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# Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences of Family Engagement: A Phenomenological Investigation

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Tiffany JaNise Dellard entitled "Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences of Family Engagement: A Phenomenological Investigation." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Educational Psychology and Research.

Katherine H. Greenberg, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Elizabeth I. Johnson, Ralph Brockett, Gary Skolits

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences of Family Engagement:  
A Phenomenological Investigation

A Dissertation  
Presented for the  
Doctor of Philosophy Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Tiffany JaNise Dellard  
August 2013

## **Dedication**

To the numerous educators, parents, pre-service educators, and community members that have taken the time in recent years to share with me your story and perspective. You have taught me the importance of listening to understand others and speaking to help others understand.

## Acknowledgements

There are not words to express how blessed I am that so many wonderful people have walked with me along my way. I began with my advisor, mentor and committee chair, Dr. Katherine Greenberg. Thank you for helping me to grow as a scholar, and for always sharing the hidden rules. I would not have seen a Ph.D. as an option if you had not shown it to me. To the rest of my committee Dr. Elizabeth Johnson, Dr. Ralph Brockett, and Dr. Gary Skolits, I appreciate your patience, guidance and encouragement along the way. My only regret is that I didn't utilize each of you more as great resources. Dr. Ronald McFadden, I am truly grateful for your support as a supervisor and mentor. Thank you for sharing your knowledge and life experiences. You have truly been a blessing to me. Dr. Karen Franklin, I am thankful to call you friend and I look forward to more discussions, collaborations and trips. Thank you to all of the other AEP and LEEDS students, as well as the members of the Phenomenology Interpretive Group members that I have had the privilege of meeting over the years. I have enjoyed learning from and with you.

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore pre-service teacher's perceptions and experiences with family engagement in the education of students. A phenomenological method developed at the University of Tennessee was utilized to explore the following research questions: (1) How do pre-service teachers view the roles of parents in their interactions with teachers, administrators and other school staff to facilitate the education of students?; and (2) What influences do pre-service teachers cite as helping to form their views of the role of families in the education of students?

Ten participants from an Educational Psychology course required for teacher licensure were interviewed about their perceptions and experiences of family engagement. Thematic analysis of the 10 interviews was conducted, developing themes that illustrated how the pre-service teachers perceived family engagement. Based on the participants' own words, a ground theme and three figural themes were identified: *Ground- You've got to get parents on your side...you can't be on their bad side; Theme I- You have to keep them involved...make them comfortable (roles); Theme II- We are restrained by various bounds (barriers); Theme III- They don't see the big picture...(assumptions).*

Based on these findings, implications are presented for both teacher educators and researchers. Implications include: (1) the need to expose pre-service teachers to the many benefits of family engagement; (2) the need to encourage pre-service teachers to recognize and acknowledge multiple types of involvement and engagement; (3) the need for pre-service teachers to develop strategies for family engagement; (4) the need for teacher education

programs to provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to acknowledge and challenge their own assumptions.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

The 1980's and 1990's saw a shift in views of parent involvement in our education system (J.L. Epstein, 2005). As our emphasis on parent involvement became more pronounced in K-12 education, our definition of parent involvement became more narrowed. Instead of recognizing the things that parents do daily to aid in their children's education as in early childhood education, we began to focus on school-based actions as the standard for parent involvement. This led to separation and isolation of parent involvement efforts from efforts to connect schools to the communities they served (Auerbach, 2007a). For the past decade, many researchers and educators have worked to develop and implement programs that recognize the importance of input from families and the community, and put forth effort to ensure their interaction and collaboration with school staff.

In February of 2005, as a new college graduate I hesitantly accepted a position at a neighborhood elementary school to "hold me over" until I was able to find more permanent employment. At the time, I had no idea that the part-time position would become the foundation for my graduate studies, research and future employment aspirations. The job of parent liaison was a direct product of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. Though educators from elementary through higher education have criticized many aspects of NCLB, there is one aspect that has been mostly embraced and used to bring about a positive change of focus in K-12 education. Title I, Section 1118 of NCLB, speaks directly to the importance of schools working to involve families and communities of the children they serve in the education process. Educators and researchers had long been aware of the importance of families and communities in education, however, the new emphasis on family engagement brought a renewed sense of focus

and accountability to their efforts. In order to receive Title I funding, schools have to demonstrate greater attempts to interact, communicate, and engage with families and communities of their students (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2003).

Schools and districts that qualify for the funding have chosen to act on these edicts in different ways. The district that hired me chose to create a staff position in five of their elementary schools, with the primary responsibility of helping to bridge the gap between home and school. Originally the positions were intended for a parent of an elementary-aged student at each school. There was a desire to fill the positions with individuals who had good rapport with the school staff as well as other families in the school community. When the original parent volunteer for my school found full-time employment, a decision was made to hire someone part-time to fill the position and begin the work. After a recommendation was made for me, I received a call to meet with the principal. I admit that while I found the job description interesting, I did not believe that it would lead to any long-term career options for me. I merely hoped to help out the school, while filling a potential employment gap on my resume.

The entire experience was very fulfilling and exciting to me, but what I valued most were the positive responses I received regularly from the staff and parents that I was privileged to interact with. There was a comment from a reading resource teacher that foreshadowed the work I would focus on for this dissertation. One of our initiatives was a reading backpack program that would take parents through a training session with the materials the teachers used to teach reading, so that they could work with their students on the same materials at home. As a pilot, the program would start with 1<sup>st</sup> graders that had been identified by their classroom teachers and the reading resource teachers as needing a little more help with their reading skills. In order to help facilitate the parent-training workshop with the reading resource teachers and offer follow-

up assistance to parents, I was trained by a resource teacher on how to use all of the material. For two weeks prior to the parent workshop, I sat with a resource teacher for 1-2 hours a day working with students. One day, after the materials had been put away and the 1<sup>st</sup> grade student had been escorted to his class, the teacher gave me a hug and thanked me for the work I was doing. She then went on to share how important she felt my position of parent liaison was because it would hopefully get teachers the opportunity to work with parents that they just “don’t know how to reach.” At the time, her comment was a nice sentiment that warmed my heart. It felt good to know that even in my part-time work, I was providing a service that the teachers found helpful. The comment took on much more significance as I decided the focus of my dissertation and the basis of the work that I hope to do as a professional. I began to see that other educators shared her concerns, and that it was a subject of interest for many researchers and educators in the field of education.

During my time as a graduate student, I have been able to speak with many pre-service teachers who have shared with me their personal thoughts and concerns about family engagement as well. My personal experiences as a guest speaker in a course for pre-service teachers led me to believe that students prior to their internship experience have many perceptions and beliefs about family engagement. Though the format of the presentation is a discussion format, students often expressed in their written reflections that they would have been interested in less group discussion, and more of a “lecture” on strategies for how to engage and work with families. Through the course of these many discussions, I began to gain more interest in what information students were getting about family engagement, and how they saw their role in family engagement.

## **Statement of the Problem**

How teachers view family engagement and the role of parents in their classroom and in their work with students goes a long way to determine how actively the teachers will work to build home-school partnerships (Amatea, Smith-Adcock, & Villares, 2006). A teacher's self-efficacy in their ability to build those relationships may be equally important. A teacher, who feels as though she doesn't know how to reach a parent, is likely not to make many efforts to reach out to those parents without support or encouragement (Amatea, Cholewa, & Mixon, 2012). Part of this barrier may be a fear or concern that the efforts will not be received well by the parent. Previous experiences or misconceptions about parents may lead to a belief that their efforts would be in vain or a waste of time (Chavkin & Williams, 1988). One way to build this efficacy and positive view of families is through preparation and training. In a 1999 evaluation of teacher education training programs, Epstein and colleagues found that while a majority of the 161 teacher preparation educators and administrators surveyed agreed that it was important for all educators to engage families and communities, very few of them believed that their program fully prepared teachers to do so (J.L. Epstein, Sanders, Clark, & Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk, 1999).

Of those who felt that the programs insufficiently prepared teachers there was a belief that many topics important to understanding family and community engagement such as diversity and communicating with families were minimally covered, or not covered at all by the programs (J.L. Epstein et al., 1999). Along with assessing their programs' effectiveness for preparing pre-service teachers for family engagement, the participants were also asked in open-ended questions to share what they believed should be included in the curricula along with some of the factors and challenges influencing the likelihood of those changes occurring. This study

helped to shed some light on the topic of pre-service teachers and family engagement from the perspective of teacher education programs. The authors go on to draw some conclusions as to the future preparation of teachers and administrators to develop and nurture school, family and community partnerships. My review of literature for this study did not produce any follow-ups to this report or any other studies of this magnitude that included the student perspective.

Through the regulations of NCLB, various state requirements for family engagement, and organizations like the National Parent Teacher Association (NPTA), there are many ideas about the standards of family engagement and the roles teachers have in upholding those standards. One example is the National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs (2004), created by the NPTA to guide schools through implementing successful parent/family involvement programs. Through a number of standards, the book outlines what teachers and administrators should do to strengthen the school's relationship with families and communities. What the guide fails to do is address the barriers that the educators may face when attempting to carry out the suggested actions. Often, teachers are expected to find ways to engage and involve parents whether they believe they can or not. Some research suggests that in order for family engagement programs to be successful, teachers must be given the knowledge and resources to do so, but they must also have a positive self-efficacy with regard to their ability to facilitate relationships in the face of challenges and barriers (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002). Teachers may avoid interacting with parents because of a belief that they lack the experience and/or skill to do so in a positive manner. With the multitude of other regulations and standards teachers have to meet, there is often little professional development devoted to preparation and strategies for family engagement, especially the psychological, pragmatic and cultural barriers (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002; Warren, Nofle, Ganley, & Quintanar, 2011).

## **Purpose of the Present Study**

There are many aspects of teacher education that have been explored through research. The role of teacher education in preparing novice pre-service teachers to facilitate and build positive home-school partnerships through family engagement has not been a major focus in that research. The few studies that have explored pre-service teachers' beliefs about family engagement have usually done so in survey format, in conjunction with research on current teacher beliefs (Ferrara, 2009). What appears to be missing from this discussion is research that looks specifically at the perceptions, beliefs and experiences that pre-service teachers have around families and family engagement. The purpose of this study is to explore pre-service teacher's perceptions and experiences with family engagement in the education of students.

Some researchers believe the issue of teacher preparation for family engagement can be addressed with pre-service teachers in their teacher-education programs (Ferrara, 2009; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Though the value of courses devoted to family engagement for pre-service teachers has been recognized, there is limited information on the views and ideas about family engagement from the perspective of pre-service teachers (Ferrara, 2009). If there is to be a strong push for more teacher education programs to be inclusive of courses specifically on family engagement, then it is critical to explore the views and strategies that pre-service teachers hold with and without this information. Insight into the perspectives, views and experiences that pre-service teachers bring with them into their teacher education programs and eventually their practice may give great insight into the information needed to prepare them for building positive relationships with the students in their classrooms.

In 1997 only 22 states included parent/community engagement requirements in their credentialing standards (J.L. Epstein et al., 1999). As a result of changes in the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) standard one on candidate knowledge, many more states saw a need to add course content or objectives in existing courses that address the topic by the early 2000's (J.L. Epstein & Sanders, 2006). Standard one emphasized that teacher candidates should understand principles and strategies for school, family, and community partnerships to support student's learning (J.L. Epstein & Sanders, 2006). Even with the addition of these standards many students receive minimal education on the subject, with most classes being required for students in Early Education and Special Education programs (Katz & Bauch, 1999; Kohl, Lengua, & McMahon, 2000). Still, many of these courses focus on understanding family units but not necessarily family engagement or the connections between families and schools (Kohl et al., 2000).

Since there is limited research focusing specifically on pre-service teachers' perceptions and experiences with family engagement, the purpose of this study is to provide some insight into the experiences and perceptions pre-service teachers have about the role of families in the education of K-12 students. Studies using survey methodology to explore pre-service and in-service teachers' thoughts and ideas about family engagement have provided helpful information regarding some of the barriers teachers face when initiating family-school partnerships, however, little has been done to understand the basis for those barriers. Exploring the pre-service teachers' perceptions about the role of families in education may help identify key areas of family engagement that teacher education programs should focus on when preparing their students to become teachers. Using my research question as a guide I decided that a phenomenological investigation would aid me in my attempt to fully understand the experiences of pre-service



teachers both in their teacher education programs and personal lives that influence their current perspectives, with regard to the relationship between home and school. Phenomenology is an ideal method for this study because it allows me to gain a deeper understanding of the pre-service teachers' beliefs and perceptions about family engagement through their own experiences. Interviews will include students from various programs in teacher education to gain insight into how different courses and experiences have influenced their views on the role families will play in their future classrooms and schools.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do pre-service teachers view the roles of parents in their interactions with teachers, administrators and other school staff to facilitate the education of students?
2. What influences do pre-service teachers cite as helping to form their views of the role of families in the education of students?

### **Terms and Definitions**

In the current literature there are numerous terms used to discuss the relationship, roles, and efforts for families, communities and schools to come together and work towards improving the educational experiences of students. Chapter 2 will include a more detailed discussion of the evolution of the terminology of the field, but throughout this study, the following terms and definitions will be utilized.

1. Parent and Family – inclusive of all mothers, fathers or legal guardians caregivers, siblings, and others that influence or impact a student's education

2. Family Engagement – encompasses all types of parenting structures. Refers to a joint relationship among family and school staff that focus on the child’s education (Katz & Bauch, 1999)
3. Parent Involvement – an idea of interaction between home and school that usually has a one way flow of information from the schools to the parents (Christenson, 2005).
4. Perceptions – direct experience of events, objects and phenomena (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). An experience as experienced by the individual (Idhe, 1986)
5. Beliefs – Personal and evaluative convictions that influence the way we judge and act in our lives. (Pajares, 1992).

### **Significance of Study**

There are many aspects of teacher education that have been explored through research, however, the role of teacher education in preparing pre-service teachers to facilitate and build positive home-school partnerships through family engagement has not been a major focus. That research is also largely focused on the early childhood and elementary education groups. Researchers often support the notion that proper preparation during teacher education will help novice teachers for all grade levels build better relationships with parents by giving them the resources needed to develop strategies and positive assumptions around the idea that partnerships between home and school are beneficial for students academically and socially (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Warren, Nofle, Ganley, & Quintanar, 2011). What appears to be missing from this discussion is research that looks specifically at the perceptions and beliefs that pre-service teachers have around families and family engagement, and the influence their experiences in teacher education programs has on those perceptions and ideas.

This study may shed light on this gap in the research and help teacher education programs consider the types of information and experiences students need to feel competent in their ability to engage families in their future classrooms. Although this study will only gather information from one university teacher education program and one group of pre-service teachers, the information gathered may be useful to other university programs if they seek to expand or refine their current practices of teaching teachers how to build positive relationships with families in their future practice. This study may also be useful to current school administrators and personnel when planning professional development or setting mentor relationships for novice teachers. By speaking specifically with pre-service teachers prior to their full-term internships, I hope to gain some insight into the disconnect between what teachers of all levels of experience say about the importance of family engagement (Auerbach, 2009; Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006; El Nokali, Bachman, & Votruba-Drzal, 2010) and the practices and efforts used to cultivate those relationships in schools (Agronick, Clark, O'Donnell, Stueve, & Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast & Islands (ED), 2009; J.L. Epstein, 1990; A. Harris & Goodall, 2008).

### **Limitations**

This study will focus on teacher education and pre-service teachers at one university. While NCATE standards are upheld by all accredited teacher education programs, each program is organized differently. The experiences of students at this university may be very different from other programs in the state and the country simply because of how and when family engagement is addressed within the various programs. Also, within the study there is some variation in student experiences simply because while there are required courses for all students, there are others courses only required for students in certain licensure programs. The students in this study

are from different licensure programs and have different levels of experiences. Some participants have direct experiences in schools, while others' experiences are mostly based on course discussions and personal/familial experiences with family engagement.

This study also lacks participants from Early Childhood education and Elementary education. This is a notable limitation because both groups are fairly well researched and discussed both as pre-service and in-service teachers in the literature on family engagement. Many of the programs for improving family engagement focus on teachers and administrators at the Early Childhood and Elementary level as well. Efforts were made to recruit students from these groups for participation, however the students did not respond. The absence of these voices from the study is a matter that will be discussed in chapter four with data analysis as well as in the conclusions and research implications in chapter five.

### **Delimitations**

Throughout their teacher education program, pre-service teachers have a number of experiences that will affect them personally and professionally. The delimitations were to help keep the size of the project manageable. Pre-service teacher education is not limited to courses taken, the process also includes internships or student teaching experiences that will also provide encounters with families and influence the individual's perception of working with them. At the study university, students participate in a two-semester, year-long school-based internship experience in order to obtain licensure. This study includes pre-service teachers who were pursuing traditional licensure but have not participated in an internship. There are also two students who are pursuing licensure through the post-baccalaureate program, one of these

students is simultaneously pursuing licensure and teaching. Students in the post-baccalaureate program are required to participate in a graduate internship after completing the required courses.

While I recognize that the internship experience possibly provides valuable information and insight for students about family engagement, I chose to focus on the student voice prior to that experience in an effort to gain better insight into student perceptions and beliefs prior to carrying out the work of teachers. Some research suggests that this may be the time when teachers begin to shape their beliefs and philosophies about families and communities and the role these groups will have in their practice (Auerbach, 2007b).

### **Organization of Study**

The first chapter has focused on introducing the current study. I have provided a description of the problem of preparing teachers to initiate/facilitate family-school relationships. There was also a discussion of the purpose of the current study as well as the guiding questions, limitations, delimitations and possible significance of the research. The chapter includes a discussion of some terms and concepts that will be used throughout the study. Chapter two will provide a detailed discussion of current literature around family engagement in K-12 education from various perspectives in the discipline, ending with a look at research specifically related to pre-service teachers. Chapter three outlines my methodological decisions for this study, along with how and why phenomenology was utilized to answer my research questions. Chapter four presents a discussion of the major findings of the study. Finally, chapter five includes conclusions based on the findings discussed in chapter four as well as a discussion of possible implications of the research.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

The purpose of this study was to explore pre-service teacher's perceptions and experiences with family engagement in the education of students. In chapter 1, I shared the rationale for working towards an understanding of the perceptions and experiences of family engagement that pre-service teachers carry with them into the classroom as novice teachers. In this chapter, I will provide a review of literature relating to family engagement in education, as well as research that looks at the preparedness of teachers to engage families and form partnerships for educating children.

### **Search Procedures**

In an effort to thoroughly review the literature related to family engagement in K-12 education, I began by searching the university electronic educational databases (ERIC, Academic Search Premier and Education Full Text) using phrases such as "family engagement," "parent involvement in education," "family engagement and school staff," "family engagement and pre-service teachers," and "parent involvement and teacher education." The earlier searches yielded a number of results that discussed many aspects of family engagement in education. The searches using keywords like "pre-services teachers" or "teacher education and family engagement or parent involvement" yielded fewer results. The majority of the sources used for this review were published in the 1990's and 2000's with a few older and well-referenced seminal articles included for historical context and perspective.

There are few studies dedicated to pre-service teacher's perceptions and beliefs about family engagement. Most often, these studies were done in conjunction with or in comparison to

novice teachers. With that in mind I chose to review the literature that focused on pre-service teachers as well as in-service teachers, especially studies focused on teachers in the first few years in the field for a broader perspective of where the research of this study would be situated. During my search and review of the literature, I discovered that there are research studies focused on administrators and other school staff such as social workers and counselors and family engagement. Though this is important information for understanding school cultures that support family engagement, I chose not to review those articles at this time and focus my review on pre-service and in-service teachers. It is also important to note that many of the studies that focused on in-service teachers often made reference to the implications of the data gathered from this group on teacher education or pre-service teacher preparation (DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2005; Joshi, Eberly, & Konzal, 2005; Lin & Bates, 2010; Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009).

Another popular research focus for family engagement looks at the subject from the parent perspective (Dotson-Blake, Foster, & Gressard, 2009; Harris & Goodall, 2008). Research on the benefits of family engagement for parents and families is included in the sections on benefits and barriers, however in an effort to narrow the focus of this review, other articles were only included as they related directly to in-service and pre-service teachers. While reviewing articles from my original searches, I was often led to other articles and texts that connected to my focus on pre-service and in-service teachers. These articles were included in the literature review when they provided some insight into the things that should be considered when planning for teacher preparation/education curriculum that addresses family engagement. Prior to reviewing the literature, I will provide an explanation for how this literature review is organized.

This review of literature will begin with a review of my search procedures, and a brief look at the historical context of family engagement in education. I will go on to discuss the use

of the phrase “parent involvement” vs. “family engagement” and the impact of terminology when understanding views and approaches to family engagement. The next section will take a look at some of the research in early childhood education, which has had great influence in family engagement in K-12 education. Next, I will provide an overview of the literature discussing the many benefits of family engagement found by researchers with relation to various areas of student success, as well as the barriers to involvement that may limit educators’ ability to build these beneficial relationships. I will then discuss some of the current approaches and models for family engagement taught to and used by both teacher educators and K-12 teachers to develop family-school partnerships. The review of literature will conclude with a discussion of the studies that focus on pre-service teachers or teacher-education programs and family engagement.

## **Historical Context**

The importance of families and communities in the education of children is not a new concept. Formal parent education can be traced back in the United States to 1815 when parents sought input from educators on child development (Berger, 1991). It is in fact parents who initiated a formal movement for alliance with the creation of the first national parent teacher association that was founded in 1920 as the National Congress of Parents and Teachers (Woyshner, 2003). The organization is considered by some to be the first major effort to develop a working relationship between home and school, parent and teacher. At that time, education was used to enlighten middle-class parents and simultaneously help make immigrant and underclass parents more “mainstream” (Berger, 1991). Educational historians saw the initiation of this movement as a reaction by parents and citizens to the bureaucratization of public education and the professionalization of teaching during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries



(Woyshner, 2003). The organization helped parents gain a better understanding of the schools they were entrusting with their children, as well as the expectations of educators (Long, 1997).

Early Parent-Teacher Associations (PTA) were often built around the sharing of information about children especially in areas of social, emotional, physical and cognitive development (Woyshner, 2003). These early exchanges were usually mono-directional from school to home, with the teachers being seen as experts and the parent (usually mothers) being seen as receivers of information only. This view of home-school relations remained in place for many years, and numerous parent-education programs and organizations were developed. Overtime, the leadership of the programs shifted from being parent led and organized to educator controlled (Long, 1997). The target demographic shifted as well. Organizations like the PTA were still in place for more affluent and middle-class parents, however, school led efforts began to focus on working with families with more “disadvantaged” backgrounds.

The 1960's and 1970's saw the creation of several pieces of legislation and federal programs that supported the commitment to family engagement in learning (Weiss, Lopez, Rosenberg, Harvard Family Research Project, & SEDL, 2010), as the focus began to shift to the families of the less affluent and less successful students. Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) requires that districts receiving Title 1 funds spend at least 1% of the funding on family involvement activities. Also under the ESEA, underperforming schools are required to include family involvement provisions in their school improvement plans (J.L. Epstein, 2005). Family involvement expectations are also a part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and other federal, special-education initiatives. Several early childhood programs, including Head Start, Early Head Start and Even Start Family Literacy

Program, include mandates for family engagement. More recently provisions for family engagement have been added to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Centers after-school programs.

Many research studies in the 1960's and 1970's focused on the family and found socio-economic status to be the greatest predictor of parent involvement (Long, 1997). Ira Gordon, a researcher at the time, noted that there were three central program themes at the time: (a) focus on home for basic human development; (b) helping parents create the most effective home environment for development; and (c) importance of early years on lifelong development (Gordon, 1977). It was during this time that Parent Education and Parent Training programs and models became popular. Specifically, these programs wanted to help educate and “train” parents of children from low-income backgrounds in an effort to get them more involved in their children's education. Unfortunately, these parents were often seen from a deficit model and educator “intervention” not collaboration was viewed as the best way to help the children's cognitive growth (Dembo, Sweitzer, & Lauritzen 1985).

Soon, disciplines in education began to push for the inclusion of parent education courses in teacher education programs. Fields like early childhood education and educational psychology saw courses on parent education as being potentially beneficial in preparing teachers to connect the home and the school (Dembo, Sweitzer, & Lauritzen 1985). Practitioners in early childhood education, especially Head Start, have a long history of setting high expectations for parent involvement, and preparing educators for facilitating that role. Overtime the relationship has shifted from one of school sharing and educating to home and school working together to do both. Work on family engagement in early childhood education will be discussed in further detail later in the chapter.

Another shift occurred in the 1980's as research on family engagement became the topic of interest for researchers outside the field of education (i.e. sociology, psychology) and the major areas of concern were poorly-educated youth, dropouts, teen pregnancy and poverty or the impoverished (Berger, 1991). This led to two main focuses for research on parent involvement: (a) the development of models that used family characteristics and behaviors to attempt to understand parental involvement; (b) the efficacy of school practices to change family behaviors and environments as a way to increase student achievement (J.L. Epstein, 1990). In the 1990's, Epstein (a sociologist) and her colleagues went on to create a model that combined these perspectives and began to focus on both family and teacher variables while studying parent involvement (Christenson, 2005). Epstein's model, the Hoover-Dempsey Sandler model, and a few others that were developed around the same time are the basis for many models and approaches to family engagement used today. In an effort to fully develop models for family engagement and home-school partnerships, researchers sought to better understand all facets of the concepts including the barriers and benefits to their influence on the education of children.

The preceding historical context provided some background information for the articles and studies reviewed for this literature review. Though not a focus of this study, research in early childhood education has made many contributions to research on family engagement. The next section will review some of the key studies and aspects of family engagement in early childhood education.

**Family engagement in early childhood education.** Early childhood researchers and practitioners have long been in the forefront of work done for family engagement in education. Dating back to the 1960's and 1970's there has been a focus by educators to engage and involve families in the education of their children on developmental, academic and social levels. Over

the years, research has shown that educators in early childhood education have long been aware of the benefits of family engagement, and found ways to work through the barriers. They have also recognized and encouraged various ways for home and school to partner for education, and developed teacher education programs to prepare educators for work with children and families during these years.

Head Start was started in 1965 with the objectives to (a) increase a child's capacity to relate positively to family members and others while at the same time strengthening the family stability and capacity to relate positively to the child; (b) develop, in the child and his/her family, a responsible attitude toward society, (c) to work together with the poor in solving their problems; and (d) increase the sense of dignity and self-worth within the child and his family among other developmental, social objectives (Hodges & Cooper, 1981). Though initial objectives for family involvement were limited and focused on skills and services head start educators could provide for students and their families, over time the objective grew to be more collaborative and partnership oriented (Halgunseth, 2009). Along the way, changes in the Head Start program model lead to the creation of other early education programs that also placed a great emphasis on school- family interactions such as the Project Follow Through in 1967 (Hodges & Cooper, 1981), and eventually the Even Start Family Literacy Program in 1988 (Robinson, 2012). Similar to Head Start, both programs had objectives about involving parents and building collaborative relationships between home and school for the benefit of the students.

The Head Start approach to engaging families in early childhood education has been shown to be effective. The program has requirements for both educators and parents with regard to family engagement. Teachers are expected to initiate family engagement through activities such as home-visits and parent conferences, and parents are required to be engaged through

volunteer hours and participate in program-initiated activities (Korfmacher et al., 2008). In a 2004 survey of four head start programs in North Carolina, the researchers found that more than three quarters of Head Start volunteers were parents (Castro, Bryant, Peisner-Feinberg, & Skinner, 2004). In the study of over 1100 parents and 56 teachers, the researchers used parent interviews, teacher questionnaires, volunteer logs and classroom observations to determine the extent and types of parent involvement in the Head Start Programs (Castro et al., 2004). They found the most frequent type of involvement for the programs to be volunteerism and engaging in parent meetings. The authors note that while the study gives a fairly detailed discussion of the characteristics and reasons for the involvement of active parents, a limitation is that information is not known about what results would be if the parents were not actively engaged with the school. This is a dilemma shared by many researchers in all areas of family engagement.

Even with the success and development to date, researchers and practitioners continue to search for ways to improve and build partnerships between home and school. Though many successful approaches for family engagement have been established, researchers are still seeking new and innovative ways to connect educators with families, especially those with a background of low socioeconomic status or ethnic minority (Castro et al., 2004; Henrich & Gadaire, 2008). The next section will begin to look at the current context of family engagement through the terms used to describe relationships between home and school. I will also discuss the influence these terms have on the views and approaches to engaging and involving families today.

### **Parent Involvement vs. Family Engagement**

The terms used to describe the relationship between home and schools have gone through a number of changes over the past couple of decades. From parent involvement to parent-school

relationships, parent participation to family engagement, researchers and educators have used many terms to connect to one main concept (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Auerbach, 2007a; Berg et al., 2006; Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006a; Powell, Son, File, & San Juan, 2010). Regardless of the words used, educators across the U.S. and other countries appear to be seeking ways to include parents in the education of the students, especially students in “high risk” areas and situations (Halgunseth, 2009; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Joshi, Eberly, & Konzal, 2005; Xu & Filler, 2008).

Despite the work in early childhood education, efforts to increase parent involvement in primary and secondary education mostly involved the use of parents to accomplish tasks that teachers and administrators did not have the time or physical resources to accomplish (Amatea, Smith-Adcock, & Villares, 2006; K.V. Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002; Muscott et al., 2008; Pedro, Miller, & Bray, 2012). Though there is research to support other ways, increased physical presence of parents at school is often viewed by many schools as the primary marker for increased parent involvement. Christianakis (2011) discusses the need to move past an approach to family engagement that views parents as “help labor.” In her qualitative study of inner-city teachers’ views of parent involvement, it was clear that the educators viewed parent involvement on a very basic level of inclusion, with the parameters of that involvement being defined by the teachers alone (Christianakis, 2011). The author reached this conclusion after interviews with fifteen teachers at an elementary school conducted over a six-month period. In three separate one-hour interview sessions, the teachers were asked to define parent involvement, describe how parent involvement looked at their school, and how parent involvement looked in their particular classrooms. The teachers ranged from kindergarten to fourth grade with 2-30 years of experience. Consistently across the interviews, parent involvement was described as

“help” to the teacher in two domains: home and school (Christianakis, 2011). Little mention is made about the relationships forged between home and school. The teachers in the study viewed parent involvement as a tool that teachers can use for student success at their own discretion, with little input from the parents themselves.

Seeing a similar need with administrators, Ferrara (2011) used a qualitative research designed to explore the extent to which school leaders understood the use of the term “engagement” and to what degree the goal of engagement influenced their efforts to interact with parents. Participants in the study included 90 school-site administrators from a school district who participated in a one-day seminar on family engagement. To start the session, participants were asked at the beginning of the seminar to write their definition of family engagement. The author argues that the terminology has little to no effect on the view of educators with regard to family engagement stating that many have just used the “find and replace button” creating new buzz words in an attempt to stir up the efforts of educators in their attempts to interact and engage with families ( Ferrara, 2011). The administrators were asked at the end of the session to review that definition and make any changes that they found appropriate. Analysis of the definitions showed that there was a minimal effect of the seminar in changing the administrators’ definition (Ferrara, 2011). While family engagement was presented as a different approach from involvement and the administrators adopted the engagement terminology, the majority of the definitions made no room for parent voice or two-way communication and still held on to many of the characteristics of involvement only.

One of the most prolific researchers of family school partnerships and leaders in the shift to expand views of family roles in education is sociologist Joyce Epstein. With studies dating back to the 1980’s, Epstein has a long history of research exploring the benefits, barriers and

approaches to family engagement (J.L. Epstein, Dauber, & Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools, 1989; J.L. Epstein, Sanders, Clark, & Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk, 1999; J.L. Epstein, 1990). Similar to Head Start, Epstein (2002) recognizes the different ways families are engaged through her definition of family involvement in six parts: (a) parenting; (b) communicating; (c) volunteering; (d) learning at home; (e) decision making; and (f) collaborating with the community. When schools open up communication with parents based on these six types of involvement, a space is created that allows parents and others in the community to contribute in their own way (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Though referred to as types of family involvement, the parts can easily be seen as the foundation for family engagement with its focus on a more holistic view of the contributions families are able to make to the education of their children.

The push for a shift in terminology is not limited to research with teachers. Others in the world of education are being encouraged to expand the notion of involvement as well. One example is in the field of school psychology, where a definition of family engagement has been presented that can be adopted by all professionals that work with students in a school setting. Influenced by the work of Joyce Epstein and colleagues, Christenson (2005) challenged all school staff to view family-school partnerships as being characterized by three defining features:

1. A student-focused philosophy - wherein educators and families work together collaboratively and cooperatively to enhance the academic, social, emotional and behavioral development of the student
2. A belief in the shared responsibility for educating and socializing children – with no prescribed roles or activities for families or educators, but options for valid and realistic participation for both,
3. A preventive, solution-oriented focus – where families and educators seek to create opportunities for student learning, engagement and development.



Family involvement is conceptualized beyond the traditional ideas of the Parent Teacher Association/Organization or school volunteers. Caregivers are viewed as true partners and contributors to their children's education and development. This view outlines a regard for the contribution of families that goes well beyond the physical presence, and positions them as experts on their children (Christenson, 2005). From this position parents, caregivers, and siblings are able to contribute to the education of students in a number of areas, both seen and unseen, by educators in the school setting.

Both Christenson and Epstein's views stand in line with Christianakis' research that supports the need for an expansion in the ways that family engagement is presented and discussed with educators. More research is needed to assess whether Ferrara's findings that the terminology itself has any influence on the views and approaches that are taken to increase the interaction between home and school, when it comes to the education of children. It is clear however, that researchers continue to use various terms to describe how home and school should interact to impact student's school experiences.

The use of the term family engagement is meant to imply a two-way relationship that values and makes use of what educators and families bring to the table. Similar to Epstein and Christenson, other researchers have highlighted broader examples of family contributions that connect home and school while impacting student outcomes. Halgunseth (2009) also suggested that through a broader view of family engagement, schools can help build stronger families and communities, with the understanding that doing so will also improve students' social and academic outcomes. This is done by utilizing a strength-based perspective that recognizes that all families are involved in their children's learning in some way, so the focus shifts to interacting with families in a way that is meaningful and fosters a sense of collaboration to enhance their

children's learning experience (Halgunseth, 2009). Similarly, by involving parents in decision making and academic changes, involving the community through school activities and community service, and engaging in two-way communication, schools are able to show the importance of a group effort in educating students (Smith, 2009). Engagement is heavily dependent on the administrators and teachers of a school. Educators must not only believe that engagement is important for engagement to occur, they should also show a commitment to building reciprocal relationships under varying circumstances and in multiple settings.

Still, the majority of researchers whose work was reviewed for this literature review stated that terminology does matter. In agreement with others, Auerbach suggests that as we try to expand the discourse of family engagement, the terminology will shape the parameters of home-school partnerships (Auerbach, 2007a). The terms used should set a tone that encourages active participation from families in the education of their children, and recognizes the many shapes and forms that participation can take to be beneficial (Auerbach, 2007b). It is possible that researchers and educators will never settle on one term or phrase to reflect the work of family engagement. As the structure and needs of families evolve, research should continue to support an evolution of terms that reflects the aims and goals of collaborative partnerships forged between home and school.

While defining parent-school-community partnerships for their school, one could easily become lost in the various terms and interpretations that researchers have used over the years. It is clear, however, that more recently there is support for the efforts to include a number of principles that focus on making parents feel that they are equal stakeholders in the school and their child's education. In the articles that I reviewed for this study, many authors mentioned extending the definition beyond a parent's physical presence in the schools, but few made it an

explicit part of their definition of involvement. The use of the term engagement lends itself to a more comprehensive understanding of the many benefits that can come from building reciprocal relationships between schools and families. The next section will discuss a few of the many benefits that researchers have connected to family engagement and families that build home-school partnerships.

### **Benefits of Family Engagement**

For the past 40 years, researchers have acknowledged numerous cognitive, social, and emotional benefits for student success resulting from various types of parent involvement (N. Hill, Baker, & Marjoribanks, 2004). During the late 1980's and early 1990's, researchers showed a renewed interest in understanding the benefits of family engagement to build a stronger case to support the dedication of funds and the development of programs to improve efforts (N. Hill et al., 2004). Greenwood and Hickman (1991) suggested that parents were at least as influential as the school on student attitudes and skills. This notion was followed by studies connecting parent involvement to higher academic achievement (Berger, 1991) and improved attendance (Comer & Haynes, 1991) for students. These studies are often cited when tracing the patterns of research on the benefits of family, however, there is a limitation in the fact that they focus on the benefits for elementary students. As the push for more collaboration between home and school has moved forward, researchers have continued to explore the impact of family engagement on educators and school environments as well as the families and communities of students. Today, researchers support the notion that they are mutual when families are engaging with schools to positively impact the education of their children (Ferguson & SEDL National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools, 2008). This section will review the literature that examined the benefits of family engagement in these areas.

**Benefits for elementary and secondary students.** According to Warren & Curry (1997), parent involvement in a child's education is the most consistent indicator of whether a child is successful in school. In recent years many researchers have made a link between parent involvement and some positive outcomes for children. There have been links to literacy, math achievement, attendance and decreased discipline issues (Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006b; Nancy E. Hill & Craft, 2003; Sanchez, 2010). In each case a certain aspect of parent involvement is viewed in relation to a particular outcome. These studies each explored these measures using questionnaires or scales, and analyzed using a quantitative method. Consistent with previous studies from the 80's and 90's, Hill and Craft (2003) found that academic behavior skills mediated the relation between parent-school involvement and school achievement. Specifically, parent's involvement at school or sending materials to school improved math performance in African American children from similar socioeconomic backgrounds (Nancy E. Hill & Craft, 2003).

The types of parent involvement are as varied as the impact that they have on students. With that in mind, Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, and Weiss (2006) took a longitudinal look at how family involvement influenced children's literacy, specifically for low-income children, accounting for different types of involvement. The authors used a multilevel model to measure individual literacy growth from kindergarten through the fifth grade, as well as examined patterns of association between family involvement in school and child literacy performance. Family involvement was measured through mothers' self-reports of the amount of time spent volunteering at school, communicating with teachers, and helping with work at home. The mothers were issued the survey at the kindergarten, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade years. The analysis looked

at family differences and within family associations with involvement and found that both were associated with literacy.

Although the main effect for family involvement was not significantly associated with literacy performance or change, the results did vary greatly by maternal education. The family involvement was significant for children of mothers with less education (Dearing et al., 2006b). The association was especially high between the hours the mother worked with the child at home and literacy performance. This finding does not support the general notion that literacy levels are influenced by family involvement, but it does suggest an influence in the case of mothers with less education levels and typically lower income. Schools that have high populations of these mothers should consider developing a literacy program with them in mind.

While the previously mentioned studies support earlier research on the benefits of family engagement, they are also limited to elementary students. There have been numerous studies to date that focus on the benefits of family engagement during the early education/pre-kindergarten and elementary years (Dail & Payne, 2010; El Nokali, Bachman, & Votruba-Drzal, 2010; Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, & Apostoleris, 1997). This also tends to be the time that we see the most engagement with parents for various reasons. While the benefits of parent involvement for academic achievement and other positive student outcomes are well documented, less is known about the specifics of those benefits and activities when children move from elementary to middle and high school (Agronick, Clark, O'Donnell, Stueve, & Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast & Islands (ED), 2009).

In a meta-analysis of current literature on benefits of parent involvement in the middle school years, Hill and Tyson (2009) examined three types of parent involvement to better

understand the ways that parents promote achievement. For the study, the authors focused on home-based involvement (e.g. homework help, creating home learning environments), school-based involvement (e.g. P.T.A. meeting attendance, volunteering at school), and academic socialization (e.g. communicating parental expectations and aspirations, making plans for future learning). Academic achievement was characterized by student class grades, G.P.A., standardized test scores and other tests designed to measure achievement.

The authors reviewed literature published between 1985-2006 that represented three types of studies that: (a) were naturalistic, longitudinal and cross-sectional; (b) reported on the effects of interventions that were intended to enhance parent involvement; (c) reported on data from public access, nationally representative data sets (N. Hill & Tyson, 2009). Each of the selected articles was primarily coded for characteristics of the publication, independent variables, sample characteristics, and outcome measures.

Overall, the meta-analysis of the correlational studies showed a positive correlation between parent involvement and middle-school academic achievement. When the authors conducted a moderator analysis to determine any variations between the three types of involvement, they found that academic socialization was more strongly related to academic achievement than home-based involvement and school based involvement (Hill & Tyson, 2009). The authors note that previous literature supports this finding by rationalizing that personal goals, beliefs, and motivations become more internalized during adolescence so it stands to reason that involvement that fosters this autonomy is consistent with the developmental needs of middle school students (Hill & Tyson, 2009).

Although many have suggested that partnerships between the school, family and community help reduce problem behaviors and improve learning in school, most interventions still focus on classroom management techniques that change these behaviors at elementary or secondary levels (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). Minor behavior offenses such as class disruption, student-student conflicts, and truancy decreased significantly over the course of a school year when varied high-quality family and community activities were implemented (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002).

In a longitudinal study by Sheldon and Epstein on schools' rates of daily attendance and chronic absenteeism and on specific partnership practices that were implemented to increase or sustain student attendance, data collected indicated that several family-school-community partnership practices predict an increase in attendance, a decrease in chronic absenteeism or both in elementary students (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). The data revealed that a number of home-school activities such as home visits, calls home when students were absent, and workshops for families about improving attendance were all effective at changing attendance behaviors of students. The data from this study supports earlier theoretical perspectives on multiple influences on student absenteeism and truancy at elementary and at the high school levels (Corville-Smith, Ryan, Adams, & Dalicandro, 1998; Weinberg & Weinberg, 1992; Ziesemer, 1984). These studies suggest that along with the academic benefits, home-school partnerships can also impact student behaviors.

**Benefits of family engagement for families and schools.** Family involvement in a child's education is not only a benefit to students but to their families and schools as well. Researchers in elementary and secondary education have only recently begun to fully explore these benefits beyond the impact of parent education activities (Weiss et al., 2010). Studies have

shown that through active engagement, families have shown improvements in areas such as parenting, sibling interaction, and community involvement (Berg et al., 2006; Cripps & Zyromski, 2009; Harris & Goodall, 2008). Through school activities and workshops, caregivers are given access to child development information from educated professionals that will be beneficial to them as a parent (Greenberg, 2005). In a thriving parent-school partnership, parents are aware of policies and expectations of students and are better able to re-enforce and support these expectations at home (Greenberg, 2005). They are also given more opportunities to have contact and share information with other families. This exchange becomes especially important when parents are allowed input on decisions that will affect the entire school body or community (Berg et al., 2006).

Numerous researchers have discussed parent empowerment as a family engagement benefit for parents and the schools of their children (Bronfenbrenner, 1978; Fullan, 1993; Konzal, 1997). In a study that supported the findings of the previous reports, Bolivar and Chrispeels (2010) found that when parents participate in engagement activities aimed at developing parent leadership in the schools, they gain leadership skills, opportunities to interact with other parents, and develop social and intellectual capital that helps them affect change in their children's schools. In this study that looked at a 12-week engagement program for Hispanic parents, some parents went on to found organizations that worked on behalf of the schools to influence the educational system (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011).

When parents are involved they can also become resources for the school community and teachers. This can be through the volunteering of their time and talents, as well as monetarily by providing physical resources that are used to enhance the students' learning experiences academically or the overall school environment (Hedeem, Moses, Peter, & Center for



Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education [CADRE], 2011). The National PTA (2000) boldly states, “High quality education cannot be successfully achieved without parents’ active involvement” (p.15). This statement is meant to remind schools that they are also benefactors when they receive support from families and communities (National PTA, 2000). In a study that examined the reasons for improvement in students’ reading achievements over a seven year period, researchers discovered a link between substantial reading improvements in some elementary schools and the successful utilization of competent local school councils (LSC) (Henderson, Mapp, & Southwest Educational Development Lab., 2002). The LSCs were comprised of six parents that were elected by other parents and two community members who were similarly elected. The study confirmed that during the seven-year timeframe, the schools with substantial reading improvements each had LSCs with the highest competency ratings as reported by the teachers from each of the school campuses. Similar to the elementary schools studied in the Bolivar and Chrispeers’ study, members of LSCs were all very active in helping to change and impact the school through contributions to the annual school-improvement plans that focused on student achievement as well as the school budget and other areas of concern expressed by teachers and administrators (Henderson et al., 2002).

Along with improvement in reading scores, schools with LSC support also had principals who were perceived as having more effective leadership and teachers with more influence on school decisions than those with less LSC support (Henderson et al., 2002). This finding is of note because of the LSC’s role in selecting and evaluating these principals. Though this is just one study, it shines light on an area of research that should be further explored. Researchers have yet to fully capture the interconnectedness that engagement potentially brings to a school community.

The benefits that family engagement can have on students, families and schools becomes especially important when assessing the barriers that schools may face when attempting to build family-school partnerships. Though some barriers are specific to the school community, there are some barriers that all schools should be aware of when planning family engagement for their school community. The next section will review research on some of the barriers that may undermine or limit family engagement efforts.

### **Barriers to Family Engagement**

A key aspect of determining the best ways to prepare teachers for family engagement, is an understanding of the barriers that can inhibit those efforts. With that in mind, many researchers have reported on the barriers that parents and teachers face that can have negative impacts on parent participation and teacher efforts (Chavkin & Williams, 1988; Christianakis, 2011; Cowan, Cowan, Pruet, Pruet, & Wong, 2009; DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2005). The research has especially focused on the barriers faced by educators working with high minority and low socioeconomic status populations (Kuperminc, Darnell, & Alvarez-Jimenez, 2008; Lopez, 2001; Mackety, Linder-VanBershot, & Regional Educational Laboratory, 2008; Sheehey, 2006; Xu & Filler, 2008). These populations face barriers to involvement that range from language and cultural concerns to time and resource availability issues. Whatever the reason, it is often up to the educators to find ways around these barriers and to help make parents aware of the benefits of their involvement (Neuenschwander, Vida, Garrett, & Eccles, 2007; Quiocho & Daoud, 2006; J. Smith, Stern, & Shatrova, 2008).

Even with the support of NCLB and the understanding that it is beneficial to the students as well as the school, many schools struggle with increasing involvement. This becomes especially true for schools with high minority and low SES populations. These populations face

barriers to involvement that range from language and cultural concerns to time and resource availability issues (Dotson-Blake et al., 2009). Some parents are faced daily with the issues of providing food and shelter for their children as well as maintaining employment, all while taking care of the family (Dearing et al., 2006b; Ferrara, 2009). Some parents may believe that schools are in control of education and that their input is not needed or wanted (Doucet, 2008). There may also be a lack of education or language that keeps a parent from school or even just an unwelcomed feeling that keeps them from communicating with administrators and teachers (N. E. Hill & Torres, 2010; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

Although it is usually unintentional, one of the major barriers that parents often face is the staff at their children's schools. The opinions and assumptions that educators may have about certain populations based on cultural, linguistic or socioeconomic factors can influence the ways they interact with parents (Auerbach, 2007a, 2007b; Bingham & Abernathy, 2007; Christenson, 2005). This in turn can effect parents' decisions to engage in their child's education, and decrease the effectiveness of their engagement. An educator's cultural competence level can set the tone for the type of relationship that will develop between home and school.

One challenge that professionals face when trying to establish effective communication with families, is the barrier of culture. Educators may be unaware of times when the school culture is in conflict with the culture of the home (N. E. Hill & Torres, 2010). Oftentimes if the cultural differences are not recognized and addressed at the onset of the interaction, progress is very slow if it occurs at all. In a study looking at the involvement of Hawaiian parents in decision making for their children in special education, data revealed that often the parents felt as though professionals did not understand their culture, and thus did not understand the parent or the child (Sheehey, 2006). Sheehey used a case-study method to collect information from three

different families who all recently had or currently have a child in the Hawaiian special education system. All of the families identified themselves as at least half Hawaiian and expressed a strong connection to the traditional Hawaiian culture. While this was a qualitative case study, the author used what was called a “talk story” format for data collection. Talk story is a Hawaiian form of informal conversation that was transcribed and coded similar to an interview (2006). The author was not Hawaiian so one of the participants was also used as a researcher when reviewing the data and checking the researcher for any personal bias’ or misunderstandings.

The data were analyzed for themes and then sent back to participants to verify that the themes matched what they had intended to convey. One theme that was common to all of the participants was the socio-cultural discrepancies between the home culture and the school culture (Sheehey, 2006). The parents in the study saw the decision-making process as informal and taking place outside of the IEP (Individualized Education Plan) meeting. The school culture, however, viewed the IEP meeting as the optimal place for parent involvement in educational decision-making. Since it is the Hawaiian culture to not challenge professionals, the adults often did not feel comfortable disagreeing with professionals in the formal meetings, and did not feel that they were given a chance to voice those concerns. Had the professionals been more aware of the culture, they would have been able to find ways of pulling the parents into informal forms of communication that allowed for sharing and storytelling (2006). This is just one example of how cultural misunderstanding can interfere with home-school communication, and make it difficult to form the partnerships needed to effectively work together for the benefit of the student.

Occasionally the barriers that parents face are the teachers and administrators of their children’s schools. Bringing parents into a partnership with schools is not always an easy task,

and sometimes requires skills that teachers and administrators do not feel they possess. Although it may be unintentional, the opinions and assumptions that teachers may have about a certain population can influence the ways they interact with parents (J. Ferrara & Siry, 2010). In a 1995 evaluation of their education-training program, Epstein and colleagues found that while a majority of the participants agreed that it was important for all educators to engage families and communities, very few of them believed that their program fully prepared them to do so (Epstein, et al., 1999). Of those who still felt that the programs insufficiently prepared teachers, there was a belief that many topics important to understanding family and community engagement were minimally covered or not covered at all by the program. In another survey many teachers reported feeling “ill-equipped and un-prepared” to work with parents, due to a lack of training and information (Bingham & Abernathy, 2007).

There is variation in the research as to whether addressing teachers’ beliefs on involving parents influences their practices of engagement, and in turn is an effective strategy for enhancing children’s education. Some believe that it is while others see parent involvement as a potential source of conflict between parent, child and teacher (Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, & Apostoleris, 1997). Teacher practices are often influenced by their beliefs, which, in turn can affect parents’ involvement. If teachers do not make an effort to include parent involvement as a part of their daily teaching practice, parents may feel uninvolved or even doubt their ability to help (Becher, 1984). For some families there are external and internal factors that will affect their involvement. One way to affect family-school partnerships is to give teachers the foundations needed to build those relationships between home and school in spite of the factors working against them (J.L. Epstein & Sanders, 2006) .

The exploration of the benefits and barriers to family engagement discussed in the previous sections are a steady influence on the models and approaches that schools choose to partner with and engage families. In the next section I will discuss some of the literature focused on in-service educators and family engagement. Included in this session will be current models and approaches that help schools improve home-school partnerships or prepare educators to work with families.

### **Teacher Beliefs and Practices of Family Engagement**

Many in-service teachers have reported their beliefs that family engagement is important to positive outcomes for students (Becher, 1984; D. Hiatt-Michael & ERIC Clearinghouse on Teaching and Teacher Education, 2001; Peña, 2000). Historically, however, the reported attitudes, dispositions and practices of family engagement have not shown their practical support of this belief (Becker & Epstein, 1982; J.L. Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; L. G. Katz & ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, 1993). Many reported receiving little formal training, and consequently possess minimal skills and have low efficacy regarding their ability to successfully work with families (D. B. Hiatt-Michael, 2006). Many also report that professional development experiences that help them build a solid knowledge base, strategies, positive experiences and practical experiences building reciprocal relationships with families would be beneficial (Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009).

In the 1980's researchers in elementary and secondary education began to expand their research on family engagement beyond its impact on students (Becher, 1984). In a survey of teacher practices for parent involvement, 3700 public elementary school teachers from over 600 schools in one state were asked about their professional beliefs and practices of parent

involvement (Becker & Epstein, 1982). From the data, the authors reported that for the participants some traditional forms of parent-teacher communication such as sending notices home and interacting with parents at school activities were universal, with over 95% reporting that they engaged in those types of activities (Becker & Epstein, 1982). Nearly three-fourths of the participants agreed that parent involvement could be helpful, but nearly half of the teachers believed that they would not be successful with attempts to involve parents in the students' work at home, and would not include it in their practice as educators (Becker & Epstein, 1982). Similar results were reported in a follow-up study that surveyed elementary and middle school teacher's nearly a decade later (J.L. Epstein & Dauber, 1991).

In the twenty-first century, educators still have conflicting notions about the importance of family engagement for student success and their ability to facilitate that involvement (Patel & Stevens, 2010). This discrepancy can negatively impact the ability of teachers and schools to increase engagement with families in their school community (Amatea et al., 2006; Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Howard M. Sandler, 2007; Pryor & Pryor, 2009). I will now discuss some of the models and approaches that researchers have developed to help teachers and schools develop beliefs and practices that support and increase family engagement.

**Models/approaches for family engagement for schools and educators.** As a result of the legislative and district encouragements for increased family engagement and in response to research on the benefits and barriers and teacher practices of family engagement, researchers have developed models and approaches that could enhance home-school partnerships and enhance student outcomes. Many of these approaches aim to help schools not only embrace family engagement as an education ideology, but build strategies that can be utilized in various situations with varying student populations. These programs also claim to help motivate

educators to understand parents and families, ultimately leading to a better understanding of their students (Trotti, 2008). Researchers have developed approaches that not only claim to help schools and districts increase and improve their family engagement efforts, they also suggest that the programs can be a foundation used by colleges and universities to create program curriculum that help new teachers and administrators feel confident in their ability to build and sustain positive relationships between home and school (Trotti, 2008).

The Epstein model for Home-School-Community Partnerships is one of the most common approaches used by K-12 and higher education institutions to structure models and strategies for family engagement (D. B. Hiatt-Michael, 2006). Epstein (2001) recognizes types of family involvement through her six part definition: (1) parenting, (2) communicating, (3) volunteering, (4) learning at home, (5) decision making, and (6) collaborating with the community. The model employs a theory of overlapping spheres of influence which argues that schools, families and communities are in contexts that simultaneously influence children's education and development (J.L. Epstein, 2001).

In the model, actions by school personnel, parents, students and community members are believed to increase connections and collaborations as it decreases distance and dissonance between the contributors. Educators are encouraged to explore the worlds of their students and families for tools to improve school performance (J.L. Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). When schools acknowledge parent contributions based on these six types of involvement, a space is created that the authors believe allows parents and others in the community to be engaged in their own way (J.L. Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Though initially developed for use in schools, the authors have suggested in recent editions that the model may also be used in teacher education programs to prepared pre-service teachers for family engagement (J.L. Epstein, 2010)



Another often cited approach to family is the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model (D. B. Hiatt-Michael, 2006). The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model for parent involvement seeks to understand parents' major sources of motivation for involvement (K. V. Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). Grounded in educational, developmental and social psychology research, the model was developed to help schools define parent involvement for their school community and develop an approach to increase it (K. V. Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). The authors believe that there are three main sources of motivation for parental involvement: (1) parents' motivational beliefs, (2) parents' perceptions of invitations to involvement, and (3) personal life contexts (K. V. Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). The first motivation source refers to the parents' views of their roles and parental self-efficacy for being able to help the child with school-related tasks. The second motivation source refers to whether or not the family receives general invitations from the school and personal invitations from the teachers and children. The third motivation source refers to variables that influence the parents' views of his/her time, skills, knowledge, and the feasibility of school involvement. Hoover-Dempsey, Sandler and others have used this model to examine the influence these factors have on parent involvement and how schools can begin to account for them (C. L. Green et al., 2007).

From their testing and review of their model, Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues made similar suggestions as Christianson (2005) and Epstein (2001). One major difference of this model is the strong emphasis placed on the importance of parents feeling welcomed and valued in schools. This becomes especially important with invitations for involvement from others (K. V. Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Unlike other models, the authors argue that invitations to involvement from important others such as the school, the child or a teacher are often key motivators for parent involvement. Awareness of these motivating factors should encourage

schools to approach every activity or engagement opportunity as a time to invite parents into the school and welcome input from them (K.V. Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Similar to Epstein, the authors of this model suggest that it can be adapted for use with pre-service teachers though to date there does not seem to be any research on its application.

Using the Epstein model as a guide, Christenson (2005) encourages educators to view family-school partnerships as being defined by three major features: (a) a student-focused philosophy - wherein educators and families work together collaboratively and cooperatively to enhance the academic, social, emotional and behavioral development of the student; (b) a belief in the shared responsibility for educating and socializing children – with no prescribed roles or activities for families or educators, but options for valid and realistic participation for both; and (c) a preventive, solution-oriented focus – where families and educators seek to create opportunities for student learning, engagement and development. Family involvement is conceptualized beyond the traditional ideas of the Parent Teacher Association/Organization or school volunteers. In this model of family engagement, caregivers are viewed as true partners and contributors to their children’s education and development.

Like Christenson’s approach, many programs and approaches used in schools are moving towards parent-school partnerships through collaboration. Feuerstein’s theory of Mediated Learning Experience is not often talked about in the literature explicitly, but many aspects of mediated learning are often tagged as ideal components for working with families. With mediated learning, learners are helped to learn strategies for problem solving and ways to critically think through real life or educational situations (Feuerstein, Rand, & Rynders, 1988). This is often done with the help of a mediator. The mediator acts as a filter, bringing focus to a specific aspect of the students’ environment and facilitating an understanding of that aspect. The

student is then given opportunities to connect this information to their existing knowledge base. While the mediator can be any individual that helps to actively engage the student, this role is often filled by the parents, teachers, and peers. Christenson (2005) suggests that school psychologists and educators should begin to pay attention to the social and emotional learning of students. This is done by focusing on self-regulated learning, student responsibility, the student's use of strategies to complete a task, identification with school, belonging, and positive peer relationships (Christenson, 2005). Parents and educators work together develop these aspects of the child at home and school, making connections between the two when possible. This is done through shared goals, contributions and accountability (Christenson, 2005)

Christenson (2005) makes no reference to the mediate learning principles or programs based on them like the Cognitive Enrichment Advantage (CEA), but some very clear parallels can be seen. The Cognitive Enrichment Advantage (CEA) expands on the principles of mediated learning which targets learners' cognition, affect, and motivation to help them understand how to learn and build strategies to work through problems they may have that interfere with learning (Greenberg, 2005). The CEA building blocks of thinking and tools of learning form a shared vocabulary that the student, teacher and parent can use to address the students thinking, feeling and motivation issues (Greenberg, 2005). Unlike Christenson's approach, CEA focuses explicitly on how parents and schools can work together. In the CEA Family-School Partnership Handbook (2005), the ways in which the building blocks and tools that are a part of the approach can be shared with parents and incorporated into home experiences are clearly discussed. Parents and teachers are both able to use the building blocks of thinking and tools of learning to build a shared vocabulary for learning that helps each side understand and respect the learning values of the other and work together to help the learner develop (Greenberg, 2005).

The parent-teacher conference is another opportunity for home and school to come together to share their ideas and goals for the education of a student. On the surface, they seem to be a natural vehicle for developing home-school connections and encouraging involvement (Minke & Anderson, 2003). Unfortunately, many researchers have reported on teachers and parents feeling as though conferences do not live up to that expectation. Both parties reported feeling as though parent teacher conferences can be ineffective at facilitating home-school partnerships (Agronick et al., 2009; Doucet, 2008; Warren, Nofle, Ganley, & Quintanar, 2011). This prescribed process leaves little, if any, time for discussion between the parties involved, and one, if not both, sides often leave feeling unheard, misrepresented and/or misunderstood (Minke & Anderson, 2003). In their CORE model, Minke and Anderson (2003) suggest a structure for family-school conferences that gives school psychologists, counselors and teachers alternative ways to interact with families in these conferences that aid in the development of more productive family-school relationships.

The CORE model derives from Bronfenbrenner's systems theory, and encourages active listening and communication techniques. Educators are encouraged to think differently about family problems through the lens of systems theory and in-turn apply this new understanding to become more flexible in their work with families (Minke & Anderson, 2003). During the CORE Model training, educators are given different exercises and activities that encourage them to adopt positive views and assumptions about parents and their desire to act in the best interest of their children. Using this perspective, the model then frames a process of working with parents that challenges the educators to listen as much as they share and to encourage parents that within this partnership much can be accomplished and problems can be solved (Minke & Anderson, 2003).

Many of the previously mentioned approaches and models have been effective at helping schools and educators facilitate family engagement when implemented properly (Ferguson & SEDL National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools, 2008). The challenge, however, can be finding the time and support for professional development to help educate and motivate educators to make use of the strategies when they have previously had limited exposure to the ideals and principles of family engagement (Ferguson & SEDL National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools, 2008). As mentioned in previous sections, there are barriers that hinder teachers' ability to engage with the families of their students. Many in-service teachers have family-based time restraints that limit their ability to commit to some afterschool family engagement activities like programs and communication attempts (Flynn & Nolan, 2008; Harris & Goodall, 2008). Cultural barriers and/or their ability to navigate those differences may also limit teachers' family engagement efforts (K.V. Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002). With these barriers in mind, one group of researchers set out to develop an effective structure for a professional development program to help teachers increase family engagement. The researchers believed that an in-service teacher education program could be one way to help in-service teachers address these concerns.

The Teachers Involving Parents (TIP) program was designed to help in-service teachers recognize and enhance the teacher beliefs that are critical to inviting parent engagement (K.V. Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002). Drawing from the research on the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model for understanding parent involvement, the authors developed the TIP program to aid in developing teacher's personal sense of efficacy in their ability to involve parents (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002). The TIP program also aims to influence teachers' beliefs about parents' ability to be involved in their children's education. The program holds the assumption that the

more strongly a teacher believes in parent involvement the more they positively contribute to student educational success (Kathleen V. Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002). Through a series of six modules, the teachers who self-reported having minimal knowledge of family engagement were included in exercises with the goal of strengthening the teacher belief system that the Hoover-Dempsey Model presupposes to be necessary to teachers inviting parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002).

Through pre- and post-intervention surveys, the researchers measured the participants' change in self-efficacy and knowledge of family engagement. The results of the surveys supported the authors' notion that participating in the program would show significant increases in the teachers' self-efficacy and their beliefs about parents' efficacy for helping children learn (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002). The results did not support the authors' notion that the program would positively impact teachers' beliefs about family engagement in general, teachers' beliefs in the importance of specific involvement practices, or teacher reports of different types of parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002). This finding could support the work of other researchers that suggest the importance of teachers receiving exposure to these ideas during their teacher education program to help the educators develop the knowledge and strategies over time (Becher, 1984; J.L. Epstein et al., 1999; J. Ferrara & Siry, 2010; Stamp & Groves, 1994)

There are a number of programs and approaches geared towards helping educators facilitate family engagement for their classrooms and on behalf of their schools. The effectiveness of these programs can be hindered if the educators don't have a pre-existing belief in the importance of family engagement or the knowledge of strategies and skills for family engagement (J.L. Epstein, 2010). This is an area of family engagement where pre-service teacher education programs can have a critical role (J. Ferrara & Siry, 2010). The next section will

review some of the existing literature about pre-service teachers/teacher education programs and family engagement.

### **Pre-service Teachers/Teacher Education Programs and Family Engagement**

The research focused solely on pre-service teachers or teacher education and family engagement is minimal. There have been a number of studies with recommendations for teacher education programs, however, in-service educators are often the focus of those studies (Amatea et al., 2006; Conaway, Browning, & Purdum-Cassidy, 2007; Flynn & Nolan, 2008; Harris & Goodall, 2008). Researchers in the area of family engagement widely agree that the body of literature should continue to grow as we begin to understand more about the knowledge and strategies the educators need to successfully impact family engagement in their classrooms and school communities (Amatea, Cholewa, & Mixon, 2012; Bakari, 2003; J.L. Epstein & Sanders, 2006; M. M. Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005; Smith, 2009).

**Teacher education programs and family engagement.** Questions about the role of teacher education programs in preparing teachers for working with families are not new. In a 1988 study funded by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL), a survey was sent to 575 teacher educators in the region to query the inclusion of parent-teacher relations in courses in their program (Chavkin & Williams, 1988). Only 4% reported teaching an entire course on family-school partnerships, 15% percent reported that part of a course in their program was dedicated to working with parents, and 37% reported that there was at least one course in their program that dedicated a class period to the topic (Chavkin & Williams, 1988). The same researchers sent a survey to over 800 teachers questioning them about their teacher preparation for family involvement. Of the 881 respondents, 88% believed that teachers need to be trained to

work with parents. While only 73% believed that it should be a required course in teacher education programs, 75% believed that it could be an elective course (Chavkin & Williams, 1988).

Over a decade later, in a 2001 survey of 147 teacher education programs, 7 of the 96 respondents reported no coverage of family engagement in their programs (Hiatt-Michael & ERIC Clearinghouse on Teaching and Teacher Education, 2001). Twenty-two schools indicated that their programs offered courses, but in the form of elective courses geared towards special education or early education pre-service teachers (D. Hiatt-Michael & ERIC Clearinghouse on Teaching and Teacher Education, 2001). Ninety-three percent reported that family engagement issues were woven into existing courses such as special education or reading courses, however, this coverage could range from a complete unit to a single classroom discussion. Respondents also stated that the most popular topics in rank order included parent conferences, parent concerns, parent newsletters, and working within the community (D. Hiatt-Michael & ERIC Clearinghouse on Teaching and Teacher Education, 2001). The inclusion of parent conferences as a popular course topic is of note because it is one of the most common forms of communication between home and school, and has been expressed by many pre-service teachers as an area of concern (Amatea et al., 2012; Bakari, 2003; J.L. Epstein & Sanders, 2006).

Many of the articles focused on preparing pre-service teachers for family engagement discussed the work that researchers have done in their particular teacher education program or courses to impact their students (Amatea et al., 2012; Smith, 2009). Typically, the results are not presented in the form of a model for other teacher educators, rather a discussion of what was done and suggestions from lessons learned. In one of the few models focused on preparing pre-service teachers to work with families, Bingham and Abernathy (2007) have identified four



typical educational models used with in-service educators to help them work families: (1) Professionally Centered Model – child/family needs determined by the educator/professionals: (2) Family Allied Model – families implement intervention determined by the educator/professional: (3) Family-Focused Model – educators/professionals help families choose from options that the professionals deem most beneficial: and (4) Family-Centered – families have autonomy to make decisions based on the values of their family with educators/professionals working as instruments to reflect those values.

Using constructivist theory as foundation, the researchers suggest that pre-service teachers should be instructed to use some Family-Focused ideals while functioning in a Family-Centered structure (Bingham & Abernathy, 2007). Citing the theory, the researchers assert that growth in knowledge is a result of actively connecting new ideas with past understandings (Bingham & Abernathy, 2007). To that end, the model encourages the pre-service teacher to learn to listen to the values and goals of the families and seek ways to bring them into what the teacher implements as a professional. In the model, pre-service teachers are also challenged to confront their own assumptions and biases and pursue a collaborative relationship with all parents. This style of engagement is expected to build confidence in teachers by stressing the importance of their knowledge and decision making abilities while encouraging collaboration with families (Bingham & Abernathy, 2007). The authors believe that teacher education programs that use this and similar models will help to increase new teachers' self-efficacy and beliefs that they are capable of forming successful relationships with parents in various school environments (Bingham & Abernathy, 2007).

This section has discussed some of the models and approaches that researchers have developed to prepare in-service and pre-service educators for family engagement. Though many

of the models and approaches were developed for in-service educators, there are often components that could be used to prepare pre-service educators as well. The next section will review studies by researchers with regard to pre-service teacher's knowledge of family engagement.

**Pre-service teachers and family engagement.** Though there has been an increase in recent decades, there are limited studies that focus on pre-service teachers and family engagement (L. Katz & Bauch, 1999). There are fewer qualitative studies that interview pre-service teachers to understand their perceptions and beliefs about family engagement in education. The majority of these studies have surveyed teacher education students, generally at the beginning of their time in the teacher education program. These studies often use Likert scale ratings with a few directed open-ended questions. As classrooms become more diversified, the push for research on how to prepare teachers to engage with families from all backgrounds becomes more pronounced. Interestingly, the strong push for better family engagement coverage in teacher education programs is coming from in-service teachers working with students of cultural backgrounds other than their own (D. B. Hiatt-Michael, 2006). This section will review a few of the research studies that influenced the directions of this dissertation.

When preparing teachers to engage families and build home school partnerships, one of the greatest challenges teacher education programs face is the existing beliefs and perceptions that the pre-service teachers have (Lawson, 2003; Warren et al., 2011). In a qualitative study examining how prospective teachers just beginning their program viewed working with parents, Graue (2005) found that many could benefit from a program that challenges their preconceived notions of family and involvement that are greatly influenced by their own experiences as students. This is especially true for students who will cross cultural boundaries that differ greatly

from their own. The study is a part of a larger project that begins with surveys of elementary and secondary education students during their first year with the teacher education program. This particular study focused on interviews with a smaller group of elementary education students who were chosen to participate in interviews to give more depth to the survey findings (Graue, 2005). The thematized interviews revealed that students enter their professional education with pre-existing cultural scripts that help them to make meaning and shape their professional identity. It is the responsibility of teacher education programs to challenge these scripts in an attempt to help prospective teachers form a more fluid identity that accounts for the differences of others (Graue, 2005).

Another survey of pre-service teachers sought to explore how they develop their knowledge and dispositions to work with families, as well as the extent to which they perceive their possession of the knowledge and dispositions (Pedro et al., 2012). The majority of participants replied that their dispositions towards working with families had been influenced by their courses and experiences in the teacher education program. Since this was not a longitudinal study, what is not clear is what the participants' dispositions were prior to the coursework in their teacher education programs. The authors surveyed 83 pre-service teachers in the final semester of early childhood education programs from 12 higher education institutions. All of the participants reported having classes that focused on family engagement and overall reported that they felt fairly well prepared to work with diverse parents and families (Pedro et al., 2012). The participants also reported that as a result of their programs they understood the value of parent involvement, and felt confident in their ability to determine parent knowledge of student educational needs.

Similar to students in previous studies, participants still held some concerns with regard to communicating with parents during conferences and when problems arise (Pedro et al., 2012). The authors posit that teacher preparation programs should continue to help prepare pre-service teachers to work with families by intentionally including discussions and strategies on how to do so throughout the teacher education programs (Pedro et al., 2012). It is important to note that this study was conducted with early education pre-service teachers who are usually required to have coursework that focuses on parents and families for licensure purposes. This is also a field in education where in-service teachers report receiving regular professional development on engaging in positive communication and interactions with parents (Castro et al., 2004).

Another area with an abundance of studies and teacher preparation courses focused on preparing teachers for family engagement is Special Education. A number of researchers have reported on their individual approaches to preparing pre-service teachers in special education to work with families (Hedeen et al., 2011). In their review of literature, the authors focused on four studies from teacher educators that discussed the topics and outcomes of classes for their program, ranging from approaches to collaborating with families to the characteristics of professionals that facilitate positive relationships. Again, it is important to note that these studies took place in an area of education where students are often required to complete some coursework focused specifically on working with families. These studies typically did not attempt to generalize their studies to elementary and secondary education students, though discussion sections often mention the importance of this information for all educators.

The studies reviewed in this section represent the current literature on pre-service teacher and family engagement. Many of the studies reflect the work of teacher educators with their students to gain an understanding of their existing beliefs about family engagement and the

impact of the course or program on informing or altering those beliefs. Unlike my review of literature in the other areas of family engagement, I was unable to locate a comprehensive review of literature about pre-service teachers or teacher education and family engagement. As research in this area continues, there will be a greater need for connection of all of the studies

## **Chapter Summary**

For the purpose of this research, I focused my review of literature on the benefits and barriers of family engagement in elementary and secondary education, and research that focused on in-service and pre-service educators and family engagement. Before presenting this research, I began the chapter by looking at the historical context of research on family engagement, including the work of researchers in the field of early childhood education. I followed that discussion with an overview of the changes of terminology in the field as they relate to the goals of educators' work with parents. Next, I examined research on the belief and practices of educators with regard to family involvement, and the models and approaches that researchers have developed to help them develop and sustain home-school partnerships. The final section of this chapter focused on research studies that examined pre-service teacher beliefs about family engagement and the role of teacher education programs in informing them. It is important to note that in my review of literature, I did not find any studies that specifically looked at pre-service teachers' perceptions and personal or professional experiences with family engagement. Though some researchers have looked at beliefs and perceptions together (Graue, 2005; Lawson, 2003), these researchers did not include the personal experiences or professional experiences in their studies.

In the current study, I aim to contribute to the body of literature focused on pre-service teachers and their preparation for family engagement in teacher education programs. I also hope to contribute to the literature that seeks to connect the practices of teacher education programs with regard to preparing pre-service teachers for family engagement with the expectation that teachers facilitate this work in their classroom and school community. In the next chapter, I will outline the methodological choices I made to design this study.

## **Chapter Three:**

### **Methodology**

The aim of this study was to explore pre-service teachers' perceptions and experiences with family engagement in the education of students. To accomplish this task I chose to utilize a phenomenological methodology. Since phenomenology seeks to describe not explain the essence of an individuals' experience with a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2007), this approach was ideal for gaining an understanding of the perceptions and ideas the pre-service teachers carried with them during their time in a teacher education program. Using this methodology, I sought to gain some insight from these experiences through the use of "dialogic interviewing procedures and thematic interpretations" (Thomas and Pollio, 2002, p. 44). This chapter will further discuss my rationale for choosing this approach, and detail the selection of participants, procedures for data collection and data analysis.

#### **Rationale**

Through an existential phenomenological approach to this study I hoped to gain deeper understanding of the experiences and perceptions pre-service teachers have about family engagement during their time in a teacher preparation program. While searching the empirical literature around the topic of family engagement and pre-service teachers or teacher preparation, I found no other studies that had chosen existential phenomenology as a methodology. It was my hope that this study would add to the literature, as well as expose researchers and teacher educators to the perceived experiences of pre-services teachers as shared in their own words when focused on family engagement.

There are many types and approaches to phenomenology. Many of these approaches have drawn heavily from the ideals of philosophers such as Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty (Creswell, 2007). For this study I upheld the ideals of existential phenomenology, using the guiding philosophy and approach to conducting this style of research developed by Thomas and Pollio (2002). Existentialism is a philosophy about who we are and is primarily concerned with prompting human beings to “live with a keen awareness of both their freedom and their responsibility in shaping the situation in which they are involved” (Thomas and Pollio, 2002, p. 9). Phenomenology provides a rigorous and systematic method of inquiry (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

Unlike traditional science which attempts to explore phenomena from an objective position, existential phenomenology uses dialogue between the researcher and the participant to explore various aspects of the human experience that traditional science approaches are not equipped to investigate (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). This is done by focusing on what Thomas and Pollio (2002) consider to be the four major existential grounds of human existence: others, time, body and world. In phenomenological methods, the researcher attempts to describe the participants' experience rather than his/her behaviors (Potter, 1996). This approach was predominantly guided by the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, with contributions from other phenomenological thinkers such as Husserl, Heidegger, Buber and Gadamer (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). This study utilized the University of Tennessee (UTK) method of existential phenomenology which includes the following procedures: exploring researcher bias (bracketing), selecting participants, data collection, data analysis, and developing/confirming the thematic structure (Thomas & Pollio 2002).



## **Exploring Researcher Bias (Bracketing)**

In this method, it is imperative that the researcher attends to the phenomena as it is (Idhe, 1986). Since I am personally, professionally and academically invested in the topics of family engagement and teacher preparation, one of the most important steps of the data collection process was the bracketing interview. Phenomenology demands that we bracket or attempt to set aside all that we think we know (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p.7). The researchers should become aware of their own assumptions and beliefs about the phenomena and attempt to keep them from influencing the participant interviews. According to Thomas and Pollio (2002), this allows us to humbly enter the world of the participant and listen in respectful silence as they share their experiences.

Exploring the researcher's bias requires the researcher to explore his/her beliefs about the phenomena through a bracketing interview (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). This step is of key importance because the methodology requires the researcher to approach the study with minimal influence from personal beliefs or preconceived notions. The bracketing interview helps the researcher identify these beliefs and become aware of their potential influence during participant interviews and data analysis (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). As a part of this study I participated in a bracketing interview conducted by a fellow graduate student and member of the phenomenology research group at the University of Tennessee. The interview lasted approximately 35 minutes, and centered on what I expected to find in the interviews from my study. The interviewer also asked me to share on my own experiences and beliefs that led me to pursue this area as a research topic. The interview was transcribed and reviewed for themes by the interviewer and me. One of the main themes to come from my bracketing interview was my pre-disposition to believe that students were guided by their experiences of being parented or negative examples of

parents when they thought about family engagement. Bracketing continued throughout the data collection and data analysis processes to minimize leading participants or shaping the findings based on my personal biases. This awareness helped me to remain open to new themes and ideas that came about as a result of the interviews (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

Along with the bracketing interview, I made use of field notes recorded during and after each interview, making note of things that stood out to me during the interview. This process of collecting field notes was another way to bracket, allowing me to be mindful of language and ideas of the participant versus my own during the interviews. The notes were also used to collect statements and conversations from participants that occurred once the official interviews were completed. The hand written field notes were referred to throughout the data collection and data analysis process.

### **Selecting Participants**

In phenomenological research, there are two main criteria to be considered during the process of selecting participants. First, participants should have experience with the phenomena in questions and next, the participant must be willing and able to discuss their experience (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). The research participants in this study were students enrolled in Educational Psychology 401 (EP 401) at a four-year university in the Southeast during the spring 2012 semester. I interviewed ten students from various majors and focus areas (i.e. elementary, special education, secondary, etc.). Instructors of each class section were contacted and provided me the opportunity to briefly speak to and/or email their students, inviting them to participate in the study. All requests for participation were issued directly to students to help minimize students' sense of obligation to an instructor request.

The invitation to participate and informed consent letter were presented by the researcher during a class session to assure possible participants that the study was not associated with the course, and would have no bearing on course grades. During the presentation, students were informed of the aim of the study and the intent of the researcher. A list was passed around and students interested were asked to signify their interest by providing their name and information for their preferred method of contact. In the course of a week, I attended five separate course sections with three different instructors, and gathered five separate lists totaling approximately sixty-four students volunteers. In phenomenological research, seven to twelve participants are usually all that are needed to garner information on the lived experience of a phenomenon. This number of participants is usually enough to reach a point of saturation, when there is sense of redundancy in the information shared by participants and no new themes are emerging (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

Since a large number of students responded to the invitation, purposeful sampling was used to choose students representing various teacher education and licensure programs. It was important for this study to include students from various programs to gather the many different views and approaches to family engagement that may occur based on each individual's focus area. While the students from all programs shared a number of required courses there are also some courses that vary based on their licensure program. It was my intent to include students from different programs to gain a full representation of the different experiences across teacher licensure programs and the experiences afforded students at this university. Course instructors were asked to provide a list of students' names along with their teacher education/licensure program. Using these lists, I compiled a list of approximately twenty students for initial contact. The list consisted of 3-4 students from each course section. Students who were the only

representative for their program, such as Art Education were automatically selected to be contacted about participation. Students from well-represented programs were chosen at random so that there were at least two students from that program on the list. When possible, each student selected from a course section represented a different program to ensure all sections were accounted for. The new list of students was used to send out a follow-up email. The students were informed that they had been selected to participate and asked to confirm their interest by selecting from the listed available interview times or providing a time/day that was more suitable for their schedules. My initial request to students to schedule interviews went unanswered by all of the students selected from Elementary Education and Early Childhood Education.

Eight students responded to the initial email request to schedule an interview. Upon agreement, I scheduled a meeting and arranged a location that ensured the participants comfort and confidentiality. After a week, another email was sent to students who had not responded to the initial email as well as two additional students who had listed elementary education as their licensure program. The second request resulted in the arrangement and confirmation of two more interviews on the schedule neither of which were elementary education students or early childhood education students. Table 1 outlines some of the demographic information including their gender, classification, teacher education program, and number of courses remaining in the teacher licensure program of the students on the final participant list. The absence of students from the Early Childhood and Elementary Education programs has potential data implications, since the majority of research on family engagement addresses the topic from these perspectives. This issue will be discussed further in future chapters. While the perspectives shared by students from those programs would have enriched the data, there is far less research discussing the perspectives of teachers from the programs represented in this study.

Table 1						
<i>Pre-service Teacher Experiences with Family Engagement</i>						
Student Pseudonym	Gender	Classification	Teacher Licensure Program	Major	# Courses remaining in program prior to internship or alternative licensure	
Silas	M	Senior	Latin	Classics and Religious Studies	3	
Dani F	F	Senior	Special Education	Special Education	4	
CB	M	Senior	Middle Grades Education	Geography	0	
Fred	M	Senior	History	History	0	
John	M	Senior	English	English Literature/History	0	
Red	M	Alt. Licensure	Government Mathematics/Deaf Education	Political Science*	0	
Oakview	F	Senior	Instrumental/General Music	Mathematics/Special Education	6	
Summer	F	Senior	Art Education	Music Education	1	
Coffee	F	Senior	Chemistry	Studio Art	3	
Richard	M	Alt. Licensure	Chemistry	Chemistry*	4	

\*Bachelor's Degree already completed

Once the participant total reached ten students, an email was sent to each of the course instructors requesting that a message be shared with the students in their classes. Each instructor

complied. The message simply thanked students for their interest in the study and informed them that interviews had been scheduled, but that they may still receive a communication requesting participation if more participants were needed. Students were informed that if they no longer wished to be contacted about the study, they could request that their name be removed from the list. A few students did make this request.

All ten scheduled interviews took place during a two-week time span. Each student that scheduled an interview participated, and no further contacts were made. Students who agreed and were selected for the study were asked to participate in a one-time, approximately one-hour interview. Prior to the start of each interview, the participant was presented with the Informed Consent Form. Each participant agreed to the terms of the study, and the data collection process proceeded.

### **Data Collection**

Unstructured, open-ended interviews were conducted with students who were enrolled in the Educational Psychology 401 courses during the spring 2012 semester. An important principal in phenomenology is that the researcher should not lead the participant but encourage them to elaborate and share parts of their own personal experience (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). With that in mind, the opening interview question was worded in a way that left space for the participant to speak about whatever experiences came to mind. The students were asked the following question: *Think about your experiences while in the teacher education program as well as other personal experiences you have had. What stands out to you about how to engage families and involve parents?* Other follow-up questions were asked as needed, simply to clarify and expand on information shared by the student. In a phenomenological approach, subsequent questions are

not determined in advance, but evolve from the researcher during the process to clarify, validate and summarize. Interviews were conducted until it appeared as though there was nothing new being reported or the participants indicated that they had nothing more to share. To conclude each audio recording, each participant was asked if there were any parting thoughts or experiences that they wished to share before the audio recorder was turned off.

At the close of each interview, each participant was asked to complete a short demographic form. This sheet was used to help the researcher set a cultural context for the study. Of the ten students four were female, and six were male. Eight of the students were classified as seniors. Two students were working towards alternative teacher licensure. One alternative licensure student had attained a Ph. D. in Chemistry while the other held a J.D.; they were not asked about their undergraduate majors. One of the alternative licensure students was in his second semester of teaching, while the other suggested that he was in the process of applying for jobs. Neither of them intended to participate in an internship prior to completion of the teacher education program. The other eight students were scheduled to begin their internships during the fall 2012 semester. One student listed her program as special education and prior to the interview stated her intent to work in the elementary school setting. Another student listed her programs as mathematics and deaf education; she did not explicitly list what grade levels she would work with, however, licensure in this program is for all grades.

Through the demographic survey completed at the end of the interview, the majority of students reported their family upbringing as nuclear (with both parents and siblings) with family socio-economic identities of middle-class to upper-middle class. Only one student reported a socio-economic status of low-income or below poverty level. All participants self-identified their ethnicity as White or Caucasian-American. Counting the present semester, the students reported

having 0-6 classes left to complete prior to beginning their internship experience. When asked to list courses they had taken that made any mention of working with families, every student made note of one of the Educational Psychology courses required for licensure, eight made note of a special education course, and a few listed a reading education course as well. When asked to what extent the students believed family engagement had been discussed in their courses one student replied rarely, six students replied occasionally, 2 students replied frequently, and one replied very frequently. The responses to this question are noteworthy when viewed in comparison to responses to the interview questions, where many students struggled to recall instances during their courses where family engagement was discussed. Though it was not a direct question of the interview or demographic survey, one student did mention being a parent of a toddler, seven made note of the fact that they were not parents, and two shared no information about the subject.

Participants were asked to provide a pseudonym for the demographic forms and interviews to provide a level of confidentiality. The interviews were recorded utilizing a digital recording device so that the researcher could make use of the participants' exact words when analyzing the data. Interviews were stored digitally on the researcher's laptop in a password-protected file in order to assure confidentiality and privacy. The audio recorded interviews were transcribed for analysis by an outside transcriber. The transcriber signed a confidentiality agreement.

The interviews were all conducted prior to the students participating in a discussion on family engagement and building home-school partnerships during their Educational Psychology 401 course. During the interview process and through conversations with some participants post interview, it was determined that it would add richness to the data in this study to also include a



written reflection from students after the family engagement session. To obtain this information, I submitted and received approval for a Form D for the original Institutional Review Board approval. This allowed me to obtain a separate informed consent from students in the class sessions to analyze their reflections on the session. The form asked students to list three things that stood out to them from the discussion, choose one of those things and describe what it was that stood out to them. The final question asked them to list any questions they still had about family engagement. This information was used to expand on the experiences and ideas of students, using a shared experience of discussing their ideas about family engagement.

After all of the participant interviews were completed I had to opportunity to return to the Educational Psychology 401 course of 5 instructors and facilitate a discussion on Home-School Partnerships with all course participants and gather more data. The data is comprised of written reflections collected from participants after we engaged in a one or one and a half hour session about family engagement and family-school partnerships. During the sessions, I facilitated a group discussion around our beliefs, experiences and strategies around family engagement. Throughout the sessions, participants were encouraged to share their personal and professional thoughts, experiences and questions on the subject. Then along with the course instructor and other members of the course, I shared information in an attempt to work through any assumptions or concerns. At the end of each session, the course participants were presented with the option to complete a written reflection of their experiences with the discussion that would be used as supplemental data for this study. Again, students were informed that the decision to participate or not would have no influence on their course grade. Students who agreed to have their reflection data used in the study were presented with an informed consent and a written

reflection sheet that asked for the response to three writing prompts. The data from these reflections will be discussed in chapter five as they relate to my study implications.

## **Data Analysis**

There are a number of approaches to analyzing phenomenological interviews. The process of data analysis is a way to organize the data so that what has been learned can be communicated with others (Hatch, 2002) . To accomplish this task with my interviews, I chose to use an interpretive analysis. To guide me through this process I referred to Hatch's (2002, p. 181) steps in interpretive analysis:

1. Read the data for a sense of the whole.
2. Review impressions previously recorded in research journals and/or bracketed in protocols and record these in field notes and memos.
3. Read the data, identify impressions, and record impressions in memos.
4. Study memos for salient interpretations.
5. Reread data, coding places where interpretations are supported or challenged.
6. Write a draft summary.
7. Review interpretations with participants.
8. Write a revised summary and identify excerpts that support interpretations.

Once a few interviews had been completed, the audio files were sent to a transcriptionist and transcribed verbatim. With each completed interview, I first listened to the audio and read along with the typed transcript. This was a way to check for transcription errors, as well as to become immersed in the interviews and begin to form impressions of the data in context with the overall data set (Hatch, 2002). The written reflections were also transcribed by typing the hand written responses into a Microsoft Word document.

Next I reviewed each transcript using qualitative data analysis software, Atlas.ti. In the first review of each transcript, I began to code the data or highlight blocks of text that stood out to me. These selections were noted as possible themes, and using a memo function in the

software I described briefly what made the passage stand out. I also noted any metaphors or “catch” phrases used by the participants. The purpose of this first step was to begin to identify any points in the data that I wanted to return to for further analysis, recognizing that not all highlighted portions would become themes. It also allowed me to begin to make connections within and across each of the interviews. The memos included a number of responses. In many of the earlier interviews they were my initial reactions to a block of text, or a connection to my bracketing interview themes. As I made my way through more interviews, the memos began to show connections and recurrences that I believed to be present in other interviews. Some highlighted sections did not include memos, which implied that I simply wanted to hold on to the participant’s words.

On my second pass through the transcripts, I began to connect each interview using the 52 codes, or what are referred to in phenomenological research as meaning units. Meaning units represent the foundational elements of a participant’s experience that are later grouped together and organized into a thematic structure of the experience (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). I began connecting the codes by paying special attention to things that stood out during the first pass in some interviews but possibly overlooked in others. This process also allowed me to begin making preliminary themes that showed relationships between the codes. In this process, a theme was viewed as a “pattern of description that repetitively recur as important aspects of each participant’s description of his/her experience” (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 37). One example would be a theme that represented the participants’ view of parents and encompassed codes that referenced that participants’ positive or negative view of parents and/or parent participation in education. Along with each preliminary theme, a new memo was made describing the

connections I saw between codes and across interviews that led to the development of a particular theme.

Each interview was reviewed again, this time I looked to see if the portions of text selected for each code fit into my description of the theme. The goal of this review was to determine if each of my coded selections were salient to the research of this study (Hatch, 2002). If a portion of selected text did not seem to fit with the theme I had developed, I first reviewed the text and any memo I had associated with it to understand why the text was initially highlighted. If it still did not seem to accurately represent the theme, then that code may not be supported by the data and was set aside as a code that stood out but didn't align with regards to its fit with the data overall (Hatch, 2002).

Initially themes were developed using my words to label what a set of codes represented. Once I was satisfied that all of my identified themes were accurately supported by the data, I went back and selected a phrase or statement said by a participant that best represented the tone of the theme. When possible I identified metaphors that the participants used to express the experience in a way that was most meaningful to them, and may not have been easily expressed with ordinary dialogue (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

A part of the University of Tennessee method of existential phenomenology is the unique opportunity to utilize feedback from a phenomenology research group. This multi-disciplinary group was comprised of the creators of this method, Drs. Thomas and Pollio as well as many other faculty and graduate students. Along with my own data analysis, I also presented a student interview and reflection transcript to the interpretive research group at the University of Tennessee. During the group interpretive process, the transcript is read out loud with group

members identifying meaning units or emerging themes that stand out for them. The group engaged in discussion about the transcript and asked questions directed to me about the interview. During the group discussions I made note of various comments and suggestions as well as things that stood out to various members. Each team member also made their own notes and interpretations on individual copies of the transcript. At the end of the session I collected each of these copies for review. All interpretations were noted and later used as secondary memos to challenge my own interpretations and codes. When the themes were developed, I returned to the group with a thematic structure in order to gain further assurances that all themes and subthemes were well represented within the text.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study received IRB approval for the recording and transcription of audio interviews and student written reflections. Prior to the collection of this data all students were asked to sign an informed consent that was kept on record for the duration of the study. Interview participants were also asked to select a personal pseudonym. All names were changed prior to the audio file being sent to the transcriptionist, with special care given not to mention the participant's name during the interview. The student review forms were each given a number and transcribed by me to ensure their confidentiality prior to those transcripts being reviewed by the research team. It is also important to note that consideration was given to students even during the recruitment process.

Since the instructors were all familiar with me and spoke on my behalf during my introduction to the class, it was important that the students knew that participation in the study would have no bearing on their course grade. I wanted students to feel comfortable to volunteer

or choose not to without concern as to whether or not their instructor expected them to. Also, since two of the instructors were also a part of the research team, all reviews of the transcripts in the research team were conducted after the semester was completed.

### **Issues of Validity and Reliability**

Phenomenological research is considered valid if steps are taken to ensure that all themes are supported by the data and accurately represents the participants' experience of the phenomena (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Although no two interviews are ever alike, the structure of the different experiences can have some common features (Thomas & Pollio). With that in mind, reliability for this study was established by seeking a consensus among the research team that the themes and supporting text did in fact capture the essence of the participants' experiences. This made way for the assumption that there was sufficient evidence to support the researcher's interpretation (Post, 2010). Phenomenology assumes that the researcher will bring his or her own understanding to the interpretation of data, and recognizes that it represents just one interpretation of many (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Another important part of the existential phenomenology methodology is the incorporation of the participant feedback on the thematic structure. This step helps to ensure rigor and improves accuracy of the findings. The thematic structure presented in the next chapter was shared with study participants via email. Each participant was then asked to share feedback regarding how well the findings captured their experiences.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I have shared my rationale for choosing existential phenomenology as a method. I have also discussed existential phenomenology as an approach and how it was applied

to this study. The processes for participant recruitment and selection, data collection, and data analysis were then discussed. In the next chapter I will share the findings of the study.

## **Chapter Four: Analysis and Findings**

In this study, I set out to explore the perceptions and experiences of pre-service teachers around family engagement. As discussed in Chapter Three, the study utilized a phenomenological methodology and framework (Thomas & Pollio, 2004). The primary source of data was 10 interviews with students during final semesters in a teacher education program. The students ranged from having zero to six classes left before their teaching internship. The present chapter will include descriptive information about the participants, a presentation of the thematic structure that captured the participants' experiences and perceptions, as well as a discussion of the themes comprising the structure. Sample quotes will be used throughout the chapter to illustrate how the themes are a representation of the participants' own words.

### **Thematic Structure and Analysis**

The transcripts were analyzed qualitatively, using the existential phenomenological method discussed in chapter three. In existential phenomenology, perception is the interaction between a person and his/her world (Merleau-Ponty, 2002). Perception, then, presents the lived human experience as a grouping of aspects that stand out in a certain context or against the background of a greater more overall experience (Merleau-Ponty, 2002). So, in existential phenomenology the aspects of an individual's experience that stand out are considered *figural*, while the context that supports those aspects are referred to as the *ground* (Jensen, 2012). Three figural themes and a ground emerged from this study, and characterized the participants' perceptions of family engagement in education:



Ground: *You have to get parents on your side... you can't be on their bad side.*

Theme I: *You have to keep them involved... make them feel comfortable* (roles)

Theme II: *We are restrained by various bounds* (barriers)

Theme III: *They don't see the bigger picture* (assumptions)

Figure 1 shows the structure of the participants' perceptions of family engagement in education. The context for these perceptions is expressed in the ground theme. For the participants, family engagement is about being seen in a positive light by parents and not doing things that will cause them to see you in a negative light or work against you. Central to their perceptions of the barriers to family engagement as well as the roles that teachers and parents play in that engagement is a set of assumptions that often overlap and can lead to barriers that inhibit the parents and teachers from fulfilling their roles. Surrounding the perception of roles, barriers and assumptions are the notion/fear that you have to be careful to leave parents with a positive perception of you; you do not want them to have a negative view of you. This creates new barriers, feeds the prescribed notion of roles, and is buffered or perpetuated by the assumptions that they hold.

The following statements by multiple participants clearly show their need to be on the good side of parents, and brings together some of the perceptions that led to the selection of the ground theme:

You have to *cover yourself (FRED )* and *give them what they need (OAKVIEW)* because there can be a *detached feeling (COFFEE)* especially when *they don't see a correlation between the core curriculum and [your] program (SUMMER)*. *The best way to go about it is to let them*

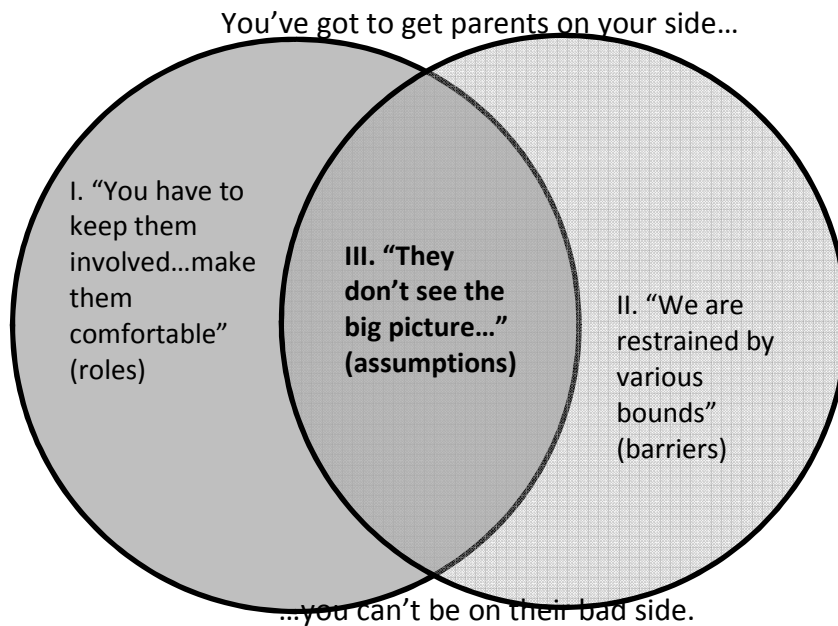


Figure 1: Structure of the Perceptions of Pre-service Teachers about Family Engagement

*know who you are up front as opposed to only coming to them when things aren't going the way they should – so that they know it's a two way street – then if they have concerns they can just let you know or ask you – to take the pressure off (RICHARD).*

Theme I represents a discussion of the various roles of parents and teachers in this process. Theme II describes the barriers that teachers sometimes face that inhibit their ability to work with parents. Theme III brings forth some of the assumptions held by the pre-service teachers that may ultimately work as barriers against family engagement, though they were not

discussed by the participants as things they knew or expected to be true about some parents. The themes will be explained in further detail in the following sections.

## **The Ground**

The quote representing the context is an amalgamation of the words from participants *DANIF* and *OAKVIEW* and represents the overall perceptions of all participants:

*You've got to get parents on your side...you can't be on their bad side (RED and SUMMER).*

The participants were grounded in the perception that in order to engage with families, you can't do things that upset them or cause them to have a negative perception of you. The students often referenced the power that parents have when it comes to teachers with comments like:

*...you'll be accountable to them [parents] when you are in the field (RED) and*

*It's the children that make or break the program, but the parents control the children nine out of ten times (SUMMER).*

The theme came from the reporting of the participants on the influence/impact of families that comes to mind when thinking of the perceptions or experiences with family engagement. As the participants spoke of their perceptions, there was an underlying implication that the relationship between teacher and parent was a tenuous one that could influence their ability to do their job as well as their ability to keep their job.

Speaking from personal experience with immediate and extended family members, participant ten commented on the importance of the relationship between families and teachers:

*The involvement of the family at home can radically change the success or failure of the student in the classroom... The support base [for the teacher] back at the house just really – it plays a massive role. (SILAS)*

He then went on to describe an instance when the collaboration between a teacher and his own parents when he was a student led to better communication between himself and the teacher:

*...there were a couple of classes that I took in high school where I just struggled very, very hard – both with relationships with the educator as well as the course material... we all had a conference – they didn't swoop in and yell at the teacher or anything like that... they just helped [us] brainstorm... and my parents were there to help me find ways to communicate more effectively with the teacher and find ways to learn the material in my way. (SILAS).*

This is one example of how family engagement can aid a teacher in his or her efforts to educate students. In this instance it was the parents that helped the student understand the teacher and the course material. The parents were able to communicate with the teacher and get clarification when the student was not able to, ultimately contributing to his ability as a student to *successfully complete the class (SILAS).*

Another student described observations of another teacher whose relationship with parents pushes students to keep going, similar to his own experiences as a student:

*...she has a fairly large amount of contact with parents. So, you can tell that some of the students are more motivated just because that exists – and like that's very similar to my high school experience in that my parents were very involved in the school community*

*and so having that extra motivator really kept students not necessarily in line, but doing what they were supposed to be doing and trying... (JOHN)*

This theme also emerged from the participants as fear or concern about parents' ability to negatively impact them. Participants *DANIF* and *FRED* spoke about the importance of opening the lines of communication with parents early to avoid misunderstandings later:

*...if you wait to call the parents until there is a problem, the parents will associate you with problems and negativity, and often they will react to you negatively because they see you as criticizing their child. If you've contacted them before that ....to give any kind of information other than direct criticism, you are more likely to develop a rapport with that parent and it's going to make your life easier. (RED)*

*... most of these things relate to one issue of how do you cover yourself by making sure you are talking to the parents – that way the parents aren't completely out of the loop when problems arise and then they're hostile towards you. (FRED)*

A few students even referenced discussions from class or conversations with in-service teachers that stressed the importance of starting off with positive conversations with parents to avoid issue or confrontations in future interactions.

*...we talk about in the teacher education class that you never want the first conversation as a teacher with a parent to be a negative one...If the parents really don't know who you are as the teacher then they will automatically side with the students and against you. (FRED)*

*We talked about...just be courteous and know where your kids are coming from I guess just make communication at the beginning of the year because...if teachers didn't make communication, they only made communication like they just waited until the student was disrupting or they're having issues, then the parents almost sometimes sided with their child because they didn't know the teacher and didn't have a background with them and that can cause even more problems...but if the parent is siding with the child and it's a serious issue, then they might go to the principal. I mean you can't always promise to eliminate the problem, but definitely talking to the parents at the beginning of the year so they know you and know you're not calling their child out for no reason. (OAKVIEW)*

*So, obviously, I feel like parents [are] a huge, huge backbone of any fine arts program. Pretty much every methods course, we learn about dealing with families as staff and administrations, we always talk about how – you have to be on their good side.*

*(SUMMER)*

Again, the emphasis is on getting the parent on the side of the teacher as opposed to the student, when an issue arises. This implies that a parent will always disagree with a teacher that he/she doesn't already have a positive relationship with, regardless of what the teacher says or does. Participant 1 also directly mentioned the concern about a parent going to a principal about a teacher, though the consequences of that discussion were not explicitly discussed. Within the ten interviews, there was very little mention of any other outcomes of relationships and interactions between home and school. The focus for these pre-service teachers appeared to be the relationship between home and the teacher and the negative things that could happen as a result of not being on the good side of the parents.

Another participant even made reference to the possibility of job security issues for teachers who do not form positive relationships with parents. Discussions in class led this participant to believe that administrators may side with parents over teachers in some circumstance:

*The general vibe that I've always gotten has been that when we are dealing with parents, the teacher education program is stressing kind of a diplomatic approach. And, there is a strong suggestion that we are at the mercy of the administration of whatever school we are at because I keep getting the feeling that if you wronged the wrong parent your job could end up being in peril... there are some very involved parents who seem to have a lot of sway over the local school board and potentially to your future. (RED)*

As noted in the ground theme, participants clearly perceived an important part of family engagement to be maintaining positive relationships with parents and avoiding negative situations and relationships. Part of this perception was shared through their discussions of the roles that parents and teachers have/should have with regards to family engagement and the education of students. These roles will be further explicated in the next theme, *You have to keep them involved and aware... make them feel comfortable calling and emailing.*

**Theme I: You have to keep them involved and aware... make them feel comfortable calling and emailing (roles)**

The quote used to capture the essence of Theme I comes from participant one who hints of the role of the teacher in facilitating a parent's ability to enact part of his/her role of communicating with the teacher:

*You have to keep them involved and aware...make them feel comfortable calling or emailing. (OAKVIEW)*

The participants discussed the role they believed a teacher played in engaging families in students' education, as well as the role they believed families and in some cases communities played in that engagement as well. Phenomenological interviewing allows the interviewer to ask back when the participant says something that could be elaborated upon or given further clarification. This technique was particularly helpful when another participant made a similar comment as participant one, and said that it was something that parents and teachers "should do." When asked to say more, the participant elaborated on the statement, adding:

*There needs to be a sense of community around the students and also a sense of trust that the teacher will do their job, and that the students will go on learning something...and that the parents should support it... (COFFEE)*

This particular statement presents a role of teachers, students and educators. Many of the other participants made reference to the roles of parent/families and teachers in the education of students and interactions with each other.

**Roles of parents/family members.** Parents and families were also described as fitting into supportive roles. For some the focus was on the support of the student, others saw them in a supportive role of teachers as well. One way that parents could show this support was through regular communication with the teacher especially when there may be a problem at home that could affect the student at school:



*...they have to let the teacher know. So, that [communication] is important because the teacher will learn more about the family and find ways – what works for the student*  
(OAKVIEW)

Occasionally, the ideas of the role of parents and families were sparked from personal experiences, and expressed as an expectation that it should be the same way for others.

*In my schooling experience, it's- family is something that drives someone and it can be a good thing or a bad thing. And so, just having families that value - a family that values learning – being raised in a rich learning environment – having that around you will really allow you to succeed. More just because it's not all internal desire – you have to have that external force that is pushing you from a very young age which helps you develop internally. (JOHN)*

This participant's perception was that family should be an external force for motivation of students, though that can be a positive or negative influence. Again, it is interesting to note that this comment began as a personal experience that was later expressed as an expectation for what should happen for others as well.

Some students also expressed their perception that parents had some responsibility for keeping students interested or engaged in school. In a post interview discussion recorded in field notes, one participant expressed a belief that if a parent had not had a lot of formal education or a good educational experience himself/herself, sometimes the only role they may have in their child's education is stressing the importance of getting an education. Though expressed from a more negative perspective, participant one also shared thoughts on the importance of parents stressing the importance of school:

*I think sometimes parent involvement with school if you don't, sometimes it leads to I guess other consequences besides directly in school. Like behavior stuff. Just maybe if parents are not trying to be involved, but when you're not involved you're not showing "hey, school's important." (OAKVIEW)*

This particular comment could be considered an assumption, but it also gives some insight into this participant's perception of the role of parents in a student's education. Part of the role of parents is to be involved and show students that school is important. When asked later in a follow-up question to say more about parents being involved and showing that school is important the following response was given:

*...especially like, even in elementary to get intrinsic motivation, you want parents to be reading with them at home so they enjoy it, because you don't just want them to associate reading with school and academics...if a kid doesn't like reading – to get them to – I mean you can get them to like reading in school, it's possible but it would make it easier if the parents would read with them at home and stuff like that, you know. (OAKVIEW)*

Part of the parent's role is to be supportive of the student and the teacher, in this case by making the teacher's efforts to help the child enjoy reading "easier" by reading with them at home. Aside from the parent being able to read, this does not require any special skill. It is implied that the parent reading at home would help the child learn to enjoy reading and aid the teacher when reading activities are presented in school.

One student made reference to the role that parents shouldn't have in their child's education:

*I'm a big fan of students working with their parents to do things and find examples in the real world without parents taking over and doing the work for them. (SILAS)*

There is still the element of support from home by finding real life examples to relate to school material, but it should not go as far as doing the student's work for them. The subject of over-involved parents did not come up in any other recorded interviews, but there were a few post interview conversations where participants shared concern over how to address over involvement. One participant used the example of a teacher knowing that a parent had completed homework or a project and questioned how they would handle that situation, believing that it would likely be a confrontational interaction.

A couple of participants also saw the role of the parent as a support for the school community as well. This was specifically mentioned in the context of support for school activities and clubs. Parents are also important for fundraisers for clubs and moral boosters for competitive groups:

*... [they] help raise money and have like bakes sales or help set things up. Typically speaking...lots of parents show up for swim meets and soccer games and baseball games...so that's good. (FRED)*

*I'm a music major, so the biggest thing within music, well just music in general is parental support. Obviously if you don't have parents behind you, the kids aren't going to participate...Especially in my own experiences...the band boosters were the ones that supported us. They're always at every event...they also raise money for us and that was pretty much anything extra we did was from the parental backing of it. (SUMMER)*

***Roles of teachers.*** Every participant in this study shared their perception of the role of the teachers in facilitating family engagement. Some shared their perceptions as ideas about what their role would be as a teacher, not just what teachers should do in general. Connecting to the ground of the study, some students clearly saw the teacher's facilitation of family engagement as a way to avoid the negative situations and relationships with parents.

*You have to kind of open up that avenue [communication] in a positive light. If parents don't really know who you are as a teacher, they're automatically going to be more inclined to side with their child anyway...you cover yourself by making sure you talk to the parents... that way they aren't out of the loop when problems arise and aren't hostile towards you. (FRED)*

*The best way to go about it is to let them know who you are upfront...so that they know that it's [communication] a two-way street, then if they have concerns they can just let you know or ask you, to take the pressure off I guess is another way to say it. (RICHARD)*

Both participants are speaking of having open and early communication as a means to avoid miscommunication or issue with parents later on. Participant nine had previously mentioned how parents sometimes get upset with teachers when they have to share negative information about a student. This is one way for teachers to avoid those confrontational interactions.

Other participants discussed the importance of teachers facilitating family engagement to aid and support students and to help the families in the process.

*When something is going on – the teachers, I feel like they're the ones who see it. So they're the ones that need to tell the community members there's something that needs to happen. (COFFEE)*

*Sometimes, you have to give them what they need. If they have elementary kids and you want them reading at home, you know the kid's homeless but there's really the cheap paperback books, just send a few home or even make your own and put them together. (OAKVIEW)*

*That first contact is key...if you make that first contact to say this is who I am, I'm teaching your student this semester, then they [parents] don't feel like they have to do all of the work. (RICHARD)*

The participants also discussed the possibility of the teacher having to fill the role of the parent or take on actions that would usually be the parent's role, for the benefit of the student.

*Definitely in our [Educational Psychology] course, we spent a whole lot of time talking about your role as a teacher and also as someone who is looking out for the best interest of the kids when the parents can't necessarily be there to see them. (RED)*

Similar to participant two, participant one anticipates the role of the teacher running at times parallel to the role of parents, especially in a residential school setting where many of the students will live on school grounds during the school year. This is a unique perspective on the role that teachers may have to take when it comes to the education of students:

*My major is deaf education so it's a little different because I've observed at (state school for deaf students) and you know [students] live there all during the week and only go*

*home on weekends so you have to get really creative because you can't always invite parents.... Sometimes you have to make choices ... (OAKVIEW).*

When asked during the interview to share an example of when a teacher would “make choices” nothing came to mind. The participant did share in post interview discussion, however, that occasionally parents of deaf children who have their hearing often want their children to learn to speak and not use sign language exclusively, but the teachers and staff at the school may decide that is not in the best interest of that particular student and choose not to pursue it as an education plan.

Participant six worked with students in an after school setting and had experiences acting in a parent's role for a student. Discussing the experience then leads him to discuss how he would handle the situation as a teacher:

*They have these agendas and each day the students get scores....the kid takes it home and the parents are supposed to sign it...what happens though is that I'm signing though because the parents don't – the parents won't si-... you know. The kids forget - and the parents don't ask. So that's a great way [for teachers to get parent involvement] but I think you need to set that up from the beginning and work on building that up because- I feel that some of the parents really, they don't know to sign them I guess. (CB)*

It seems as though he believes it is the responsibility of the teacher to make sure parents know what to do in this particular situation. It is interesting to note, however, that he censured himself when finding the words to express why the agendas aren't signed by parents. There were times when he started to say things and would cut himself off and say another word. His ultimate

response is that it is the responsibility of the teacher to ensure that parents are aware of the engagement efforts and properly instructed on how to fulfill their role in the exchange.

Another participant brought the discussion of roles full circle when discussing the things she's learned about her role as a parent while in the teacher education program that have in turn influenced her perceptions of the responsibilities of teachers:

*I guess being in the program – I've learned as a parent, like now I read to him [her son] more – where before I would have thought he was too young. But - as a teacher you have to tell parents things like that...because not all of them will know that. (DANIF)*

## **Theme II: We are restrained by various bounds (barriers)**

Whether speaking about what they expected to encounter as teachers or just about family engagement in general, all of the participants mentioned something that can serve as a barrier to family engagement. For many of the students the barriers were discussed in terms of being roadblocks for teacher, but half of the participants also made some reference to the barriers to family engagement that parents encounter that preclude them from engaging in the education of their children. Regardless of who was impacted, the participants believed there would be limitations to the ability of families and schools to engage. The theme quote *restrained by [various] bounds*, comes from participant two who was referring to the expectations that some barriers could be expected for a teacher:

*So one of the things that I found frustrating and I expect to encounter more in the future is being somewhat restrained by the professional bounds that separate me from the parents – that limit me from being able to communicate with them like I wish I could. (RED)*

Other participants also discussed the barriers they believed they would face when engaging with families, especially the two fine arts students who expressed the possibility of parents not being supportive of their subjects or finding them unnecessary. Participant seven recognized the barrier for all fine arts program, not just her prospective program in particular.

*I think within my program that we have issues with, with parents and the correlation between core curriculum and the fine arts programs. A lot of parents see that their student isn't doing well in, let's say a math class and they blame it on "oh well, they're spending too much time in band" or "they're spending too much time in theater." And so, that's the kind of issues that as a music educator I have to learn how to overcome.*  
(SUMMER)

For some participants the lack of discussion of family engagement in the teacher education program was perceived as a potential barrier. Three participants made reference to this particular barrier. Students were most candid about this concern in casual post interview discussion, stating that not having more conversations about family engagement made them anxious or nervous. One participant verbalized this fear during the interview; she was particularly concerned about how to communicate with the families if she noticed that the student was experiencing an issue:

*But I feel like I don't really know what goes on or what you actively do and that's actually one of the things that scares me most. How do you actually do something – I don't know – what do I do – I wouldn't know where to start. (COFFEE).*



Some anticipated that even with efforts from the teacher to engage families there are still some barriers that will keep them from engaging. They recognized that various life circumstances may still make it difficult for parents to be involved.

*The parents of the kids – and I have a good relationship with the parents that I work with and they're – they – it's not that they're not wanting to be a part of their kids' lives, but I mean life – you know their survival – I guess survival is not the right word, but their livelihood gets in the way. (CB)*

*Just going back to deaf education I think it's really hard because – not all of them are residential schools but a lot of them are and you know most of them who do go there, they live all over the state and you can't really physically get to the parents and you can't always just invite all of the parents. (OAKVIEW)*

One participant also acknowledged that the grade level of the child or structure of the school may be a barrier for some parents as well.

*I've just noticed that I feel like there's more support in younger grades. You know and then like in high school, there's more like a detached feeling. Probably because there are more teachers and different subjects and things like that...it might be intimidating for some parents. (COFFEE)*

Two other participants made note of the fact parents who have to sit through Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings for their students may be put off by the process, and that this could lead to a hesitance to be involved.

*We've talked about that with the IEP procedures and the like. It can be very intimidating for the child who is there, for the parents who are there, too, because – especially if the parents aren't very well educated, it's just the bureaucracy that's suddenly interfering with their child... So, that's scary for anyone – could make them not want to come back. (RED)*

For other parents their socioeconomic status or level of education may be a factor. Speaking from personal experience of a family member and a discussions in class, participant five shares a potential barrier for parents and teachers:

*...he's not able to help the older kids with math, because he didn't complete school himself and so, I guess like that – I mean that's something that I've – I don't know how I would deal with that as a teacher – I guess you have to be careful with homework...sometimes you can't expect kids to...like homework – they're not going to do it if they don't have the parents that can help them. And like the programs with the box tops- the wealthier families are going to do the box tops because – it's only on name brand foods – it's not, like, kinda fair, you know, to ask them to do that. (DANIF)*

Through observation as well as personal and professional experiences, the participants formed a perception that there are barriers that will limit the efforts of parents and teachers to improve family engagement. For some of the participants, there are some barriers that they may not recognize that were prevented in the form of some assumptions that they held. The next theme explores some of the assumptions participants expressed that may impact family engagement.

### **Theme III: They don't see the bigger picture...(assumptions)**

Throughout the interviews, a number of participants made generalized statements that they believed to be true about parents. The theme quote may not have been intended as negative, but it did make a generalized statement about a group of parents or families.

*They [parents] don't see the bigger picture, where I think – where I come in to try to let them know that. (CB)*

Others were clearly more negative in their discussion with parents and the expectations held for their interactions with them.

*Sometimes they don't feed them right and sometimes they smoke with them in the car, stuff like that – just basic necessities that kids – I would think would be common sense – isn't really so common with other parents. (DANIF)*

These participants may have been thinking of a particular population or small group of parents, however, that distinction was not made during the course of the interview.

*I don't think a whole lot of students are getting that from one or both of their parents. Where they're sitting down [to complete homework] and like, "Now, I'm gonna – you're gonna do it – and I'm gonna make sure you do it. A lot of parents now – they don't care. (FRED)*

*You know they [failing students] are not doing well either because their parents – sometimes I think when you're not involved it kind of sends a message that school is not as important – you know – as it should be. (OAKVIEW)*

Similarly, participant five later explains how he can determine what type of parent a student has:

*I'll always think of it as, your kid is in that school and they're learning but really even though I don't know the parent and I may never meet the parent, those kids are a representation of their parents and so if a kid conducts himself or herself in a respectful manner, then you can imagine the parent doing the same thing. If he's in there and he's showing off or he... you know you kind of put another tag on a parent, I guess you would say. (CB)*

In the ground theme the participants share the importance of keeping parents content and remaining on their good side. Participant two expressed the idea that in order to successfully engage families you must be prepared to deal with parents that have “issues.”

*I feel like once I'm out in the field, the way I'm going to be able to do a good job with family engagement is from the fact that I'm a lot older than most of the other students. I've already had a successful law practice, so I'm used to engaging with people who are hostile or going through emotional problems one-on-one. (RED)*

Participant two is also the only participant to make assumptions about other pre-service teachers. He goes on to make an assumption about his fellow pre-service teachers and their ability to engage with families when they become teachers. It is also interesting to note that he is older than most of the others in his program, and is entering the field of education as a second career.

*I think that some of my colleagues in the program will leave the program not really knowing what to do in those situations... if you're taking a 21 year-old and you're*

*putting them in a room where you've got angry parents or you've got concerned parents or whatever else, and they've not been trained in what they should do and don't have some life experiences with people one-on-one – that can be a problem. (RED)*

In this theme participants expressed a number of assumptions that would make it difficult for parents or teachers to fulfill their roles and maintain positive relationships. Maintaining some of these assumptions while interacting with families may also prove to be barriers to engagement that would be difficult to overcome without a change in perception.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I presented the three major themes and ground from this study. Participants' perceptions of family engagement were grounded in the notion that it was best to have a positive relationship with families, and just as important to avoid having negative interactions with them. All of the participants discussed some aspect of the roles that teachers and parents have in family engagement and the education of students, and were aware of potential barriers that may inhibit either party from fulfilling those roles. Participants also had some assumptions that were not necessarily discussed as barriers, and were usually negative perceptions that were generalized to a larger group of parents/families, when a much smaller and specific population may have been in mind. In the next chapter, I will provide a discussion of the themes and propose several implications that can be drawn from this study.

## **Chapter Five:**

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of pre-service teachers with regard to family engagement and the education of students. A significant body of literature exists that explores the topic from the perspective of in-service teachers including novice teachers who have recently completed their teacher education programs and acquired licensure. In my own experiences as a facilitator in the educational psychology course that yielded the participants, I have some first-hand experiences of the pre-service teacher's perceptions of family engagement. I have heard the pre-service teachers express fear or concern about having positive interactions and relationships with families. I have been privy to their discussions and explorations of the roles that family members and teachers play in building those relationships. There have also been times when class members have shared some assumptions or generalized notions that they hold about specific populations that I believed to be detrimental to their future work with families. It is primarily these experiences and concerns that led me to further explore ways in which pre-service teachers perceive the engagement of families in the education of their students.

The study was introduced in Chapter One, while Chapter Two provided a review of the literature on the topic of family engagement, concluding with the literature that has focused on pre-service teachers and family engagement. Chapter Three discussed my methodological decisions, detailing the existential phenomenological methodology and the steps that were taken throughout the study. Chapter Four reviewed the findings of the study, detailing the thematic structure and analysis. In this chapter, I will briefly summarize and discuss the major findings of the study. Next I will suggest possible implications for the study for teacher education programs

and school administrators, linking them to the current research on family engagement and/or areas for further research when there is a gap in the literature. I will conclude the chapter with my final conclusions and a reflection of my experiences interviewing pre-service teachers about family engagement.

### **Summary of Findings**

The themes that emerged provide some insight into the research questions posed at the start of the study: (1) How do pre-service teachers view the roles of parents in their interactions with teachers, administrators and other school staff to facilitate the education of students?; and (2) What influences do pre-service teachers cite as helping to form their views of the role of families in the education of students? For the participants in this study, there seemed to be a limited view of the role of parents in the education of students. The participants mostly discussed parents as having the role of assisting and supporting educators but made little mention of the other contributions that parents or families may make. Similar to other studies, the participants did not focus on partnerships between parents and educators, but emphasized the things they believed that parents should do to help educators teach their children.

With regard to the second research question, the participants seemed to be mostly influenced by their own personal experiences. For the participants in this study, their personal experiences as students, observations of their own parents, or experiences with their own children seemed to be the greatest influence on how they perceived the role of parents in education. This runs contrary to the perception that I bracketed; my own assumption that students would most often cite their experiences in the teacher education programs as having a strong influence on their perceptions of the roles of families in education.

The findings in this study represent pre-service teachers' perceptions of family engagement in education. As they discussed their own perceptions and experiences with family engagement, many kept coming around to the notion that an important piece of family engagement is remaining on the good side of parents and avoiding negative interactions with them. These perceptions were represented by the ground theme *You've got to get parents on your side...you can't be on their bad side*. Represented by the theme *You have to keep them involved...make them feel comfortable*, participants shared their perceptions of the roles that teachers and family members play in facilitating family engagement.

The participants also anticipated a number of barriers that would interfere with family engagement efforts as discussed within the theme *[We are] restrained by [various] bounds*. Finally, as students described their experiences and perceptions they shared assumptions that were often negative, generalized and provided some insight into other barriers that may impact their ability to engage families. This theme was represented by the name *They don't see the bigger picture...* Guided by these findings, the next section will include a discussion of potential implications that can be drawn from this study for practice as well as future research.

## **Discussion and Implications**

Based on the findings of this study, there are numerous possible implications for educational researchers, teacher educators, and district or school administrators. My discussion will include the utilization of reflection data collected from participants in a required Educational Psychology course. Though this data is mentioned in chapter three and analyzed in the same manner as the interview transcript data, it is not discussed in chapter four. The results of the reflection data analysis will be used throughout the implications and discussions for the study.



The inclusion of this data is intended to support the current implications by sharing what other pre-service teachers gained from exposure to family engagement discussions.

In the next sections, I will also attempt to situate these implications within the current research related to that particular implication. This will include studies on pre-service as well as in-service teachers. I will discuss the implications and related recommendations together, along with literature supporting my conclusions.

**Expose pre-service teachers to the many benefits of family engagement.** One implication from this study relates to the overall perception shared in the ground theme, which suggests the importance of exposing pre-service teachers to the many benefits of family engagement. The ground theme gives the impression that the pre-service teachers have a fairly limited perception of the value of family engagement. Pre-service teachers may benefit from reviewing literature or case studies that provide them with the opportunity to connect family engagement to benefits for their students and themselves. Possibly, one of the first steps for preparing pre-service teachers to build relationships and engage with families is to make them aware of the many benefits for students, schools, teachers, and families when there are positive collaborative relationships. Previous researchers have also discussed the importance of educating teachers and administrators on the benefits of family engagement as a means to expand and encourage efforts to build home-school partnerships (Bouffard & Weiss, 2008). Exposure to research and examples of the benefits of engagement may work as encouragement or motivation for educators to work towards positive relationships between home and school (Lloyd-Smith & Baron, 2010). The participants in this study seemed more aware of family engagement as a proactive and reactionary tool for avoiding problems or possible disagreements and

confrontations. Though a few of the participants mentioned the benefits for students, they did not share awareness of the benefits to educators, family members and communities.

Family engagement efforts have the potential to yield numerous benefits for teachers as well as their students and families (Canter & Canter, 2002); however, family engagement efforts are most successful when they are a part of the overall tone and goals of education (Doucet, 2008; Farrell & Collier, 2010). If teachers do not receive the proper information and training during teacher education programs prior to entering the classrooms, opportunities to acquire such information become limited and attempts to develop the relationships become less likely (Hiatt-Michael & ERIC Clearinghouse on Teaching and Teacher Education, 2001).

At the beginning of the session that I facilitate on family engagement for the educational psychology course, I often begin the discussion by asking the group to share why they believe we are having the conversation. I ask them to share what their thoughts are about family engagement and why it is or is not important to their future work as educators. The pre-service teachers in the group discussion often respond similarly to the participants in this study. There is often a lot of discussion about having parents on their side and how communicating with them will be of great benefit if any issues should arise. Rarely do the group members mention any of the benefits to their future students or their students' families, and the benefits to them as educators rarely goes beyond not having to worry about confrontations or accusations if the student gets into trouble for behavioral or academic issues.

I make it a point during the discussion to share some of the benefits that researchers have found with family engagement decreasing behavioral issues and increasing academic achievement in students (Amatea et al., 2006; A. Harris & Goodall, 2008). After the session

students are often able to express other benefits that they had not previously considered, as one student shared in a post class reflection in response to a question that asks them to share something they are aware of after participating in the session:

*Any parents' involvement can effect student's achievement or provide support for other students...I am more aware that parent involvement can be a huge factor in student success... (B.A. Class Reflections, Student #17)*

Exposing future teachers to the benefits of family engagement may help to change their perceptions about how the relationship between home and school should look. Along with more information on the benefits of family engagements, pre-service teachers should also receive information on the various ways parents can be involved and engaged in their practice as teachers. Teacher education programs should help pre-service teachers begin to understand how these different types of involvement can impact a teacher's classroom.

**Encourage pre-service teachers to recognize and acknowledge multiple types of involvement and engagement.** Another implication that I see from the study relates to theme one, which implies the need to make pre-service teachers more aware of multiple types of involvement/engagement. While this does not necessarily pertain to participant's perception of the role of the teacher, the perceptions of the roles of parents and family members seem to be one dimensional. The participants described the tangible roles for parents that they could see or that directly related to the student and the teacher, such as communicating with the teacher about the student or having a physical presence at school through volunteering or fundraising. Similar to other studies with in-service and pre-service teachers, the participant's ideas did not account for

the other ways that parents and families engage in a child's education that may also impact the teachers' classrooms (Auerbach, 2007b; Bakari, 2003).

Joyce Epstein's current organization, The National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University helps bring together educators, researchers, parents, students and community members to develop and maintain effective partnership programs. Many schools and districts have adopted parts, if not all of the program's model for partnership building. According to the group's website, the network had over 686 network members nationwide including individual schools, school districts, states, and organizations as of February 2012 (NNPS, 2012). A major portion of the program stems from a component of Epstein's model for School, Family and Community Partnerships referred to as the Six Types of Involvement. Increasingly, this view of involvement is being accepted by schools, in an effort to take a strength not deficit-based approach to family engagement. Future teachers should also be made aware of the multiple ways that parents and family members contribute to their student's education, to be better prepared to adapt to the schools in which they will work.

I recently did an informal survey of teaching position postings on a job search website, and found that 27 of the 30 descriptions reviewed listed parent involvement or family engagement as one of the responsibilities for the position. The teacher candidate that can express the various types and ways to cultivate family engagement may not only benefit in their work as a teacher but also in their search for a teaching position. Teacher candidates with knowledge of the many types of involvement may have a professional edge over others who have a limited view. Familiarity with the various ways that families engage in the education of their children can help teachers cultivate and implement strategies for engagement with the students and families of their classrooms. Administrators that encourage inclusion of families may look more

favorably on prospective teachers that have this base of knowledge and in turn can articulate and share how they plan to engage and involve families in their work as an educator.

It is important to make participants aware that engagement efforts are not in competition with, nor should they ever be a detriment to their ability to work as teachers. The goal should be helping teachers find a balance between working with families and sharing their expertise and insight as educators (Pedro, Miller, & Bray, 2012). Helping pre-service teachers see the things that families do in support of their children as well as the teachers who educate them, can serve as a platform for developing strategies that incorporate the strengths of the home with the expertise of the school. Encouraging teachers to anticipate a collaborative relationship with families also contributes to the development of a strength-based view and approach to family engagement as opposed to a deficit based view (Stamp & Groves, 1994). This knowledge will help educators seek opportunities to find the strengths that families bring to their child's education instead of focusing on the things they do not possess. They can then build upon those strengths in helping the child develop as a student and as a member of that family (Amatea et al., 2006)

**Help pre-service teachers develop strategies for family engagement for students and families from diverse backgrounds.** The next implication of the study relates to the perceptions shared by participants in theme two. Many of the barriers to family engagement expressed by theme two do not have to be barriers and can be worked through if pre-service teachers are given opportunities to cultivate an understanding of the barriers and strategies to overcome them (Berger, 2008; J.L. Epstein et al., 2008). The participants in this study anticipated barriers such as parents not understanding a course's connection to curriculum or having limited face-to-face communication with a parent due to physical distance or lack of time. These things were

considered barriers to family engagement to the participants because they did not seem to have any ideas on how to get past them. Many of the students' concerns implied a need to build strategies and gain ideas for how to engage and interact with parents in challenging situations.

When provided with the right learning opportunities, students can gain confidence in their ability to reach out, build relationships, and collaboratively problem solve with families whose background or views may be different from their own (Amatea et al., 2012). Providing students with the opportunity to learn more about the perspectives of families from culturally diverse and different socioeconomic backgrounds will help them anticipate the differences that will exist between students and families in their schools and classrooms. It will also help to eliminate the perception that parents and family members that are unable to contribute to their child's education in a way that the teacher thinks they should have no interest or are incapable of contributing at all.

Though only one participant mentioned it during the recorded interview, in post interview discussions other participants also expressed some concern about not feeling prepared to interact and engage with parents once they enter the classroom as teachers. One member of an Educational Psychology course that I spoke with shared this in the post session reflection in response to a question that asked the participants if there was anything they would like to know more about:

*In our education classes, no one has really talked about parent-teacher relationships. I think this is very important to learn about quickly because I am interning next year. Do they teach you how to interact at the school you are placed in? (B.S. Class Reflections#2, Student #1)*

While I do believe that every school community must define family/school engagement locally (Hedeen, Moses, Peter, & Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education (CADRE), 2011), I also believe that there are some general strategies and ideas about family engagement that all teachers should have to jump start their efforts (Agronick et al., 2009). There are some basic communication skills and collaborative approaches to family engagement that can be shared with future teachers during the teacher education programs that will aid them in their future work as educators (Katz & Bauch, 1999). Novice teachers that possess this knowledge may be more successful in building and sustaining relationships with the families of their students that will aid them in their work as educators and benefit their students academically and socially (El Nokali, Bachman, & Votruba-Drzal, 2010).

There are a great number of possibilities and choices that educators can make in an effort to engage families. As participants from the class discussions shared, sometimes a little exposure can go a long way in helping pre-service teachers begin to think of how they will engage families:

*I became aware of how crucial and important regular communication with the parents is and how much it affects the student. I think it gave me a better perspective on parent/school relations and making it a little less intimidating seeing all of the ways that this can be played out. (B.S. Class Reflections #3, Student #2).*

With the opportunity to explore and dialogue with others, pre-service teachers can begin to see the ways that they could easily incorporate family engagement in their work as teachers. Thinking about the matter before actually being in a situation that requires it allows the pre-service to think through possible strategies in a stress-free environment with the opportunity to

give and receive feedback (M. M. Harris, Jacobson, Hemmer, & Harvard Family Research Project, 2004).

**Provide more opportunities for pre-service teachers to challenge their assumptions.**

Similar to other studies (Bakari, 2003; Graue, 2005), the participants in this study shared some assumptions about families that were based on their own personal experiences. Another implication is related to the perceptions shared by participants in theme three. This theme showcased the need for teacher education programs to provide pre-service teachers with more opportunities to acknowledge and challenge their assumptions about families and family engagement. This implication is also supported in the research for in-service teacher professional development around family engagement (Amatea et al., 2006; Bouffard & Weiss, 2008).

I have often heard teachers express frustration with the public and the media and their criticism of education and educators. This is especially true when it comes to a “failing school” and the responsibility of teachers when students fail standardized tests. At times there is a feeling that teachers are not respected because everyone has an opinion of what teachers should be able to do because of their own experiences with teachers. Just as teachers should not be solely judged on the experiences that parents and family members have had with their own teachers, parents and family members should not be judged based on the experiences of the teachers with their own parents in their education. This implication is also addressed in the literature on preparing in-service teachers for family engagement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002; Lawson, 2003a)

One participant in this study was particularly critical of other teachers, including the professors in his teacher education program, because he felt they focused more on the ideal



family engagement situations and not the settings where family engagement was more difficult. This was contrary to a number of students who stated that many of their course conversations around family engagement were about how to act/react when the situations were not ideal. They could usually remember conversations about what to do when parents were hostile or confrontational, and struggled to remember conversations about non-problematic situations. Though the first participant thought he was discussing family engagement differently from the others, both views pre-suppose an issue with family engagement that needs to be addressed, not just a need to pro-actively pursue family engagement on multiple levels with all parents.

Recognizing and confronting assumptions is one of the goals of my facilitated session in the Educational Psychology course. I often do this by introducing the students to debatable statements or positive assumptions about families. One of the most controversial is the assumption that all parents want to be involved parents. Inevitably, there is at least one student that responds to this positive assumption with a negative assumption, and as a class we are able to discuss our assumptions and the impact they can have on our practice. Participants usually respond thoughtfully as this student did when asked what they were aware of after our session:

*I was aware of how important going the extra mile is in parent involvement and how it will look different for everyone. Good to recognize assumptions that are involved with this topic and look further into them. (B.S. Class Reflections #1 Student #2).*

This particular participant as well as numerous others over the years have expressed some benefit from the discussions on assumptions, and have shared that they intend to use the discussion as a point of reflection in their practice. Other researchers have suggested that teacher educators encourage pre-service teachers to acknowledge their assumptions as well.

There is also research to suggest that personal reflections can be a great tool in helping educators to acknowledge and work through their own assumptions (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005). Occasionally, connecting personal experiences to professional experiences can help educators empathize in a way that they would not if they only viewed a situation from a professional perspective, as one participant from the course discussion shared:

*Parents can share info about the student that we [teachers] don't know...I've seen the parent side and IEP's are so intimidating. Teachers throw around so many acronyms and terms that don't make sense so it is so important to start with the basics. (B.A. Class Reflections, Student #19)*

Assumptions themselves are not bad; it is when we let our assumptions influence our actions without gathering other information that they can become harmful. Educators should be reminded that students are a part of families, and families have stories beyond what we see in the school setting. One way of accomplishing this is through home visits. In the world of early education, home visits are common practice and required for all head start educators (Lin & Bates, 2010; Muscott et al., 2008). Home visits help educators of young children develop an ethic of care that sees participating family members as partners not competitors in the role of educating children (Stamp & Groves, 1994). While this practice is not nearly as popular in primary and secondary education, there is research to support it as a helpful tool for these educators (Auerbach, 2009; M. M. Harris et al., 2004; Lawson, 2003b).

Many participants from the Educational Psychology group discussions were skeptical about home visits. Some were completely unaware of what home visits were or that they were used by educators. Many shared in their reflections, however, that it seemed to have great

potential in helping them connect with the parents that they may not otherwise have the opportunity to meet:

*Home visits could put the teacher in danger depending on the district. I have never thought of this as a way to communicate with the parent, but I see that it would be helpful in gaining a parent's trust. (B.A. Class Reflections, Student #16)*

For this participant, there is still a slight assumption that teachers in certain districts could not or should not, participate in this type of engagement. There is however, recognition of the potential benefits. It is possible that with more discussion and confrontation of assumptions and fears this could become a part of this participant's repertoire of engagement activities as a teacher. If given the opportunity to speak with this class again, I would be sure to address the safety concerns, and help the participants work through ways they could keep home visits as an option while being mindful of their own safety and comfort levels.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

There is still a need to examine how family engagement is being discussed in teacher education programs. Participants in this study gave varied reports on the level of discussion in their courses ranging from the topic being extensively discussed to rarely discussed. There was, however, a range in the number of courses they had each completed in the program. In the absence of a course focused on family engagement, it is important to know how and when the topic is addressed with pre-service teachers. It would also be helpful to know specifically what aspects of family engagement are being discussed in courses. Are pre-service teachers usually presented with discussions of overcoming negative aspects of family engagement, as implied by

participants in this study? If other information is being presented, what causes the discussion of negative issues to stand out for some students?

As mentioned in chapter one, one of the limitations of this study is that all of the participants were pre-service teachers prior to their internship experiences. A continuation of this study would include interviews with the same participants or new participants during the internship phase of their licensure program to gain insight on the evolution of perceptions around family engagement. Do the students' perceptions of family engagement change when they are working as teachers in a classroom setting? In this program all students complete an internship, even students pursuing an alternative licensure and whom are already teaching. During the internship they spend time each week teaching as well as time in courses that incorporate their experiences in the classroom into the discussion. It might be very informative to learn if family engagement is discussed during these sessions, as students begin to have more one-on-one interactions with family.

A longitudinal study of pre-service teachers may be helpful when structuring a more intensive family engagement component for a program. Interviewing or surveying pre-service teachers prior to a course or session to determine their pre-existing thoughts and experiences with family engagement could be the first phase of the study. That information could in turn be used to structure the session to incorporate some of the concerns or needs of the students and work through them. Next, the participants could be followed into their internship or student teaching phase to determine how the information from the course sessions is applied when interacting with families. This information could be useful to teacher educators in determining how much attention should be given to family engagement during teacher education programs to provide teachers with the foundation needed to successfully build home-school partnerships.

While these suggestions are helpful for pre-service teachers, it still does not address the concerns of in-service teachers that feel they are unprepared for work with families. Many researchers have highlighted the fact that opportunities for in-service teachers to improve their family engagement skills are limited (Agronick et al., 2009; Bouffard & Weiss, 2008; J.L. Epstein, 2005). It is possible that there is still a place for higher education in working through this dilemma. Professional development courses and administrative licensure programs give in-service teachers the opportunity to continue their education and professional development while working full-time as educators. In the future, researchers may want to look into the benefits of offering family engagement courses to these individuals as a way to receive the information that they may not have received in their own teacher education programs.

### **Personal Reflection on Interviewing Pre-Service Teachers**

My experiences interviewing these pre-service teachers were different from any interviews I have conducted before, phenomenological or semi-structured. In previous experiences, I have interviewed adult participants who had readily volunteered and readily shared their thoughts and experience. While all of the participants for this study volunteered and were assured that their responses would in no way negatively impact their participation in the course, there was still a great hesitancy to share in most cases. Participants were advised prior to the start of each interview that I would present them with one question, and would only ask follow-up question for clarification. Still, many participants often gave short responses, and would look to me to say more or ask more. There were also a number of participants who would respond and then ask if their answer met my expectation, or was what I was looking for. In these situations, I tried to respond by reassuring the participant that I was not looking for a specific answer, and that I was interested in hearing whatever response the question brought to their

mind. In phenomenological research, the focus is on the participant's experience so there is no right or wrong answer.

As I mentioned in chapter three with the discussion of my bracketing interview, these interviews did not include some of the concerns that I thought the participants would share based on my own experiences with students in the course from previous years. There were however, a number of post interview conversations where the students appeared to open up to me more about their concerns, and in some instances would ask for my thoughts, ideas or strategies for working with parents. In hindsight, I wish that I had asked the students to record these conversations. These conversations tended to flow much better as a dialogue with the students, and provided very interesting insight into some of the main concerns and in some cases ideas about how they would incorporate families into their practice as teachers.

In my own reflection after all ten interviews, it occurred to me that my use of the term family engagement may have been a determining factor in how the students spoke during their interviews. As mentioned in the literature, the terms used in research and practice are constantly involving. Though there is a strong push in research to move past the term parent involvement, in-service teachers, administrators and teacher education faculty may still use the term parent involvement. The educational psychology textbook of the course that the participants were a part of for the 2011-2012 school year, made no reference to family engagement at all. The term parent involvement was used in three different sections of the book, and parents were referenced throughout. According to the book's subject index, families were only referred to twice; in reference to the Family Educational and Privacy Act of 1974, and with regard to understanding family relationships (Ormrod, 2010). It is possible that the participants were not as familiar with

the term family engagement as they were parent involvement, and would have shared differently had the more familiar term been used.

Finally, I reflected on my own presentations to the students. When introduced to them by their course instructors, it was often shared that I was very knowledgeable in the area of family engagement, and that I would eventually be back to facilitate a class session on home-school partnerships. Knowing this about my background, the students could have felt less comfortable sharing all of their thoughts about families, out of concern for my feelings on the subject. As mentioned earlier, the students often asked for my approval on their responses and in some cases seemed to censure themselves when talking about parents or families. I am left to wonder if more information would have been shared during the interviews if the students were less familiar with my own background and passion for the subject.

## **Conclusions**

With increased national scrutiny of schools and educators, it is imperative that teachers are able to form successful alliances and partnerships with families and communities. These partnerships bring accountability for the education and socialization of children back to all parties involved, not solely on the shoulders of one. Teacher Education programs can aid in this endeavor by equipping new teachers with the tools, strategies and confidence needed to initiate these partnerships. They can also help by challenging and pushing pre-service teachers past their assumptions and prescribed notions of the roles and responsibilities of teachers or families.

Research is needed to further explore how programs are addressing concerns of family engagement and home-school relationships to help to determine the ways higher education licensure programs can send their students into the field with a full repertoire of family

engagement strategies (J.L. Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005). Other school professionals should not be excluded from this charge. As we move towards schools that truly seek to be in partnership with communities, counselors and other school staff will continue to play a crucial role in bridging the gap between home and school (Christenson, 2005).

Researchers may examine the ways that these professionals are prepared to work with teachers and administrators to increase family engagement.

There is no magic strategy or idea that can guarantee 100% family engagement and participation in education. There are going to be conflicts, disagreements, and the teachers may occasionally find themselves on a parents' "bad side." The goal of teacher education programs should not be to prepare their students to avoid problems with parents. The goal should be to help each pre-service teacher embrace not fear family engagement, and incorporate strategies for family engagement the way they would classroom management styles or teaching styles. When this occurs, confrontations and disagreements will be easily minimized.

Family engagement in education should be viewed as just as important in teacher education as teaching methods, learning styles, classroom management approaches, and discussed just as frequently. In the absence of full courses devoted to the topic, there should at minimum be an effort to connect and discuss it in other courses when possible. At the end of the day, if teacher education programs are equipping each of their pre-service teachers to go forward and make every effort possible to create a place in their classrooms for families to engage, then these programs are actively doing their part to improve family-school partnerships.

Future teachers should be reminded that family engagement is not just another to-do on the endless list of expectations for educators. Instead, family engagement should be viewed as a



component that permeates every aspect of the education process, and incorporated into everything that schools do to educate students. When educators feel comfortable and confident in their ability to create an atmosphere that recognizes what all parties can contribute and invites participation and input from every voice, great things can be accomplished (Auerbach, 2007a). We then begin to see home-school partnerships engage families as well as educators, and help move them towards the common goal of educating and preparing students in meaningful ways (J.L. Epstein & Sanders, 2006), which I believe in turn helps students reach the ultimate goal of finding their own productive place in the world.

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## **APPENDICES**

**Appendix A:**  
**Participant Informed Consent Letter**

*Pre-service Teachers' Perceptions of the Role of Families in the Education of K-12 Students*

**INTRODUCTION**

You are invited to participate in a research project to capture the perceptions and experiences of pre-service teachers regarding working with families.

**INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY**

This study will seek to understand the experiences of pre-service teachers at the University of Tennessee Knoxville regarding working with families as an educator. A phenomenological interview will be audio recorded to investigate these experiences. The interview will last approximately one hour. The data will be analyzed by a researcher at the University of Tennessee. The findings may be used for conference presentations and publications in journals. This study is in no way associated with your EP 401. Your decision to participate in this study will have no bearing on your course grade.

**RISKS**

There are no obvious risks with this study. Feel free to ask any questions about the study. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty.

**BENEFITS**

The results of this research may serve to inform teacher education programs about the experiences of their students and the information students receive dealing with families in educating students. Participation in the study also allows pre-service teachers the opportunity to reflect upon the experiences and perceptions of family engagement during their time in a teacher education program.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

All information from this study will be kept strictly confidential. Your name will be replaced with a pseudonym. All digital recordings will be stored securely in password protected folders on the researchers' laptop and will be made available only to persons conducting the study unless participants specifically give permission in writing to do otherwise. The audio recordings will be used outside of this study only with your expressed permission. An outside transcriptionist will be used and required to sign a pledge of confidentiality.

**CONTACT INFORMATION**

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researchers, Dr. Katherine H. Greenberg or Tiffany J. Dellard, at 201 Aconda Court, Knoxville, TN. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the Office of Research [Compliance Officer](#) at (865) 974-3466. Please sign below to give your consent to participate in the study and to indicate that you are aware of the nature and purpose of the study.

**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE**

I have read the above information. **I have received a copy of this form.** I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**CONSENT TO ALLOW YOUR VOICE TO BE USED IN PRESENTATIONS**

I agree to allow the researchers to use selections from the course recordings in the form of digital audio recordings in the presentation of the findings of this study.

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix B:  
Demographic Survey**

*Pre-service Teachers' Perceptions of the Role of Families in the Education of K-12 Students*

Participant Pseudonym:

1. Gender (circle one):      Male      Female

2. Age: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Classification (circle one):      Freshmen      Sophomore      Junior      Senior

4. Major:

5. Teacher Education Program (please check):

<input type="checkbox"/> Agricultural Ed.	<input type="checkbox"/> Agriscience	<input type="checkbox"/> Biology	<input type="checkbox"/> Chemistry	<input type="checkbox"/> ESL
<input type="checkbox"/> Earth Science	<input type="checkbox"/> Economics	<input type="checkbox"/> Elementary Ed.	<input type="checkbox"/> English	<input type="checkbox"/> French
<input type="checkbox"/> Geography	<input type="checkbox"/> German	<input type="checkbox"/> Government	<input type="checkbox"/> History	<input type="checkbox"/> Latin
<input type="checkbox"/> Mathematics	<input type="checkbox"/> Middle Grades	<input type="checkbox"/> Physics	<input type="checkbox"/> Russian	<input type="checkbox"/> Spanish
<input type="checkbox"/> Visual Arts		<input type="checkbox"/> Reading Specialist		
<input type="checkbox"/> Library Info. Specialist	<input type="checkbox"/> Special Education	<input type="checkbox"/> Instrumental/General Music	<input type="checkbox"/> Vocal/General Music	<input type="checkbox"/> Early Childhood Ed.

6. Who grew up with you in your household (please check **all** that apply)?

Nuclear family (i.e., parent(s) and siblings)  
grandparent, aunt)

Extended family (e.g.,

Foster parents/siblings

Family friends or another family

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

7. How would you describe the socioeconomic status of most of the individuals that lived in our community?

Low income/at or below poverty level

Working class

Middle class

Upper-middle class

Upper class

other: \_\_\_\_\_

8. Please list any work or volunteer experiences you have had in schools:

9. Please list any courses you have taken that discussed family engagement/parent involvement:

10. To what extent do you believe family engagement/parent involvement was discussed?

Never

Rarely

Occasionally

Frequently

Very Frequently

11. Approximately how many required teacher education courses do you still have to take prior to the start of your internship?

**Appendix C:**  
**Research Team Member's Pledge of Confidentiality**

*Pre-service Teachers' Perceptions of the Role of Families in the Education of K-12 Students*

As a member of this project's research team, I understand that I will be reading transcriptions of confidential interviews. The information in these transcripts has been revealed by research participants who participated in this project on good faith that their interviews would remain confidential. I understand that I have a responsibility to honor this confidentiality agreement. I hereby agree not to share any information in these transcriptions with anyone except the primary researchers of this project, his/her doctoral chair, or other members of this research team. Any violation of this agreement would constitute a serious breach of ethical standards, and I pledge not to do so.

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Research Team Member

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Date

**Appendix D:**  
**Interview Transcript**  
DaniF – Interview #5

I: Okay, so today is March 12<sup>th</sup> and this is interview #5. We've already gone over the informed consent, so I'm going to start with our question. Think about your experiences in the teacher education program as well as your personal experiences – what stands out to you about engaging families and involving parents?

P: I guess through the teacher program I've found out that there's not – that there are more kids than I thought that don't have parents that are engaged and from my personal experience that's not how – what I have seen, so that stands out probably the most. How much they actual do participate in the school work and things like that.

I: Okay, can you think of any specific instances during your teacher education program where you've had experiences

P: With parents who don't ...

I: Either way. Anything around family engagement or parent involvement.

P: Well, one thing that definitely stands out to me is when I was – I was volunteering in a special needs class – summer school – and a student with autism was – he was ten and he – and they had potty-trained him at the school, but hen over the summer that summer before, they didn't stick with the program and so then he wasn't potty trained again, and so that next summer they were keeping him in the program so that they could keep him potty-trained. (Inaudible) I just kind of thought that was crazy that their parents wouldn't stick with the program that the school had given them to help the kid – I mean better his life.



I: Um huh. Can you think of any experiences in classes or any other observations that you've had about family engagement?

P: Just a lot of my classes, they – my reading-ed class, they talked about how you'll get kids who have never been read to . And they come into kindergarten and they have no past experiences and how you have to take that into account when you're teaching and things like that.

I: Um huh. Any other courses?

P: I guess, it's the same teacher, but it's the –I can't remember what it's called, but it's just – where you go to science, math, social studies and then a Friday class – I can't remember what it's called – It's just one of the teacher classes, before your practicum and she talks about -- a lot – how, just passed experiences and how parents are not involved. They don't do things that I would assume that they do because I do that with my kids and, my parents did that with me and I don't see other kids who don't – I guess. So,

I: You mention the things that you would assume that parents would do. What types of things would that be?

P: Reading to them. Basic singing them the ABCs or counting, you know sitting down with them at some point and doing stuff like that. Just even in the car, taking them to museums and the library and stuff like that, that some kids never experience..

I: And, you said your reading –ed class, specifically and in the other class with that same instructor – you talked about it – anything else in any other classes – anything standing out to you about discussions that you've had in those classes or things that you've seen – actually in schools?

P: My first ed-psych, I think it's 110 or 101, we had talked about – trying to think – I've got a million thoughts at once (laughter) – they had talked about – I guess, well – in talking about whether teachers should smoke or not – if that should be a big deal – we talked about health habits that parents

have with their kids – sometimes they don't feed them right and sometimes they smoke with them in the car, stuff like that – just basic necessities that kids – I would think would be common sense – isn't really so common with other parents – so, that's one thing that we talked about – trying to think of something else. I guess, -- so we're talking about parent involvement with the kid, with their school activities?

I: Um huh, any aspect of education or school activities with the teacher – anything around families or parents in education –

P: Ok, my husband has a cousin – there's three kids and they live with their papa, who's single and I watch the girl a lot, but he has – he's not able to help the older kids with the math, because he didn't complete school himself and so, I guess things like that – I mean that's something that I've encountered – I don't how to I would deal with that as a teacher—I guess (inaudible) homework – That's what we talk about a lot also – with parent involvement – is sometimes you can't expect kids to go out – like they're not just going to do things – like homework – they're not going to do it if they don't have the parents there to help them. And, also we talked about different programs, like the box tops—like the wealthier families are going to do the box tops because – it's only on name-brand foods, how it's not like kinda fair for the kids, -- things like that ....

I: Anything else standing out to you about families thinking as a pre-service teacher in your teacher education program, anything standing out to you as far as families

P: It's definitely influenced how I deal with my own kids, in preparing them for school.

I: Can you say more about that.

P: Definitely, I knew it was important to read to your kids and I kind of learned that really they just pick up what you give them and so making – I try to give them a lot more opportunities than I think I would have. I would have thought that maybe they were just too young for certain things, but it

showed me that kids are smarter than we think and they understand more than, I guess, I thought before being in the teacher program.

I: Can you think of anything, specifically, that maybe you were in one of your classes and something was talked about and anything, specifically, that you then related to as a parent?

P: A lot of things. Let me think of something specific. I guess, in ed-psych 491 right now, we're talking about restorative justice, and I guess positive reinforcement and different types of punishment – and I feel like that has helped me shape – the readings that we've had – a totally different view on discipline and re-enforcing positive behaviors .

I: Ok, can you think of anything you've discussed in classes – anything specific you discussed in classes relating families and parents that you have connected to your work as a teacher?

P: I guess I really haven't had that much in-class experience, like, specific majors don't even get in the classroom until next fall, but I guess, in volunteering in that class, the only that I can think back on – I did work in an after-school-care program for a little while and, so I guess that's kind of school ... Watching the parents and their – some kids had disabilities and seeing how the parents dealt with those disabilities, I guess – some classes – especially ed-psych has helped me see what 's appropriate in responding to those behaviors and especially responding to parents who are not responding appropriately and things like that. I guess, but nothing specific except for just trying to get around how the parents who aren't going to help their kids.

I: Um huh. Ok, anything else?

P: (Inaudible).

I: Ok, well thank you.

P: You're welcome (laughter).

## **Vita**

Tiffany Dellard grew up in St. Louis, Missouri and graduated from Hazelwood East High school in 2000. Graduating from Missouri State University in Springfield, Missouri, in 2004, she obtained a Bachelor of Science with a major in Psychology and a minor in Biomedical Sciences. After completing her bachelor's degree she worked as a parent liaison for a St. Louis County school district while also working as a clerical of May/Federated Department Stores. In August 2006 she began course work as a masters student in Applied Educational Psychology at the University of Tennessee. In August of 2007 she transitioned to the doctoral program in Applied Educational Psychology. While at the University of Tennessee she worked as a graduate administrative assistant and counselor with the Educational Advancement Program, a TRiO Grant federally funded Student Support Services Program. She has also had the pleasure of working alongside the Coordinator for Family and Community Engagement in Project GRAD supported Knox County Schools. In the near future, Tiffany hopes to find work with a school district or educational non-profit agency working to increase and improve family engagement in education.