages</p> <p>Communication is passive...it is communicated through mail and parental involvement seems less</p>	<p>show up</p> <p>prescribed to them</p> <p>receptive</p> <p>receiving communication</p> <p>showing interest</p> <p>respond</p> <p>support</p>

## Appendix G - Question Five Responses

Families' Responses	Teachers' Responses
<p>more teacher confereces</p>	<p>It seems that pre planning and thought needs to happen. As usual, a lot of decisions seemed to be made at the last minute. Also, more committees (celebration, family night) should look into having more families sit at the planning table.</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Adding more opportunities to communicate with teachers, like teachers/parents conference.</li> <li>2. Adding more chances to talk with other parents whoes kids are in the same class.</li> </ol>	<p>It serves mostly white families who tend to be vocal.</p>
<p>I hope that parents can tour the school building and meet other parents at school.</p>	<p>I believe that we work to make personal connections with all families. Those connections are not all the same as we try to be sensitive to the needs of each family. This really starts with being a good listener first and not dictating to families. I feel like we strive to be as open and available as possible. There can be more work done to provide even more opportunities for families to be part of our school community though.</p>

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Families' Responses	Teachers' Responses
<p>In Taiwan, there is a kind of “teacher-parent communicator” (like a journal) for daily communication between teachers and parents. It really helps improve the interaction between teachers and parents, in terms of frequency and quality.</p>	<p>I think we need to look for more translating of written materials. We also need to cut back on relying heavily on written communication. Many cultures are much more community oriented and would welcome more informal times to talk with teachers and other families. We need to build community throughout the whole school. Not just using the ‘white culture’ thinking of what engagement looks like.</p>
<p>When my child first started school, because of the language barrier, he didn’t understand much of school. I hope there could be more provided to parents and students so we can understand more of school, class, rules, system, etc. so my child can overcome his fears and adjust to new environment.</p>	<p>I feel like this is an area where our school can continue to grow — right now we do a good job of engaging certain groups of families but need to improve our ability to engage with all.</p>

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